

Education Is Our Hope



The Interact Club of Vashon Island High School has made it possible for some Kenyan orphans to continue their schooling.

Ever since you were five or six years old, the classroom has been an almost daily part of life. There have always been teachers to teach you how to make sense of words on a page, to add and subtract numbers, and to learn the many other skills you will need as an adult.

For millions of children around the world, however, education is still an unfulfilled dream. More than 130 million children between the ages of 6 and 11 are not in school. In most cases, this is due to poverty.

Sometimes children are kept at home because they are needed to do chores, from working on the farm to taking care of younger brothers and sisters. This is especially true for girls, so fewer girls attend school than boys. But for many families, school costs are too high.

While the Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for free primary (elementary) education, many governments cannot afford to cover all educational expenses, so parents

must pay school fees and buy books and uniforms. In Kenya, primary school was once free, and almost 90 percent of children attended. But in the 1980s, the government, short on money, started charging. The number of children in school dropped to 50 percent.

AIDS, a disease that has taken the lives of many Africans, makes it especially hard for children to afford the cost of education. The village of Majiwa (ma-GEE-wah) is inhabited by the Luo people, who have long valued education and often pooled their money to send village children to boarding schools to get a better education. AIDS is undoing this custom. Many children have lost parents to AIDS. Without their support, the children cannot afford the cost of school.

Gideon, Carolina, Jacqueline, and Benjamin have lived alone since their mother died in the spring of 2002. The foursome missed weeks of school when they were short on tuition. But they were determined to keep

“Primary education shall be free and compulsory. . . . Education should prepare the child for life in a spirit of understanding, peace, and tolerance.”

—The Convention on the Rights of the Child



going. Gideon, age 18, aspires to become an engineer, while Benjamin, age 8, says he “likes to read best.” To raise money for school fees, Jacqueline and Carolina, ages 10 and 12, collected wood to sell. Still, their chances of staying in school were not good.

But 9,000 miles away in the U.S., on Vashon Island in Washington, a group of high school students was learning about the AIDS epidemic. They were members of a service club called Interact, and they decided they wanted to help.

The students invited Atieno Kombe, who is from Majiwa, to give a presentation at their school. Without an education, children don’t have hope or value their lives as much, Atieno told the students who filled the school auditorium. As a result, they get involved in risky behavior, which can lead to AIDS. When children go to school, they have a light shining that keeps them focused, she said.

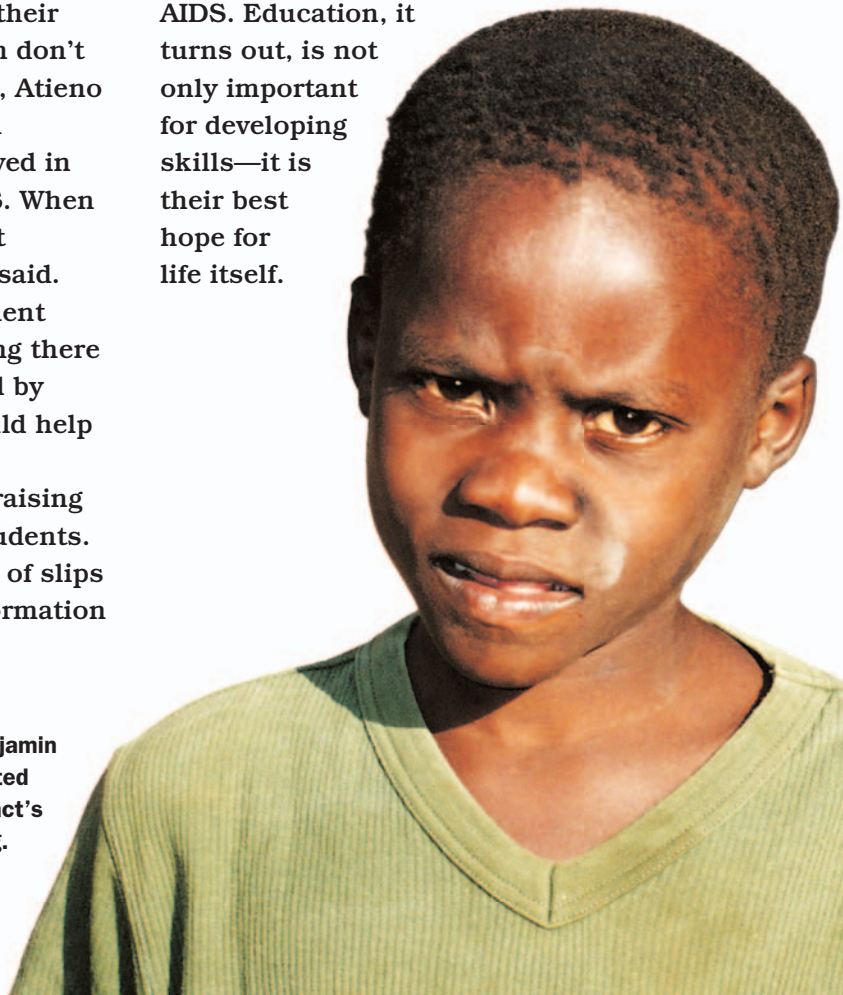
Afterward, Vashon High School student Rachel Weise said, “We felt bad learning there was a heart and a soul being destroyed by AIDS, but there was also hope. We could help the kids go to school.”

The group started fundraising and educating fellow students. They left hundreds of slips of paper with information

about AIDS and Africa on desks all over the school and put out collection jars. They quickly raised \$1,500, which was used to build a well at the Majiwa high school. Before the well, the children had to collect dirty water from streams, which often made them sick.

The Interact group also decided to pay for Gideon’s, Carolina’s, Jacqueline’s, and Benjamin’s school fees. To do this, they hold regular bake sales and sell candy. They especially want to ensure that Jacqueline and Carolina continue their schooling because girls who go to school are half as likely to get AIDS. Education, it turns out, is not only important for developing skills—it is their best hope for life itself.

Young Benjamin has benefited from Interact’s fundraising.



“The children are the future . . .”

—Femke Oldham



The banner, which traveled thousands of miles, is held up by Majiwa students.

In fact, educating girls may be the smartest way to bring families out of poverty. Girls who have been to school are more likely to have smaller families, and healthier, better-educated children. The benefits of this education range from being able to read instructions on pill bottles, to making better decisions, to getting a job.

Most countries are committed to making sure all children get some education. Recently, Kenya made primary school free again. Girls who want to go to high school, however, must attend costly boarding schools. On Vashon Island, the bake sales continue; middle

school students are selling hacky sacks to help out, too.

Emma Bean shared the dream of her fellow students: “We’re hoping that by helping one part of the village, we can help the whole community.”

“The children are the future,” added Femke Oldham. “We’re giving them the opportunity to have a good future with lots of options.”

Adapted from an article by Lesley Reed