



GWEIMEN CENTRE

A Self-Sufficiency Centre for Widows and Orphans of HIV/AIDS

December 2009

A Day in the Life of Suzi

Note: "Suzi" is a figment of the writer's imagination, but the story of her day reflects the typical experience of an orphan from the village of Kwoi who lives with her extended family, attends the local school, and participates in Gweimen Centre's daily program.

It was the crack of dawn on Tuesday when Suzi's grandmother came to her bed in the corner of the room to wake her up for school. Suzi had lost her father to AIDS 3 years ago, and her mother died just last winter, so she and her little brother, Yusuf, and seven of their cousins, live with their grandmother. Suzi still cries for her mother in the night, but the rest of the time she tries to be brave for her little brother. She gets up and dresses quickly because she has to be at the centre by 7 AM, and it's a bit of a walk for her.

It's time for Breakfast when she gets there, and after some hugs by the "aunties" they all sit down and have their morning prayer. While waiting for the food she starts counting, and is surprised to see that there are only 47 children at the table this morning. After breakfast they give her the pills that she has to take every day. Most of the kids get them, but not everyone. And then, because her grandmother didn't have time to wash her uniform, one of the "aunties" finds a clean one for her so she can look her best today. By 8 o'clock she and the others are off to school.

The classroom is crowded, but she gets to share a desk with her best friend, Precious, plus she really likes her teacher. Today there is enough writing paper for everyone in the class, and she has a brand new pencil! After 3 hours of class, she starts to feel hungry, and finds it hard to wait for 12:30 to come so she can go back to the centre for lunch. It'll probably be rice and beans again today, but she likes that all right. She just wonders if there'll be any milk.

Suzi always feels tired after lunch. She wonders if the pills do that, or maybe it's just that the mornings at school are so long. Whatever it is, she's very glad they have a nap time. Before she drops off to sleep, she lies there wondering if the Bible teacher will come this afternoon. He missed yesterday, but that did give her a little more time to do her homework.

She had no sooner fallen asleep when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Thinking it was her grandmother waking her up, she was about to complain that it was too early. But

when she opened her eyes she saw the smiling face of Auntie Ankuma. "It's Bible story time." That woke her up, because the stories were always interesting, and she was one who loved to ask questions afterward. After the story they sang some of her favorite songs.

Then, because it was such a nice day, they all went outdoors to play football. Some of the boys played pretty rough, but it felt good to run all over the field as fast as she could. She only got to kick the ball once. When they came back indoors, it was time for homework. While she studied she couldn't stop thinking to herself, "If we have electricity today, we can watch some TV when we're finished."



Well, there wasn't any electricity today, and besides, by the time Suzi finished her homework it was after 5 o'clock, almost time for supper. The thing she liked best about the food was that she got enough to eat so she didn't feel a bit hungry as she was getting ready to go home for the night.

Suzi was glad it was not a rainy evening, and that there was no mud on the road. As she walked, she wondered if her brother and his little cousins had given grandmother a bad time today. "We know she loves us all very much, but she's old and when she gets tired she can't be bothered by the stories of what happened at school and at the centre during the day. Even so, we know she really loves us."

Vern Geurkink, Gweimen, U.S.A.

Beatrice

Editors Note: Mary Sytsma, a USA board member of Gweimen Centre, traveled to Kwoi, Nigeria, where she volunteered in this outreach to widows and orphans of HIV/AIDS. In the following article, Mary introduces us to Dr. Beatrice Kadangs, the International Director of Gweimen Centre in Kwoi. This article also appeared in the September, 2009, issue of Wheaton Cross Connections, the newsletter of the Wheaton Christian Reformed Church where Mary is an active member.

I have seen the human spirit give birth to hope. If every day a woman's load gets heavier, she will soon be unable to lift her eyes from the ground and will only be able to see the step that lies in front of her. Eventually she will give up. But if someone comes alongside her and says to her, "Let me help you carry that" - imagine the look you will see when she raises her eyes. That is hope.



That is the look I have seen in the eyes of hundreds of widows in Nigeria. Their lives are so hard, but when I watch Beatrice speak to them, even though I don't speak Hausa, I know immediately when she gets to the part about being an orphan herself. She tells them how she rose from poverty, without parents to help her, and she got an education, by the grace of God, even a Ph.D. in America. I watch the eyes of the women as they listen, and I see hope begin to stand on wobbly newborn legs. When she tells them that there are people in their community, and even across the world who want to help them, I see them take their first steps toward the possibility of a better life.

