

My Experience in Africa

-- By Christine Dunagan (at age 15)

Eight-year-old Jennifer huddled in the dark corner of her grandmother's hut. Once again, she was locked in this repulsive room with no food, and no hope. Sometimes she was left alone for days while her grandmother wasted what little money they had. Most likely, the old woman would return home – drunk – and beat the girl until she could barely stand.

Jennifer knew nothing of happiness.

When she was very young, her parents were victims of Uganda's number one killer: AIDS; and now, she was yet another victim: of poverty, hunger, and abuse.

Hearing footsteps outside her door, Jennifer looked up hopefully. Maybe she would finally be released from this small damp prison she was forced to call home . . . but no.

She cringed, as the footsteps drew nearer and she recognized them, not as those of her grandmother, but as the sound of one of her uncles. Again one was coming. Too often they came . . . to use little Jennifer to satisfy their physical pleasures. When they had enough of her, they left her once again, hurt and crying on the mud floor. The latch creaked . . . and Jennifer prepared herself for yet another night of agony and heartache.

She knew she could not last much longer...

Somehow, the frightened girl escaped and began wandering her village streets. With nowhere to go, Jennifer leaned against the closest building she could find . . . and wept.

A hand touched her shoulder, startling her; but as she looked up, the girl stared into the face of a kind woman. It was Alice, a long-time friend of my family, and the local director of an AIDS orphanage which my parents helped establish ten years ago in Mbarara, Uganda.

Along with hundreds of other orphans, this child finally has a home. People are now feeding her, ministering to her hurts, and loving her. Slowly, she is learning life is not just pain and horror, and she is discovering joy. Slowly, her emotional wounds are healing. Finally, Jennifer is becoming the girl she was born to be.

During November and December of 2005, I had the incredible experience of traveling to Uganda along with my mother and a precious elderly minister. There, I met Jennifer and many orphans just like her – and it made an incredible impact on my life. Beginning on that trip, my mom and I have been establishing a brand-new orphanage (called "*Oh Sunny Day Village*") primarily for AIDS victims. There are many details – organizing orphan photos, recruiting sponsors, doing computer work – but it's worth it. I want to help rescue as many hurting children as I can.

During my journey, I traveled by a rugged dugout-canoe to a remote island. There, the poverty was so great, and many children were left as orphans due to the trauma of war and AIDS. My mom and I decided we couldn't just sit back. Thousands of children were dying from malnutrition and neglect. We knew we had to do something.

As I walked through the narrow village streets, the air reeked of fish, body odor and garbage. Little children flocked around me, holding my hands, touching my hair, and gazing deeply into my eyes. As they longed for some sort of love and affection, I wished I could just "wrap them up," hide them in my suitcase and take them all home.

But obviously, that wasn't possible.

Yet since our return to the U.S., my mom and I have been working with some Ugandan nationals to build an orphanage on that island for as many children as possible. Our desire is for these orphan children to grow up in an environment where they will be loved and wanted, to provide a happy place where hurting children can receive quality care, nutrition and education.

Right now, our new orphanage is small, but it is growing. Currently, we have 160 orphans and will have 16 orphanage-houses. My mom and I know we will never be able to help every orphan in Uganda; but we're doing what we can, and we won't give up.

For these children, it is finally an "*Oh Sunny Day*." No longer will they roam the streets, beg for meals or sleep "wherever."

These little ones will be safe and cared for.

And with smiles on their faces – just like Jennifer now has – these orphans will finally have a chance to become the children they were born to be.

