

Rosemary Nyirumbe runs a school for young women who fled slavery as 'wives' of a Ugandan warlord and his followers.



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HEALER: Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe works with women in Uganda who were kidnapped into slavery, providing job training, kindness – even laughter.

By Nancy Henderson / Contributor

Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe sits with a cluster of young women from St. Monica Girls' Tailoring Center in Gulu, Uganda, and teaches them how to crochet purses to be sold in the United States.

Inspecting one of the handbags, she uses a seam ripper to loosen imperfect stitches while affectionately chiding the student who made it.

"You are holding the needle like a man," teases Nyirumbe, the school's director. "You are supposed to hold it like this."

The women laugh out loud, something they did not dare do while living in the bush as captives of warlord Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army.

Mr. Kony's brutal, 20-year genocide in northern Uganda ended in 2006, and he is believed to be hiding in Congo. But the emotional trauma of the young women who were abducted, raped, tortured, forced to serve as soldiers, and, in some cases, ordered to kill their own family members, remains.

Since becoming director of St. Monica's in 2001, Nyirumbe has made it her

mission to ease her students' pain and give them the education they missed when they were kidnapped, some at ages as young as 10 or 12.

Under her watchful eye, more than 2,000 students have mastered tailoring, catering, making jewelry and purses, and other skills that allow them to earn a living for themselves – and often for the children

'My real goal was to ... try to bring [these women] to a situation where they could accept and forgive themselves.'

– Sister Rosemary Nyirumbe, director of St. Monica Girls' Tailoring Center

they bore as the slave wives of Kony and his rebel soldiers. Currently, about 250 young women and 250 children live on St. Monica's campus.

"A good number of [the school's gradu-

ates] have settled in the community," Nyirumbe says. "We are struggling to make sure they walk toward their own destiny. If, in a small way, we can witness that they are becoming self-sufficient today and productive members of society, that is what we are all about."

The spunky, 5-foot-tall Nyirumbe was born in Paidha, Uganda, and joined the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus convent in Moyo, Uganda, in 1972 at age 15. She became a midwife and surgical assistant. But she had no idea what was waiting for her when in 2001 her superiors sent her to try to revive the run-down St. Monica Girls' Tailoring Center in Gulu.

The compound could accommodate 300 students, but only 30 were enrolled at the time, and many were having great difficulty in the classroom.

One girl seemed desperately lonely and refused to make eye contact with Nyirumbe, the other teachers, or her fellow students. When Nyirumbe gently questioned her, the student made a stunning confession: She had been forced to serve as a soldier in Kony's army and commit

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barbaric acts against her own people.

"That was the first time I realized there were girls who came from the bush in this school," Nyirumbe recalls. "She needed something more practical that she could do."

In 2002, after securing funds to purchase a few foot-pedal-powered sewing machines, Nyirumbe introduced a sewing class; 10 of the 30 girls signed up. All 10 had escaped from Kony's army. Now considered defiled and dangerous, they had been shunned, sometimes even by their own families, when they tried to return to their villages. They had nowhere else to go.

Without knowing how she would pay for it all, Nyirumbe made an announcement on the radio inviting all former Kony captives to come to St. Monica's for refuge and training. By the end of the year, more than 200 women had signed up. Nyirumbe and the other sisters established a day-care center for the newcomers' children. Funding trickled in from nonprofit organizations.

"My real goal," Nyirumbe says, "was to reach out to these women who were deeply traumatized, who lost their chances of education, and try to bring them to a situation where they could accept and forgive themselves."

After seeing how the tailoring class boosted the girls' self-esteem, Nyirumbe also taught them how to cater local events and how to create jewelry from tightly rolled, lacquered magazine pages.

In 2012, she cofounded a for-profit business, Sisters United, to "empower women one stitch at a time." The students spend many after-school hours making purses from yarn and tabs pulled from discarded aluminum cans. The young women earn cash for their work.

Over the years, Nyirumbe estimates, St. Monica's has provided a haven for more than 50 of Kony's own kidnapped "wives."

Ellen, a student who bore three children to Kony while in captivity, is now home-

schooling other villagers; studying at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda; and crafting can-tab purses and jewelry to support her family. "This girl has become a great advocate for others," Nyirumbe says. "She even goes into the community and encourages others. To see how she cares for her own children makes me so, so happy."

Though it may take a while, even the most severely traumatized students eventually show signs of healing. Sharon, who was abducted at age 13, was forced by her captors to stab her little sister to death when she grew too tired to carry her. After five years at St. Monica's, Sharon now smiles frequently and is employed as a tailoring instructor at the school.

"I feel good happiness in my heart," says Sharon, now a young adult. Her head and forearms still bear the scars of the rebel "husband" who burned her to keep her in line. Over the years, Nyirumbe has often shielded the girls from rebels who show up to reclaim their "wives." And she has offered counseling and unconditional love.

"To me, she is the greatest living feminist on planet Earth," says Reggie Whitten, an attorney in Oklahoma City and founder of Pros for Africa, a nonprofit group that provides financial aid to Nyirumbe. "Mother Teresa was an incredible person and certainly deserved to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

But her life was not in the kind of danger that Rosemary's was, every day, for years. [Nyirumbe] was standing up to these guys, and it's a miracle they didn't kill her because they were killing so many others."

For years, Nyirumbe's works went virtually unnoticed. Then, in 2007, the US cable news station CNN dubbed her a "hero." In April 2014, after Time

magazine named her one of its "100 Most Influential People in the World," the international press sought her out for comments on the kidnappings in Nigeria. She is also the subject of a book, "Sewing Hope," and



RICH CLABAUGH/STAFF

How to take action

Universal Giving (www.universalgiving.org) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects are vetted by Universal Giving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause. Below are groups selected by Universal Giving that help people in need in Africa:

■ **Develop Africa** (<http://bit.ly/DevelopAfrica>) establishes meaningful and sustainable development in Africa through building capacity and transforming education. Take action: Support the education of girls (<http://bit.ly/TeachGirl>).

■ **Global Citizens Network** (<http://bit.ly/GlobalCitizenNetwork>) promotes cross-cultural understanding through immersive experiences. Take action: Be part of a community-development team in Tanzania (<http://bit.ly/TanzaniaVolunteer>).

■ **South African Education and Environment Project - USA** (<http://bit.ly/SAEEP>) raises funds for educational and environmental projects in South Africa. Take action: Support arts lessons for students in Cape Town's impoverished schools (<http://bit.ly/ArtsKids>).

a documentary of the same name, narrated by her friend actor Forest Whitaker.

"She is an extremely affable and compassionate personality who will go out of her way to help no matter what. She radiates with energy and iron determination," says Paulo Kyama, a senior consultant working on Uganda's Public Financial Reform Program and a devoted supporter of Nyirumbe.

Nyirumbe, who notes that her boundless energy comes from "prayer and a cup of coffee," hopes to someday open a gas station and restaurant operated by her students. A second school she helped launch in Atiak, Uganda, is struggling and could benefit from an expanded health-care clinic.

Funds are scarce, even to pay the electric bill. But Nyirumbe remains optimistic.

"This is something that we are living with in our present time. It's not in the past century," she says of the devastation left in Kony's wake. "The effort we are putting now into preparing these girls in different ways—skills training, education, and so forth—are all about preventing what happened from happening again."

■ *The names of the students in this article have been changed for their protection. To learn more, visit <http://sewinghope.com>.*

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