I have long been convinced that part of the ministry God has given to me is what I call "the ministry of standing next to." It's not rocket science. It's just coming alongside someone and caring about what happens to that person. Being faithful to this calling is why God brought me to Nigeria.

I met a twenty-year-old widow whose name was Helen. She had two children, one of whom was strapped to her back. The baby's name was "Precious." Helen had not finished high school. Her husband died of AIDS a year ago. She and her children have not been tested. Beatrice told her to come to the centre to be tested. She told her to go back to school and be a good example to her children. The very next morning Helen came to the centre and Abigail gave her the test to see if she was HIV positive. Whatever the results of that test, and I am praying that she is negative, the good news is that she has made contact with Gweimen Centre now, and she will not have to walk alone after this. There are people who will stand next to her as she faces the next thing. Someone has lifted part of her load. She has hope.

This is part of what Beatrice means when she says, "Education is emancipation." Knowing her status can help her to be free from the paralyzing fear and hopelessness, even if the test says she is HIV positive. Knowing that could save her life and the lives of her children. Knowledge brings power.

In all of the villages we visited and in all of the meetings we held, the women of the Board went through the group asking the widows to register, stating their names, status (if they knew it), and village. For some of these women this is the first time they have admitted publicly that they are HIV positive. Beatrice thinks that if 200 widows showed up at a meeting, that was probably only 10% of the total number of widows that lived in that village.

The numbers are staggering, but we will be better able to serve their needs if we have an idea of how many there are. Each one has a story, and we don't yet know all of their stories. We do know that for some of them that story includes being HIV positive. For all of them, we know their lives include poverty and shattered dreams. They never intended to become widows and to raise their children alone.

Every house in Nigeria has numbers written on the outside, a means the government used to take a recent census. If the members of the household had been counted, the number of those living in that house was spray painted on the outside. Their names were recorded in the government's book. I don't know how recent the census was, but I do know by the number of funerals in the village in just the time I was there, those numbers can no longer be accurate. Having your name written in that record book doesn't necessarily bring a better life.

The widows have to learn to trust the promises of Gweimen Centre. The people who will walk alongside them aren't in this for the money, as some of them have learned from hard experience with other NGOs (non-governmental organizations). But it is a heavy responsibility for Beatrice and the other women who serve on the Board of Gweimen in Nigeria to have so many looking at them with hope in their eyes.

As the women of the Board move among them writing the widows' names in the book, they are telling them in a small way, "You are precious." You matter, and we know your name and we will help you. Imagine the hope that results if you think your name is written in a book that is about Life, not death.

Mary Sytsma, Gweimen, U.S.A.

Who Is Beatrice?

Gweimen Centre has a living founder, a guiding spirit, a hands-on leader, and an International Director, and they are all the same person, none other than Beatrice, whom we meet on page 2 in this Newsletter.

Dr. Beatrice Kadangs (BA, MA, PhD) is well prepared for all these roles.

She was orphaned at age 12 when her father died, and was separated from her mother when she was brought to live with her older brother and his family.

Her early education was in a public school in the mostly Islamic town of Zaria.

She has earned 2 college degrees:

- A 5-year degree from a Bible College
- A B.A. in Christian Education from the Seminary of ECWA (Evangelical Church of West Africa)

Her 3 graduate degrees include:

- An M.A. in Christian Education from the ECWA Seminary
- An M.A. in Educational Ministries from Wheaton College
- A Ph.D. in Educational Administration/Policy Studies from Loyola Univ.

Throughout her adult years she has been active in the life of the Evangelical Church of West Africa in many leadership capacities, including frequent guest preaching.

She currently serves on the Faculty and Administration of Bingham University in Abuja, the Nigerian capitol.

And she is the International Director of Gweimen Centre in Kwoi, Nigeria.

She and her husband, Matthew, a teacher in the ECWA College of Health Technology, live in Abuja. They have three daughters, Patricia, Dorcas and Deborah.

Living in Abuja allows her to travel frequently to Kwoi for the many ways she serves the orphans and widows at Gweimen Centre who are always on her heart.

We wish all our readers the blessing of a truly Merry Christmas. Each Christmas we are reminded again of the mother and the child for whom there was no room in the inn. Your partnership with us enables the Gweimen Centre to keep its doors open to welcome and serve the orphans and widows of HIV/AIDS in the vicinity of Kwoi, Nigeria. May the joy and wonder of Christmas shine in your hearts in this holy season and through the New Year.

From the Gweimen Centre Board of Directors, U.S.A.: Mike Richardson, Grant Buma, John Townsend, Joy Townsend, Mary Sytsma, Nancy Richardson, and Vern Geurkink.

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