

THE GWEIMEN CENTRE: A HISTORY

Introduction:

The word *gweimen*, in the Hausa dialect of Jaba, has many meanings. Used in numerous Nigerian songs and prayers, *gweimen* is typically used to describe peace and tranquility. In the peaceful, rural village of Kwoi, in the state of Kaduna in Nigeria, a war against an enemy is being waged, a war that brings pain, chaos, poverty, and death. This war though, is really a world war, claiming lives on all continents without discrimination or mercy. This world war is the pandemic known as HIV/AIDS. The following document is a historical testament to the lives lost in the war against HIV/AIDS. This testament tells the story of how a community is fighting the enemies of illness and poverty through peace, love and Christian commitment in order to restore *gweimen* to the people of Nigeria.

For generations the people of Kwoi, Nigeria have generously cared for those who have been orphaned or vulnerable in their community and extended families. As a result of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, those orphaned have become so numerous that individual guardians and families no longer have the resources to care for these children by themselves. The most conservative estimates suggest that there are more than 13 million orphans as a result of HIV/AIDS worldwide, a problem which will dramatically affect, in turn, the futures of many HIV-prevalent nations worldwide. While it is a Nigerian custom for families to take orphans into their extended family, the number of orphans and the lack of economic resources have left many orphaned children hungry, unsupervised, and susceptible to infection. When the burden of caring for orphans became too heavy for families to bear alone, a community joined together in support. From a community's

concern to care for those who cannot care for themselves, Gweimen began.

One couple that was principally involved in this initiative, Reverend and Mrs. Abigail Kato, began a ministry when they brought orphaned relatives from Kaduna City in northern Nigeria to their home in Kwoi, Nigeria to care for them. Many families in the community had households with similar initiatives (Ankoma). The families began to talk with one another and serve as support system to each other as the numbers of orphans grew in the community. In 2003, Mrs. Kato invited Mrs. Ankoma, a secondary school teacher and community leader, to bring biscuits for the orphaned children who had gathered at monthly community meetings. According to Mrs. Ankoma, the cookies attracted more children to these monthly meetings, meetings that were being organized at the home of the District Head. As more orphans congregated, the group outgrew its space and moved the meetings to Good News Ecwa Church in Sab-zuro, Kwoi. There, monthly meetings were initiated in which singing, the memorizing of Bible verses, and the teaching of Bible stories supported the children. Mrs. Arkoma and Mrs. Kato raised awareness in the community by addressing churches, meeting with district heads, and by talking informally with and visiting people in their homes. From informal inquiry and neighborly support came more orphans and families who were struggling with HIV/AIDS, hunger, and poverty. As the community became larger, more families in the community began to contribute to the informal ministry.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Beatrice Kadangs was studying to receive her doctorate in Educational Administration and Policy Studies from Loyola University in Chicago, in the United States. Mrs. Kadangs, originally from Kaduna state had been studying in the United States and was planning her semi-annual trip home to Nigeria when members of

her church in Wheaton, Illinois, approached her with gifts to be distributed to those in need. With eleven packages containing school supplies, clothes and shoes, books and toys in hand, Mrs. Kadangs returned to Kwoi to distribute the items to the orphans in her own extended family. The supplies donated proved more than enough, so Beatrice contacted Mrs. Kato to inquire whether she knew of any children with whom she could share her surplus. The two women fixed a meeting date on a Saturday morning in summer of 2003. Much to Mrs. Kadangs surprise, over one hundred HIV+ orphaned children arrived at the meeting. Mrs. Kadangs took photos and video of the meeting and was touched by their desperate situations. Unable to forget the magnitude of the problem, she spent the rest of her stay considering what she should do for these vulnerable children. Upon returning to the United States in fall of 2004, Mrs. Kadangs reported to her church and began seeking opportunities to speak publically about the HIV/AIDS pandemic and how it had affected her community in Nigeria.

