



A Celebration of Achievement

By Rebecca Salonen

In January 2008 the Godparents Association celebrates ten years of sponsoring the education of young women at risk for forced female genital mutilation in Uganda. From the beginning, we had three goals: we wanted to spare these young people the unnecessary suffering of FGM, we hoped to allow them to develop their talents and abilities through education, and we expected them to be agents of cultural change through pioneering a way of life that did not require female circumcision.

On January 17, 2008, we reached a milestone in our history as Betty Moreen Chelangat and Monica

Chebichira graduated from Kampala University with bachelor's degrees in Social Work and Social Administration. Both girls had done very well in their studies, and Betty was awarded a First Class (highest honors) degree. A number of our goddaughters have graduated from nursing and teachers' colleges over the past few years, but Betty and Monica are the first of our sponsored girls to have attained a bachelor's degree. These two were among the first few girls we began sponsoring at Gamatui Girls Secondary School in Kapchorwa in 1998, and they were among the first 12 we brought to Kampala to study in 2000, when we feared that circumcision was going to be forced on them.

In the years that followed many of their friends dropped out of our program -- giving in to family pressures to be cut and married, giving up on their studies because of their inadequate primary school foundation, or for other reasons -- but through thick and thin Monica and Betty Moreen persisted. They studied hard and prayed hard; they passed every test, whether their national exams or trials of character.

This triumphant graduation day was the fruit of their courage and hard work, and of the generosity and good faith of their sponsors.

Following the commencement ceremonies at

Kampala University, we held a celebration dinner in honor of the graduates. The report from our country director, Hon. Erinah Rutangye, made me wish that all the Godparents could have been in Kampala to enjoy the event. We sent congratulations, which were read by Hon. Erinah (see next page). Four Members of Parliament attended the party, along with the graduates and

Betty Moreen and Monica on graduation day.



their family members. Since Yoweri Museveni, the President of Uganda, is the patron of the Godparents Association, the President's Office sent a representative, and the three major national newspapers sent reporters. It was an evening of touching moments.

No one had eaten lunch on graduation day, since the KU ceremonies ended at 4 p.m., so the first event was enjoying the delicious meal arranged by Hon. Erinah's daughter Carol. Dancing was planned, with music provided by Carol's husband, Isaac, but a heavy downpour ended the outdoor events at 9 p.m. In between the dinner and the rain, however, there was a feast of words.

Praise for the Godparents Association. Each of the MPs congratulated us on accomplishing so much with modest resources and so little fanfare. Hon. Oliver Wonekha, Bududa District, declared that she was surprised to see an NGO that could produce such substantial results as the Godparents Association had done. She said she felt God had brought her to this dinner to be inspired by what a

humble group can do. Unlike many international NGOs, the Godparents have worked quietly, never seeking publicity for its own sake. Because our organization is all-volunteer, and we pay no salaries and have no overhead, all of our resources can be used to support “our girls” directly. We have been able to do a lot with a little.

Hon. Father Lokodo (Moroto District) was overwhelmed by the fact that we had sponsored the girls through university, since NGOs promoting education usually drop students at the S4 level at best, he said. As Godparents know, our goal has always been to support the girls' education as far as they can go, so that they can be shining lights in their home areas. Hon. Eudia Kwizera (Kisoro District) said she felt that only people with kind hearts could so consistently do God's work in a remote country like Uganda. Her words made me reflect on our sponsors, who alone, year after year, have made it possible to keep the girls in school.

Tears from the families. Others spoke as well. Godfrey Gimeyi, a Kapchorwa resident who has served as a liaison and sometimes assisted with our travel in the district over the years, made the Godparents nostalgic as he reminisced about our ups and downs with the girls and our many hours spent on the terrible road to Kapchorwa.

Betty's mother, Olive Cheluket Akelle, who attended the dinner, is a birth attendant who knows firsthand the dangers women confront when giving birth after having been cut. Mrs. Akelle is now supportive of her daughter and in recent years has been a GPA parents' representative in Kapchorwa. Allying herself with the Godparents has made her the target of the slings and arrows of those in her culture who promote FGM. But now, as she spoke through her tears, she said that those in Kapchorwa who used to laugh at the Godparents and Peace High School have been put to shame by the girls' achievements.

Monica's parents were unable to attend the event, but a representative relative spoke on their behalf. Her deeply felt words brought tears to everyone's eyes. She said that she would never have believed that there was any way Monica could have gotten a university degree, however much Monica wanted to pursue her education. Now, she said, Monica is the envy of everyone at home, as she is the first in her entire sub-country to become a university graduate. Monica's family asked that the Godparents Association sponsor many more girls.

