

Jitegemee

\jee-tay-gay-may\ v [Kiswahili:sustain yourself]: empowering street children through **education**.

“People used to call our children garbage pickers. Thanks to Jitegemee, now they are just called children.”—Jitegemee parent

November 26, 2003

Dear Friends of Jitegemee:

I’m still high on the thrill of returning to Machakos, catching up with the 47 children we supported in 2003, and the dedicated adults who do so much to help them. I am a Boston-area teacher and a board member of Jitegemee, Inc., a grassroots organization run by volunteers that gives scholarships and educational opportunities to street children and destitute children in Kenya. This September, I traveled to Africa to do my own research on women in Kenya, but I was able to spend several weeks with Jitegemee’s children and with Farah Stockman, our Executive Director, who spends her vacations every year in Kenya visiting the program. (None of these trips are funded by your donations.)

Images of the children still fill my mind: The proud eyes of Musyoki Makau, a newly sponsored seventh grader, who scored the top grade out of 96 students. The crisp uniform of Muli Kieti, an orphan, who now lives at a prestigious high school just a stone’s throw from the slum where he grew up. This year, your donations made it possible for us to give food, health care, tuition, uniforms, books and support programs to 35 primary school students, four secondary school students, and eight vocational training students. Your generosity also made it possible for us to provide health care and support to parents involved in a farming project serving 35 families. This year, we hired a program director, Michael Kimeu, who is expanding our vocational program and assembling an advisory board of Kenyan community leaders.

It has been a year of dramatic change in Kenya: much of it good, and all of it challenging. At the beginning of 2003, with less than a week’s notice, the new government announced that primary education would be free. This has created widespread enthusiasm across the political spectrum. But it has been a difficult year in schools, including the schools our Jitegemee Scholars attend. More children now attend school, but an estimated 300,000 children are still not in school. Some are bringing in money to help their families, some are living on the streets and spend the daylight hours begging or doing odd jobs in order to eat. Some fear school or won’t go because they wear filthy rags and dread being laughed at by children in new uniforms.

Even in Machakos, a town about an hour outside Kenya’s capital where Jitegemee operates its program, we were still greeted by a band of street children the moment we arrived. In the past, a locally-run program called the Kataloni Rehabilitation Centre fed these destitute children, and provided informal education. There, street children learned habits of regular attendance, and school skills like reading and writing. The ones who succeeded there became our Jitegemee Scholars. We sponsored them to primary, secondary or vocational education and helped them excel. But now, because primary education is compulsory for all children between seven and fourteen, programs such as Kataloni are no longer allowed to offer services during the school day, in order not to compete with schools. Ironically, some children are even worse off now than they were before free education.

Vocational Training:

Some of the neediest children can still be seen collecting scrap metal and food from the garbage. One child on the streets is Mutinda Mueni, who spends his days pulling a heavy cart so he can support his younger brother with the \$1.50 he averages. When someone hires him to make a delivery, he runs, pulling the loaded cart behind him. Like all the other cart boys, he wants to be the fastest. Another is Muthoki Matiku, a teenage mother who has been homeless. Muthoki wants to be a hairdresser, but can't join a traditional training program because she has to care for her infant son. Making it possible for youth like Mutinda and Muthoki to learn a sustainable trade is a major challenge our new program must tackle. Jitegemee is reaching out to these children.

Michael Kimeu, our new director, who has seven years experience working with destitute kids, relates wonderfully to parents, children, and the other adults who work with our children. Working in partnership with the Undugu Society, one of Kenya's oldest non-profit organizations, Michael is designing a program that will provide a transition from the street to education, placing children in apprenticeships with established artisans such as carpenters, tailors, and welders. Jitegemee Scholars who have already completed vocational training will be youth-teachers and peer mentors helping train new children. Michael moves fast. He has found us a small centrally-located office which will be a place for Jitegemee Scholars to learn basic literacy skills, eat, talk, read, and do homework in quiet, well-lighted surroundings. Jitegemee has already seen success with the first group of children who attended vocational training. Four girls are in training as tailors. Mbithe, a successful welder who has won high praise from other artisans, has already spent several months training a new apprentice. Kyalo Nduku, our first student to complete a carpentry course, is already making tables and chairs for the new office.

