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## Outreach Kibera

M.S.W. student Betsy Swart has empowered a group of African teens to help themselves

Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya, is one of the largest slums in Africa, where 800,000 to 1 million people live on 600 acres of shacks, mud and filth. Approximately 100,000 of them are orphans under the age of 18.

Betsy Swart first met some of these children, a group of teenage boys, in 2004, when she visited the slum with Kenyan social worker Jennifer Simwa. Swart, a lifelong social justice activist who is earning a master's degree in social work at UCF, and Simwa were just acquaintances. However, they quickly learned they share a passion for empowering others.

"I first saw the boys hanging out in a vacant lot," Swart recalled. "They were walking around aimlessly and sniffing glue." With help from



Betsy Swart

A common pastime for the boys was sniffing concentrated glue fumes that formed when glue was added to an empty water bottle.

Simwa, who speaks both Swahili and English, the two struck up a conversation with the teens.

Over the next few years, Swart and Simwa made many other trips to Kibera, each time meeting and speaking with the boys — and developing trust. They learned that the boys' ages ranged from 13 to 19 years old and that many of them had lost their parents to AIDS. For some, their earliest memory was of walking through the slum. They also learned of the dangers street kids face: Gangs, violence and prostitution are prevalent and sniffing glue and petrol, which are easy to get and cheap, is a way to pass the time.

But Swart and Simwa heard uplifting things as well, such as the way the teens had developed a mutual support system. By seeking odd jobs to earn a little money and then pooling it, the group could occasionally rent a hut to sleep in for a few nights.

"We found that they are absolutely great kids — savvy, creative and intelligent, but with no outlet," Swart said.

Years of working on human rights and anti-poverty initiatives taught Swart that the best way she could help was to empower the boys to help themselves. "They didn't need us to come in from a Western white culture and tell them what to do. They didn't need to be rescued," Swart explained. "We knew they knew best. So we just asked, 'What do you want?'"



Jackson Muhoro

Kibera is heavily polluted by open sewage routes, which contribute to the spread of disease.

The teens' answer was to start a soccer team. Not just an informal group, but a team recognized by the national association, the Kenya Football Federation. (The sport of soccer in the United States is called "football" in Kenya and most other nations worldwide.)

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Swart and Simwa began researching what the boys would need to put together such a team. They learned the federation requires each team to pay a registration fee and to have shoes and two sets of uniforms for each player, two soccer balls and a goal net.

Back in Florida, Swart began raising funds to help the boys. She collected about \$2,500 in contributions from faculty members, friends and nonprofit organizations, enough to buy

discount uniforms and shoes online and to cover the cost to register. She also received new T-shirts embroidered with “UCF Social Work” for each boy from UCF’s B.S.W. Student Association.

In December 2006, Swart returned to Nairobi, her suitcases packed with the clothing. While there, she and Simwa bought a net and soccer balls and helped the boys complete the necessary registration forms. That same month the boys successfully registered their team with the federation, earning it a monthly spot on the schedule of national soccer games.

Swart said it has been a life-altering experience for the teens. “Forming a sports team has motivated them to stop sniffing glue,” she shared. “And previously none of the boys had dreams or aspirations beyond the slum. Now they want to see other parts of Nairobi.”

Particularly significant has been the teens’ desire to expand the team into more of a youth group designed to help other children in the slum. “The boys want to provide peer counseling, particularly on AIDS, and to encourage the younger kids to stay in school,” Swart said, noting that many of the slum’s orphans drop out of primary school. “Another goal is to raise money for scholarships to send kids to secondary school, which you have to pay for in Kenya.”

The teens are especially worried about young girls in the slum, many of whom turn to prostitution just to survive, she added. “They see black limousines pick up girls at night and drop them off in the morning.”

Thanks to Swart and Simwa’s help, the boys completed in a matter of months the multitude of steps needed to create an incorporated group, including writing a constitution, securing a post office box and getting a photo ID card for each boy. On Feb. 8, the group officially launched the Kibera Santiago Resource Center.



Betsy Swart

Alternate goalie Dennis Ingoza holds a sign that thanks Swart and M.S.W. program faculty members for the soccer clothes and equipment. He is wearing a UCF Social Work T-shirt, a gift from the B.S.W. Student Association.

The KISREC is housed in a room in the slum the boys have rented for a year for \$540 — money Swart raised through a nonprofit she recently established here in the United States named “Outreach Kibera.” Outside the door is a sign, and inside there is a photo on the wall and a table. Swart said the boys will be getting

more furniture. “They’re so fired up, you can’t stop them.”

At UCF, Swart’s studies in the School of Social Work are fueling her work in Kibera. “The school focuses on social justice and cultural competency in the practice of social work,” she explained. “We’re taught to not only help individuals but to also address injustices, such as poverty and racism, in larger social systems. It’s been empowering for me as a student.”

To learn more, contact Betsy Swart at OutreachKibera@aol.com.



Jackson Muhoro

The boys in front of the resource center they established for children in Kibera.



Courtesy Betsy Swart

Swart and Simwa (standing, second and fifth from right, respectively) with many of the team’s members at a sports field in Nairobi in December 2006. Pictured here are (back row) Coach Jackson Muhoro, Simon Irungu, Peter Ngaga, Geoffrey Mwai, Solom Karanja, John Nganga, John Ndwati, [Simwa], Samuel Maina, Captain Wilson Mwangi, [Swart], Francis Njoroge and (front row) John Muiruri, Peter Mwangi, Anthony Ndoni, Julius Kilonzo, Philip Tianga, Robert Warogungu, Wyclif Luva, and Arnest Nganga.