Thanks from the graduates. When Betty Moreen spoke, her eloquence confirmed her rank as the top graduate at Kampala University. Her words were brief but touching. Betty took the audience along on her journey with the Godparents Association, from the day she first saw us at Gamatui in 1998. She thanked her Godparents for their guidance, which she said had been her spiritual support until this time. Betty said she felt her life has now been shaped, and her future looks bright.

Monica, speaking in her usual clear, intense way, expressed deep gratitude to the Godparents Association. She recalled that when she was young she would sometimes hear of *bazungu* (foreigners) who helped Ugandans, but she never thought that she herself would ever be a beneficiary of any *muzungu's* kindness. She said that the past nine years have in fact been the easiest and most comfortable part of her life, and she would never forget this time. To tell the truth, Erinah and I often wished we could provide more for the girls; but Monica told her audience that she felt she had been treated like the child of a VIP, and she never lacked anything in her studies. She said that only God could properly reward the Godparents.

What a joyful day! Next year another talented young woman is scheduled to graduate from a different university under our program, and two others will begin their university studies in 2008. It is thrilling to think of what these young women can do. Let us take a moment to be proud. Thanks to all our sponsors for what they have done for “our girls.”

Congratulations

To our Goddaughters, Monica and Betty Moreen

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the Godparents Association, I send sincere congratulations on your much deserved achievement today. We have always known that you would make it to this day because of your determination and hard work. Now that you have run all the way to the goal and captured the prize, you have accomplished something that no one can ever take away from you, and that no one can minimize. You have set a good example for all the girls under our sponsorship, and for all the young girls coming up in your home district. Please continue to resist FGM, and talk to other girls about resisting FGM. We Godparents, and especially your individual sponsors, are very proud of you. Please convey my regards to your parents and relatives. Have a happy day today, and may God bless you in your future activities.

*Rebecca Salonen, President
Godparents Association, Inc.*

Information and News

“We Escaped Female Circumcision”

On January 17, Kampala University’s commencement day, *The Monitor*, one of Kampala’s two daily newspapers, published an article entitled “We Escaped Female Circumcision.” (To read it all, see <http://allafrica.com/stories/200801161101.html>.) The article begins:

Betty Chelangat, 23, and Monica Chebichira, 25, have never enjoyed parental love. This is not because they are orphans, but because their refusal to submit to the cultural practice of female circumcision has all but ostracised them from their community. . . . Ms. Chelangat and Ms. Chebichira say their parents, relatives, and the community have for the last 10 years been trying to force them to undergo Female Genital Mutilation so they could be regarded as mature women in society.

Betty Moreen’s eldest sister had hemorrhaged to unconsciousness after being circumcised, and her friend had died of shock after being cut. At a young age Betty determined not to accept FGM. So during Sabiny circumcision season, from October through December of every even-numbered year, she and Monica ran away to relatives in Kenya. Girls are often cut during school holidays at Christmas, when they are expected to come home.

“When we made 14 years, respectively, that mandated us to be circumcised. We started escaping to our relatives in Kenya during holidays,” Ms. Chelangat says as she breaks

down into tears. “Even our parents were not protective at all. They wanted to fulfill their cultural obligation of having circumcised daughters.” She says the two have not been able to visit their home areas during circumcision periods since 1998.

The girls faced all kinds of intimidation and ridicule whenever they went home to Kapchorwa. People called them cowards and said they were not real Sabiny. “But,” Monica says, “This could not make us surrender. We are proud that they have not succeeded in circumcising us.” The young women both said that it would not have been easy to escape FGM if the Godparents Association had not come to their aid.

Monica says in the article, “We are among the few lucky ones to escape the knife. Many of our friends tried to resist but were forced.” She said that although many NGOs are fighting the practice, most girls still submit to FGM. “Many girls are quietly being forced to be circumcised,” she said. Both Betty and Monica are determined to join the struggle against FGM. They believe that they, more than outsiders, will be able to persuade their communities to give up the practice. “We are ready to go down to the grassroots to talk to our people and tell them the dangers of female circumcision,” Monica said. ☺

A Note of Appreciation

In early January, Betty sent her excellent university transcript and wrote the following:

Dear and ever-loving Godparents: I am grateful for all your support towards my academic struggles since 1998 to date. You have been so loving, caring and indeed supportive to me, just as the name of the organization suggests: “Godparents.” You then cherish a vote of appreciation in all that you have done. I will always continue to keep the fire burning, wherever I go.

She added a Bible verse, 2 Timothy 4:7-8:

I have fought a good fight, I have finished the race and I have remained faithful. And now the prize awaits me – the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on the day of his return.



A group of visiting U.S. Godparents spoke to the students at Gamatui Girls' Secondary School in November 2000. Betty and Monica, already sponsored for a year, were in the crowd.