Secondary Schools:

Our four secondary students are in boarding schools around Machakos. Two are orphans. One sleeps at a Boy Scout camp when he's not at school. They're thrilled to be in secondary school: It is a payoff for years of work well done. We are very proud of the students who have succeeded. They are working hard, confident of a bright future. But sometimes the present is sad. Their schoolmates all come from middle-class families whose parents are able to come on visiting day laden with food and other small gifts. The Jitegemee Scholars watch with envy, and are sometimes teased for having no parents. Even if their families can walk the distance to school or pay bus fare, they feel ashamed to come visiting in their only clothes, with no gifts. So, Michael, and Sammy, the Coordinator for Secondary Students, visit as often as they can. Educational Field Trips:

We take all our students on a field trip once a year. This year we went camping at Lake Naivasha. The children played community-building games, took their first boat ride, saw animals they had only read about. The trip also gave us time for quiet talks with students facing special problems. The day we left for Naivasha was Michael's first day on the job. He fit right in, leading games for groups of students he had just met, charming the parents, and helping the boys in his tent become comfortable with the unfamiliar experience of camping. We asked all the children to write in their journals about the trip, and new events in their lives. One image of the Naivasha trip illustrates how greatly these children value their chance at an education: After the boat ride, I took a group of children back to camp for a moment of free time, and expected that they would play ball while I caught a glimpse of the local newspaper. But --without my prompting --- many of them sat down to add to their journals. The rest split the newspaper into five sections so as many as possible could read part of it.

Helping Children and their Families:

Sometimes, we don't succeed at first. Jitegemee works with children who've been scarred by their rough lives. So, we often have to hang on tenaciously, helping children pick themselves up several times before they walk confidently on their own. Savali and his siblings were abandoned by their mother. The father went to Machakos to earn money for their support, which he sent through a neighbor. The neighbor stole the money, so the children became homeless. The oldest daughter married at fifteen to get a home for herself and

the younger children. When we met Savali, he was addicted to sniffing glue, a common drug for street children in the developing world that curbs the appetite and gives intoxicating highs. He was dirty and covered with scabs, partially bald due to a skin disease. He would only attend the classes at Kataloni Rehabilitation Centre occasionally, despite the free food. But he's a survivor. With Jitegemee's help, he overcame his dependence on glue, and started going to school regularly. Since Savali and his younger brother didn't have a stable home, we sent them to a boarding school that has served several of our children very well. Although he excelled there for several years -- rising to become a class prefect -- Savali ran away from school last year after a teacher treated him roughly. But he didn't give up. This year, he joined his cousin's business making small, fuel-efficient cookstoves. As the first member of his family to learn to read and write, he has contributed greatly to the success of the business, which provides him and his siblings a regular income. As Jitegemee expands its vision of vocational training and peer-mentoring, Savali is poised to teach younger street children both the business of making stoves and of overcoming life's many obstacles: how to pick yourself up again when you get knocked down; how to be clean, healthy, hardworking and proud, whatever trouble life throws at you.

Unmet Needs and Unfinished Tasks:

Jane was the bright star of the tailoring program, making rapid progress because she loved the work. But she's at home now, with her newborn son. During our camping trip, we learned that Jane did not know how to prevent pregnancy. Learning this was a wake up call for us. We're now designing a counseling program which will include age-appropriate sex education, mentoring, and self-esteem. St. Mary's Mixed (co-ed) School is the one most of our students attend. Children come from all over the Machakos area, walking long distances to get to school. Most live too far to go home for lunch. So, in the past, the school provided lunch and charged the parents for it, as well as for everything else. We paid for lunch, and our Jitegemee Scholars were assured of at least one full meal, even if their families had nothing at home.

But, this year, schools are prohibited from charging parents. Financial troubles caused St. Mary's to lose their secretary, their accountant, and their cook. There is not even money to buy wood for cooking. So, there's no lunch for St. Mary's students now. One of our goals next year is to provide lunch for our primary and vocational students. Joseph Muthoka Yussuf is not yet a Jitegemee Scholar. He is part of a band of street boys that always greets visitors arriving in Machakos. All the street children know Farah, and they even remembered my name, though I haven't been much of a presence there. But we had never seen Joseph before. This is his first year on the street. Last year, he was finishing primary school. He did very well on his national exams, and could have gone to secondary school if his parents had been able to pay. Since they couldn't, he turned to the street, doing odd jobs and begging for food. He is a charming, helpful boy, obviously bright. Joseph is one of the children we hope to serve if we are able to expand our program.

Sincerely,

Helena Halperin

Your generous support over the years has helped us to turn many children's lives around. We are grateful, and so are the Jitegemee Scholars and their families. We raised \$17,000 for this year. But next year, we will need to raise more than twice that amount to expand our vocational training program to 30 children and continue to assist our current students. We hope we will have your continued support as we help new children stay in school, and prepare children who are still on the streets for school or vocational training. Thanks once again to helping needy children in Kenya build a bright future for themselves and their families.

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