Ann Batchelder, former Midwest Field program Organizer/ Field Coordinator/ Acting Field Director of the ONE campaign, met Beatrice Kadangs through professor Sandra Joireman, 2005 Professor of International Relations at Wheaton College. In May of that year Ms. Balchelder asked Mrs. Kadangs to speak at ONE campaign event, a Mother's Day tea where she addressed the topic of women and children in Nigeria, specifically orphans and widows. Ms. Jennifer Howe, Ms. Karen Waters, and Ms. Tasha Gibbons were present and continued the conversation with Beatrice after her talk. Mrs. Kadangs had been thinking of a way to establish a formal organization and the women agreed with her vision. The women advised that the best way to get help was by registering as an official organization. Ms. Howe was employed at a law firm where her

colleagues advised her on how to legitimize the application process in order to become an official charitable organization, or Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) (Kadangs).

In fall of 2005, the U.S. Board of Gweimen began to form with the three official members being Mrs. Beatrice Kadangs, Ms. Jennifer Gibbons and Ms. Anne Batchelder.

Another speaking opportunity that came to Mrs. Kadangs occurred when students under Mrs. Mary Sytsma, Assistant Professor of English at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois were required to write a paper on the topic of AIDS and service learning. Through this assignment, Mrs. Sytsma encouraged her students to work and learn within their “sphere of influence”. This assignment influenced Mrs. Sytsma to model her answers to these questions in her own life. Outside of the classroom, Mrs. Sytsma volunteered as the spiritual advisor to the residents at the Canticle AIDS facility in Dupage County, Illinois. A colleague of Mrs. Sytsma had met Mrs. Beatrice Kadangs when she spoke in a church and encouraged Mrs. Sytsma to contact her as a resource for her class. Mrs. Sytsma contacted Mrs. Kadangs who came to speak to her class on the topic of AIDS in Africa, and a friendship sparked between them. Within a month of meeting, Mrs. Kadangs asked Mrs. Sytsma to serve on the United States Board of Gweimen (Sytsma).

Back in Nigeria, the severity of the poverty of the elderly who were taking care of the orphaned children overshadowed the desire to care for the sick children. Many of the people looking after the children were too old or ill to work the farms to make money or provide food for their growing households. The families needed food, clothing, and school fees to help support the children whom they had added into their families. The ministry began collecting food donations that were then distributed to grandparents or

other guardians. The ministry also began collecting monetary donations to sponsor children and to pay for their school fees. With the scholarships gathered from the community, orphaned children and teenagers were able to complete grade school, and secondary school.

The need became more complicated when the orphans not only needed school monetary support but were also in desperate health conditions. Many of the orphaned children were HIV+ or ill with other sicknesses in addition to being malnourished and neglected hygienically. To meet the physical needs of the orphans, the Gweimen Centre began taking children and widows to the hospitals to be tested for HIV and to be treated for other illnesses. From the hospital examinations, anti-retro viral drugs (ARVs) for HIV control were made available to the orphans. When Mrs. Kato and Mrs. Ankoma brought the children to the hospital in Kafanchan, in addition to diagnoses and testing of HIV prevalence rates (CD4 counts) for the orphans, they were informed that the children must supplement their medication with proper nutrition in order for the drugs to work.

With a desire to treat the vulnerable children and provide for their physical health, Mrs. Kato hired five HIV+ widows to cook for the children three times daily. One community member, Mr. Timpot, donated his compound as a site for the first temporary feeding centre. The children began coming to the compound in centrally located, “Sab-Zuro” district before and after school to receive food and medicines.

As the word spread about the ministries of the Gweimen Centre, its beneficiaries quickly outgrew their allotted space. Discussions about a permanent site became a reality when his Royal Highness sent a surveyor to the community lands outside the bustling Kwoi town. Upon identifying the twelve landowners to which the plot belonged, the King

invited these landowners to designate their land for the permanent home of the community ministry. These landowners agreed with the mission of the centre and gave their land to the building project in 2006. The donation of the land for the permanent site was a monumental step towards the growth and the fulfillment of the vision of Gweimen; it is also an example of the community's support for this project, the first of its kind in southern Kaduna state.

