

## From Tacoma to Africa, with love

Immigrant launches nonprofit to give Ugandan children the educational opportunity that nearly eluded her  
**BY LARRY LARUE**

Two third-grade classes at St. Patrick Catholic School raised \$160 selling coffee and doughnuts, and on Tuesday Carolyn Othieno asked the students how they'd like it spent. There were plenty of choices. The schoolchildren at St. Jude School in Rubongi, Uganda, need everything. They have no school supplies. They need clean water, school uniforms, shoes, tuition. The Tacoma kids decided to buy food for the once-a-week lunch program at St. Jude, and Othieno took a tiny calculator from her purse. "That will buy 533 plates of food," she said. "There are 500 children in the school, so you've bought everyone there a lunch!" For the children at St. Patrick and a growing group of Pierce County schools, there's a certain pride in impacting the lives of children so far away. Othieno and her nonprofit group, Circle of Friends In Action, try to bring those kids closer.



"We've started a pen-pal program in four schools — St. Patrick, Concordia Lutheran, Annie Wright and Bellarmine Prep — and have 200 children involved in letter-writing," Othieno said. "We realized there were lessons our children could learn from the situation in my village," she said. "They could make a difference in other lives, become aware of what is happening in the world, become global citizens." Circle of Friends was formed a year and half ago by a group of 10 mothers, each inspired by Othieno and her story.

Now 37 and finishing a master's degree in world health from the University of Washington, Othieno left Uganda as a 25-year-old. She grew up a child of Rubongi, living in poverty she called "unimaginable." "People talk about those who subsist on \$2 a day, but there were families — including mine — who often went months without a penny," she said. "We lived in homes without plumbing or electricity, slept on dirt floors under a roof that leaked. We didn't eat every day.

"I desperately wanted an education, but school cost money, about \$10 a quarter," she said. "I'd go to school for three weeks, then get thrown out because we couldn't pay." Friends would slip Othieno their class notes, and she would stay up at night reading them by the light of a tiny can with a flame lit by lighter fluid. Meals consisted of corn, beans, rice — whatever they could grow or trade for. Always, money stood in her path toward education.

"There's a national test after high school in Uganda, and it cost \$10," Othieno said. "I wanted to go to college, but we didn't have money for that test."

Walking through the village, Othieno met a woman whose son Othieno had once tutored in math. The boy had died, and the mother wanted to pay for Othieno's test. She took it and won a scholarship. That turned into a business degree. A job with the YMCA sent her to the United States.

Eventually, she wound up in Tacoma, where her older sister lived. Othieno landed with Washington Mutual and was in bank administration when the bank folded in 2009. The money she earned there allowed her to buy property in Uganda, build her mother a home and get all three younger brothers through college. "What I wanted to do then was impact the community there," Othieno said. "I started sending money for kids who couldn't afford to go to school, and some of them wound up living with my mother. She loved that."

Seven years ago, Othieno married Eric Rader. Six years ago, they had a son, Zimmie. When she told her life story to attorney Amanda O'Halloran, she found an ally who wanted to help the children of Rubongi. Soon, there were eight other mothers and a nonprofit group. "We've started from the ground up, we don't have a website yet," said Julie Ammann, one of the directors. "Carolyn's story is special. I wanted to help. At least we're on Facebook now."

"All funds raised go directly to the children," O'Halloran said. A growing number of people and organizations are finding and helping the group. One child contributed money he got from the tooth fairy.

On Tuesday, the Sound View Little League donated boxes of baseball caps, uniforms and equipment. It will be sent, along with a shipping container full of donated school supplies. Do the children of St. Jude play baseball? "Not yet," Othieno said, "but they will learn."