

Step Up! American Association for Rwandan Women

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February 2023

MESSAGE FROM THE FOUNDER

"Give a man/(woman) a fish, and you'll feed him/(her) for a day.

Teach a man/(woman) to fish, and you've fed him/(her) for a lifetime."

It has been a while since you received the annual StepUp Newsletter. The last one was in February 2019, a year before the Covid-19 pandemic struck. In that newsletter, we gave an overview of what StepUp accomplished in the 15 years since its founding in 2004 and proudly showed the progress of our projects in collaboration with women in Rwanda.



Visiting with the Abasa in 2022

But before we proceed to our updates-a bit of housekeeping: There was also a change in the StepUp board membership and officers since the last newsletter. Brielle Weinreich has agreed to serve as the treasurer and Malaika Gallimore is assisting her. The former treasurer Ema Barbosa Brown will stay on as a board member. By this time, you should have received a letter acknowledging the contributions you made to StepUp during the 2022 tax year. If you have not received your letter, please let us know and we will get it to you right away.

Onward: As most of you know, StepUp exists to empower the Abasa, a group of Rwandan women who are all survivors of rape and other atrocities during the 1994 Genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. Through the years, we provided financial support to the Abasa by helping them to generate self-sustaining income through planting crops,

raising cows, keeping honeybees, and sewing. StepUp also has provided university scholarships to five Abasa members who were young girls when they were raped along with their respective mothers. Four of them received their diplomas and are now teachers. Another StepUp accomplishment was the construction of a counseling center to provide onsite diagnosis and treatment to the women and children we serve. Before the pandemic, through collaboration with a grass roots organizations in Rwanda and international institutions, StepUp also provided training and education to Rwandan practitioners to meet the psychological and economic needs of trauma survivors and their dependents.

Step-Up has avoided, in our work with the Abasa, what is a common mistake among many external humanitarian assistance organizations who focus on "giving a fish" for the day instead of teaching people how to fish. The famous Chinese saying has been at the core of StepUp's engagement in Rwanda where we did not just feed a woman for a day but helped the Abasa women to feed themselves for a lifetime. Unfortunately, during the two waves of the Covid-19 pandemic, like everywhere in the world, Rwanda, a small country with a high-density population, adopted frequent lockdowns, forcing the population to stay home to reduce spread of the disease. The Abasa members who live with the HIV/AIDS virus became even more vulnerable not only in terms of susceptibility to the virus but also from their loss of income. Many Abasa lost their small trade in the market, cleaning jobs in hotels, positions at restaurants in town and at the University of Rwanda not far from where they live. Because of the lack of food, some of them stop taking their daily medications and that aggravated their condition.



Food distribution during COVID-19 lockdown

To assist these women, StepUp organized a quick fundraising drive on Mother's Day in May 2021, during which members of the StepUp board solicited friends and family. The amount raised from that fundraiser helped us to feed seven of the most vulnerable Abasa women with millet cereal and milk for breakfast, and one full meal later in the day. The assistance lasted for 10 months. That quick response was appreciated by all of us in StepUp.

In April 2021, we applied for a grant through the local Rotary Club in Columbia, Missouri. In the middle of October 2021, Step Up was awarded \$2,500 from the local club and another \$2,500 as a match from the Rotary District. StepUp added another \$1,000 remaining from our fundraiser for a total of \$6,000. In November 2021, we started providing food to the 20 most vulnerable women amounting to two full meals and a liter of milk a day. This operation lasted until the end of April 2022.



In the middle of April 2022, our founder Rangira Béa Gallimore traveled to Rwanda to meet with the Abasa women to assess the situation and to discuss with them a way forward. Although several Abasa women were negatively impacted by the pandemic, most of them are doing fine today and are back in business as usual. The two meetings with the women were aimed at finding a lasting solution for the 20 most needy individuals. After long discussions among themselves, the women voted to start a version of a women's cooperative. Each of the 20

women received \$150 to feed themselves and to start a food trade. They all buy bulk food together that they sell at retail to make a profit and feed themselves. The profits are reinvested to buy more goods for resale. The profit is put in a common savings account weekly. Each woman contributes 20,000 Rwandan francs a month or about \$20. The cooperative started in June 2022 and is working well according to Jeanne Nyirakamana, our StepUp representative in Rwanda.



Abasa elected Treasurer collecting weekly savings

Things are going well but the women need more money for food and other necessities of life. Another \$3,000 will allow them to eat more nutritious food and to buy other items without depriving themselves of nutrition. What we expect from the Abasa is that they achieve sustainability. They have done this before with some assistance and we believe that going forward with your assistance- they will do it again.

Also, as we look forward, the goal we have now set our sights on is to provide consistent funding to aid in staffing the Nsanga Counseling Center. Step-Up hopes to provide financial stability to the Nsanga Counseling Center so that it is staffed to provide onsite mental and behavioral health assessment and treatment to survivors of genocide, including members of the Abasa as well as other Rwandans who have been traumatized, for years to come. We want to offer those who have been of assistance a BIG thank you for your ongoing support of Nsanga Counseling Center whose annual maintenance and upkeep cost is \$1200. And we want to encourage you to join us in our efforts to bolster the staffing at the Center over the years to come!

We thank you again for your continuing support!

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