

Jitegemee

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

December 1, 2005

Dear Friend,

When I was asked this fall to join the Jitegemee board, I accepted with enthusiasm. The reason was simple: I had visited Jitegemee's program in Kenya and seen the work this organization is doing. Indeed, no one who visits Jitegemee can help but marvel at how much a small group can accomplish on a limited budget. books, shoes, uniforms, exam fees, tutoring, and, for secondary students, tuition, room, and board. For youth who are too old to return to school, Jitegemee runs a five-day-a-week classroom curriculum that exposes students to various trades and teaches basic math and literacy, business and communication skills, and health and AIDS education, while emphasizing punctuality, honesty, cleanliness, and the importance of giving back to the community. Jitegemee then arranges year-long apprenticeships with local tradespeople to give them hands-on experience in a skill. Jitegemee also takes care of children's other needs, with emergency health care for sick children and home placement for the homeless.

I am a professor of economics at Boston University, and this summer, I visited Africa for the first time with my friend, Helena Halperin, who is Chair of the Jitegemee Board. As soon as I walked into the small Jitegemee office, I could see how much the staff cared for each child. Every time a kid entered that office, they came face to face with their own accomplishments. Hand-written posters on the walls listed every primary and secondary school "scholar" with their grades, and every vocational student in Jitegemee with their chosen trades and check marks for the training they had completed. Next to the posters hung a few children's school uniforms and sweaters, all made by vocational students who were pursuing tailoring. Students apprenticing in carpentry had made some of the furniture in the room.

We were the guests of honor at the vocational class that morning. The students were all neatly dressed, the girls in skirts, the boys in collared shirts. We told them about our lives, our children, and ourselves. They asked us interesting and challenging questions (such as, "Why did you choose to have only two children?"). They seemed like normal kids, some shyly giggling when called upon, others boldly offering opinions, but all engaged, happy, bright, and curious. I only realized the extent of their transformation during a short break. As we mingled, a teen shuffled past the classroom door and said something to the students standing around. The boy was dressed in tatters, his dirty feet in torn sandals made from tires, and he hung his head and spoke sullenly. All of the kids, I learned, came to Jitegemee looking like that. The great majority of them had been, as this boy still was, addicted to sniffing glue, the drug of choice among the poor in Kenya. It cost only 6 cents a hit and had the helpful effect of curbing hunger. Jitegemee requires its students to be non-users and supports them while kicking the habit. This teen wasn't yet ready to shed his addiction, but Mike Kimeu, Jitegemee Program Director, hoped that, one day, he would.

Mike and Alex Mutiso, Jitegemee's senior teacher, are both special people, soft-spoken and accommodating, clearly concerned for every Jitegemee scholar. I saw first-hand how Alex attracts kids to join the program. When Alex noticed a teenage boy across the street and went over to greet him, I could see how much he cared and how comfortable this boy felt with him. The trust that Alex and Mike build with the street kids eventually brings them to Jitegemee's door. As we continued on, Helena marveled at how Machakos had changed since she'd visited three years before, when groups of tough kids seemed to own the street. Jitegemee is a major reason for that change: taking 100 kids from the streets makes a huge difference to a small town. As part of our visit, Mike arranged for us to see some of the vocational students in their apprenticeships. In a shack in the market area, we met Faith Mbinya Mwanza, a 17 year old, knitting in a room with two older women. Faith had lived on the streets for several years before coming to Jitegemee, sleeping in drainage ditches or under trees. On unlucky nights, she was arrested or was attacked by strangers. "I used to sniff glue," she told us, "to forget my difficulties." Faith enjoys knitting and is already attracting her own customers. We moved on to the industrial area, entering a large yard shared by dozens of craftsmen. Armed only with home-made equipment powered by car batteries, they soldered metal into ornamental grates to cover windows and doors. There we met Patrick dambuki, another Jitegemee student, who proudly showed us a grate he had made. We then met Eric Mutaki making wooden bed frames and Stella Kambua braiding a woman's hair under the sharp eye of her beauty shop mentor. One of Jitegemee's greatest challenges is to find placements for the students where the supervisor takes time to train them. The

Jitegemee staff members maintain broad relationships in the community to find good mentors, and then they check up on each apprentice regularly and make re-assignments when needed. As the vocational students finish their apprenticeships, Jitegemee loans them the capital to go into business for themselves, with the understanding that these students will become the next generation of mentors.

I met several of Jitegemee's primary and secondary school students at a small dinner for the Jitegemee Machakos Advisory Board. There, Muasya Peter, a 13-year-old 7th, told the story of how he used to roam the streets looking for scrap metal and plastic to sell or expired food that stores had thrown out. A small boy, he was often beaten up for these treasures. When Jitegemee sent Muasya to school in 2002, the teachers discovered that he was bright enough to skip first, second and third grades. He has been number one in his class ever since. Muasya spent an animated ten minutes sharing (mostly in Kiswahili) his career goal: to become a doctor. For an ex-scavenger, this is a long way to come in three years.

As a new board member and an economist by profession, I spent time looking over Jitegemee's budgets from the past few years. It is an amazingly cost-efficient operation. In 2005, Jitegemee provided its extensive services for more than 100 young people for less than \$40,000. This includes staff salaries, rent, school tuition, apprenticeship fees, medical services, free lunch and more, all for less than \$400 per child. Less than \$1500 of the annual budget stays in the U.S. to pay for postage, printing, and other administrative needs. Jitegemee is overseen by a small, dedicated group of U.S.-based volunteer board members who donate their time and expertise. Executive Director Farah Stockman, also a volunteer, visits at least once a year to work with the program's full time Kenyan staff on planning for the coming year. Farah and the other Board members all pay their own way when they visit Kenya. Each year, Jitegemee has grown. This fall, Jitegemee moved from one small, dark classroom in a shared building to a facility of its own. The program now has space for classrooms, a library and a computer center, and a playground.

I thought carefully about supporting Jitegemee, and I hope that you will reach the same conclusion that I did. There are hundreds and hundreds of NGOs in Africa. I donate to several of the larger ones myself. To keep a large organization running, however, requires costly staff on several continents and leaves only a limited portion donated funds to be spent on direct services. Moreover, it is difficult to tailor a large program to each particular place and problem. For me, Jitegemee offers a rare giving opportunity: a chance to support a program where I know that 100% of my gift is being used to save more than 100 real kids from lives of hopeless poverty and addiction. I have seen this program in action, and I hope that you will be moved, as I was, to support its growth.

For those of you who have given before, thank you for the support that you've shown Jitegemee. You are the reason Jitegemee has been able to flourish all these years! With such a small budget, every donor is precious. As the number of Jitegemee scholars grow, our expenses do as well. The new location will require repair, painting and refurbishing. We hope we will have your support this coming year so that Jitegemee can continue to offer an education and a future to the destitute children of Kenya.

Sincerely,

Shulamit Kahn

Jitegemee Board Member

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