Meanwhile, in the United States, official non-profit status for The Gweimen Centre was obtained in February 2006. When Ms. Batchelder became the United States Director of Gweimen, visiting Nigeria for the first time in April of 2006, the feeding centre had just begun its ministry. During her visit she met with the members of the Board of Trustees and brainstormed the future for the Gweimen Centre. This original brainstorming included a plan for four centres on a single campus. These centres would include a medical clinic and testing centre, a life skills training centre, a professional centre with classrooms and offices, and the feeding centre.

The clinic was intended to be a testing centre as well as a community clinic for HIV testing and care. The hopes for the life-skills training centre included hairdressing, knitting, sewing, home economics, and catering, as well as a mechanical workshop for carpentry and other trades, and included a garden for subsistence farming training. The professional centre would have classrooms that could host training in literacy, mathematics, HIV/AIDS education and community education, as well as a nursery and the Gweimen office complete with computer resource centre. Finally, in addition to the feeding centre, the Gweimen leadership planned to build transitional housing and hostels for youth and families, complete with a subsistancy garden (meeting minutes 4/4/06). The

projected cost for the building project was between \$60-70,000 U.S. and construction was expected to begin as soon as possible.

After these initial meeting, construction did begin in the fall of 2006. Ms. Batchelder and Ms. Howe returned to Nigeria for the groundbreaking ceremony of the permanent site at 8:00 in the morning on November 25th, 2006. The program included prayer, a welcome by His Royal highness Wakilli Kpop Ham, a presentation of the history of the Gweimen Centre by Mrs. Kadangs, good will messages, singing, and fundraising. The ceremony was a festive occasion attended by many community supporters and lasted the entire day. The event generated a great deal of community awareness but also served as the first organized fundraising event. The event raised N3,064,906 or \$23, 944.58 in pledges.

By the summer, the United States Board of Gweimen was working hard, hosting the first official fundraising initiatives, launching letters, and forming the Gweimen Website. In January of 2007, Mrs. Nancy Richardson and Mrs. Mary Sytsma visited Nigeria as ambassadors for the United States board of Gweimen. During their time in Nigeria, the two women attended district meetings where they met the Nationals who directed and supported the Gweimen Centre Ministries. The women attended Gweimen Centre events that disseminated the history and services of Gweimen to orphans and widows in each of the seven Kwoi village districts. Through Gweimen Secretary Mrs. Kande Ankoma, the village heads of each district arranged these meetings. At district meetings hundreds of widows and orphaned children came to be registered, ask questions, and learn about HIV/AIDS, discovering what Gweimen could do to help with their situations. For those women who attended the meetings, Gweimen distributed

clothing, seed, and foodstuffs, as well as information and resources for prayer and medical support.

In the summer of 2007 Mrs. Kadangs obtained her doctorate and returned to Nigeria where she resumed her position at the seminary and as the spokesperson for the Gweimen Centre. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees in Nigeria, Mr. Joshua Mikoiri traveled to the United States to meet with the United States board of Gweimen. In November of 2007, Ms. Anne Batchelder returned to Nigeria for a three-month stay. During her stay, Ms. Batchelder is investigating ways to be a service to the centre in organizing the centre and in communicating between the Nigerian and United States Board of Gweimen. In January of 2008, Ms. Batchelder and Ms. Ellen Richardson worked to compile updated personal records of the orphans in the Centre and the Gweimen Centre began to develop partnerships with the Christian Evangelical Front (CEF) and the International Center for AIDS Care (ICAP) as well as the local and state governments in Nigeria. In January of 2008, the second class of life skills training in home economics convened. The feeding centre moved from its original temporary site to a new temporary site directly across from the Director, Mrs. Kato's home in Sab-Zuro district. The construction on the permanent site continues.