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"The man who believes he can do it is probably right."
- Helve Tius

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THE HEART AND SOUL OF DOROTHY SELEWBA

Think there's nothing one woman can do about a country of orphans? Think again.

by Ellen Michaud

Driving along a two-lane road not far from Maine's rocky coast, the slow, heavy thrumming of crickets in a nearby meadow drifts in through the car window. Wild grasses and buttercups line the road's sandy shoulders and far above, on a current of warm sea air, a broad winged hawk glides across the sky.

Noting the black mailbox that's almost buried in wildflowers at the edge of the road, I turn into a short sandy drive that leads to a small house on the edge of a meadow. A grey and white cat sprawls in the sun, and as I enter the house through the open door, an elderly dog struggles to his feet to welcome me.

"Ellen, is that you?" calls a voice from somewhere within the house.

The dog peers sweetly up at my face and leans his head against my thigh for a pat. "Yup. I made it," I call back.

Two women emerge from another room and welcome me with warm smiles. We have never met before, but over the past few years, we have emailed a time or two about our mutual concern for the three million children who have been orphaned by AIDS in Kenya.

Suki Rice, a Maine woman who owns the house in which we meet, is tiny, with long grey hair, a quick giving manner, and swirling skirts. Dorothy Selewba, who has come from Kenya to visit, is a tall woman with curly brown hair, dark chocolate eyes, a direct manner, and a solid faith that reaches into the heart of anyone who gets within ten feet.

"El-len," she says in soft Kenyan accents as we hug. "It is so good to meet you."

The love and faith I sense in this woman's heart is humbling. While most of us wring our hands in despair over the plight of 7 million children orphaned by Africa's AIDS epidemic, this woman—mother of 7, grandmother of 15, head of her church's regional committee on widows and orphans—has rolled up her sleeves, waded into a problem that has so far defeated 193 nations around the world, and done something to help the 3 million orphans in her home country of Kenya.

As we sit together in Suki's living room, Dorothy explains that her work began one hot day in 2001 when she and a committee of women were meeting at their church to discuss the care of widows and orphans in the Kakamega district. Generally they would talk about



getting some clothing together and maybe a small monetary donation. But while they were meeting, two hungry children appeared at the door. "You can't refuse food to anyone when you have some," says Dorothy, and so the women shared their lunch. But at their next meeting, three children showed up. At the next, 10. Then 20.

By then the women wanted to know where the kids were coming from and why they were hungry. "We found out that their parents had died of AIDS," Dorothy says. Some were roaming the countryside. "Some had been taken in by aunties and uncles, but they didn't have the food to feed them. Most were living in grass shelters." When the rains came, the children were drenched. "They had not even a blanket," Dorothy says.

The government, preoccupied with other issues, would not help.

So, "I said to the committee, 'Fine. We are the mothers. We bring children into this world. We will find a way to feed them,'" says Dorothy.

The church had no cooking facilities, so the women began cooking outside on stones and feeding the children under a tree. The numbers grew and stretched the committee's resources to the breaking point.



A year later, an American woman visiting the area invited Dorothy to the United States to share her work with an international group of churchwomen. Dorothy went, the group agreed to help with a small grant, and Suki Rice, the Maine woman in whose house we were meeting, volunteered to help Dorothy raise more money.

Suki places a cup of tea beside me as Dorothy tells what happened. Working together, church members of the Kakamega district and four Maine women who formed the nonprofit group "Friends of Kakamega," raised enough money for the Kakamega churchwomen to

build a simple kitchen and dining hall. A year later, they were able to top it with 10 rooms to house at least some of the children. A year after that, they built a third floor with another 10 rooms. Then they bought 5 acres of surrounding land where they now raise vegetables and chickens to feed the kids.

Today the Kakamega Orphans Care Center houses 42 boys and girls, feeds a hot lunch to another 59 kids every day, and supports an additional 70 kids who live in the community with a relative. Community members, who make an average of \$4 to \$6 a month, leave a bag of beans or a bushel of corn at the care center as they are able.

There are two problems. One is that, as AIDS slashes its way through the African continent, there are more homeless orphans wandering the countryside every day. The other is that, although boys and girls are housed on separate, supervised floors of the dormitory, the government—yes, the same one that can't seem to help the kids itself—told Dorothy in June that it will close the care center unless a separate structure is built to house the boys. And they'll close it by December of this year. It's a desperate but misguided attempt to stop the spread of AIDS.

Dorothy looks at me with quiet eyes. There's not much time. "We don't know whether to send the boys away or try to raise money for a new structure," she says simply.

By December it will be one or the other.

It will cost \$13,000 to buy land for a new structure to house the boys. It will cost \$26,000 to build a dormitory. If you'd like to help, round up your friends and hold a bake sale, community supper, or whatever it takes to raise a few bucks and give these kids a chance. Contributions are tax-deductible and can be sent to Friends of Kakamega, 51 Hunter Road, Freeport, ME 04032. And let me know what you've done. I'd like to thank you personally.

Award-winning author Ellen Michaud frequently writes about the everyday blessings we all tend to overlook. Share your stories with her at ellen@blackberrycottageproductions.com.

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