

# FIGHTING AIDS IN UGANDA

By Heather Kopp



Heather Kopp is a Senior Product Trainer for DoubleClick Inc. Besides volunteering in other countries and at home in Denver, Colorado, Heather volunteered with the Global Volunteer Network in Ndejje, Uganda, in 2004. Heather has been in 13 countries and on every continent except Antarctica, which, she says, is "just too cold!"

I had gotten all my shots, packed my clothes, and fully tested my mosquito netting. I felt I was prepared to depart for the country of Uganda and make a difference in the lives of others and experience a new culture. I had no idea I would come home very much changed.

Uganda, sitting right in the heart of East Africa, is slightly smaller than the state of Oregon and boasts a population of over 27 million people. Overlapping the equator, it is amazingly lush, full of color and beauty. Sadly, this little country has been devastated by violence, disease, and poverty.

Currently, though, Uganda is led by its first democratically elected President, Yoweri Museveni.

President Museveni has strengthened the economy and supported AIDS programs, making Uganda one of the few countries in Africa that has dramatically reduced the prevalence of AIDS. This is primarily because President Museveni has called on everyone in the country to help with the fight and discourages discrimination. He also promotes the ABC approach to combating AIDS: Abstinence till marriage, Be faithful to your partner, and use Condoms. This powerful combination has reduced the prevalence of HIV in the country from over 30 percent to approximately 5 percent.

I landed at Entebbe Airport, Uganda, late one

night in August. My luggage did not make it and I was exhausted from flying for over 20 hours. But seeing the smiling face of Joyce, who was holding a sign with my name on it, made everything okay. Joyce is the coordinator for the in-country volunteer organization with which I would be working, the AIDS Outreach program. One hour and a crazy bumpy ride later, I arrived in the small town of Ndejje. After a short tour I went straight to bed.



Heather with two of Edith's daughters

The following morning I met other volunteers for breakfast and

began my work with the AIDS Outreach program. The program consists of two local women, Miriam and Gertrude. These two women, along with one to three volunteers, travel by foot to visit specific people or families in the village who have AIDS and need assistance. I met a variety of wonderfully typical men, women, and children - all who were HIV positive or had full-blown AIDS.

On one of my first days doing Outreach, I met Betty and her children. Betty was brand new to the program and in dire need of help. Though she has AIDS and is sick with tuberculosis (AIDS deadliest ally), she cares for her own four children and an additional infant. When we arrived at her small brick home I peeked through a sheet, which was hanging in place of a door. I heard a baby crying inside, but did not expect to see the child lying naked on the half dirt, half linoleum floor. We went inside, picked up the child and called for Betty. Within minutes a few of her other children came in the house and managed to help Betty out of her bed.

Betty could not get around easily. She had

contracted AIDS from her husband, who had cheated on her and then left her for another woman. The infant on the floor was the product of her husband's infidelity, whom he then dropped on her doorstep. Because she is unable to work, neither she, her children, or the infant have eaten in over a day and a half.

In this culture when a woman is widowed, or her husband leaves her for another woman or to go to the city to look for a job, it is very difficult for her to find work. It is expected that the husband will provide for his wife and family. When he is gone, the woman is left with no food, no skills to find a job, no way of caring for her family. The family quickly descends into abject poverty and starvation.

AIDS has also greatly affected the 25-35 age group, leaving many orphans and the elderly without adequate care. These groups in places like the Ndejje village need assistance and help in becoming self-sufficient where possible. Most do not want to be dependent upon others for handouts; they are very willing to work hard. Unfortunately, both jobs and skills are few.

For Edith, however, the program has allowed her to become nearly self-sufficient. She lives with her four children and sews and weaves baskets to earn an income for herself and her children. She is the only person I met on this trip who is on HIV anti-retroviral medication. One of the largest issues with fighting AIDS in Africa is that they have such a low treatment coverage percentage - under 10 percent. For Edith to obtain her anti-retroviral medications, she must travel to the hospital in Entebbe. There she receives her medication free but has to obtain money for the round-trip bus ride, which many people do not have. In the United States, different combinations and options for HIV medication are available; but in most locations in Africa, only

one option is available. HIV is a very smart virus. If Edith misses even two days of her medication because she cannot get to the hospital, her strain of HIV will mutate and the medication will no longer be effective. This is another huge problem in combating AIDS in rural Africa.

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Education really is the other key factor needed in places like Ndejje. While I was there, we held two AIDS education seminars created and put on by the volunteer group. We offered food as an incentive to get people to come and then taught attendees about AIDS and HIV. It is amazing how many misperceptions and myths abound. Yet, to

help prevent HIV in the young people, they must understand the facts about HIV and how to protect themselves from it.

Coming home from Uganda in September, I realized that I may have had only a tiny impact on the people there. Nonetheless, they had a huge impact on me and how I viewed the world and people with HIV or AIDS. The fight against HIV and AIDS needs your prayers, support, and, for those who are called to help, your hands and your heart.

