

# Upendo Village

Life and Hope for Kenyans Living with HIV and AIDS



## The History of Upendo Village

By Sr. Florence Muia, ASN, Foundress of Upendo Village

The mission of Upendo Village is to spread the Gospel message of love to people living with HIV and AIDS “so that they can live with dignity, self-esteem, self-sufficiency and respect.” Upendo Village brings together Christians, Muslims and people of other religions to address HIV and AIDS problem in terms of prevention, caring for orphans, putting an end to defilement and rape, and promoting open support for those infected and affected. Upendo Village has created a high HIV and AIDS awareness level in the community and people are openly talking about it. Here there is support and hope.

It took about 15 years of silence on HIV and AIDS epidemic in the country before the then President of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, acknowledged HIV and AIDS as a “national disaster” in 1999. The many years of silence saw the disease take root in the country. Watching all the suffering, I did not want to sit on the other side of the fence. I strongly felt I wanted to get involved with the fight against HIV and AIDS. I realized that I needed to establish a Kenyan project by and for the Kenyan people. My vision was for a safe haven for women, men and children affected by the disease. I wanted to call this sanctuary “*Upendo Village*.” Upendo means “*love*” in the Kiswahili language. The word Village signifies a global response to the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Africa. Upendo Village provides nutrition supplements, testing, life-extending drugs, counseling, support groups, orphan care and life skills training to the Naivasha community.

In the year 2000, I shared my dream with Sr. Marge Zulaski, OSF, a Wheaton Franciscan Sister, who had learned about the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa through her work as a psychologist with HIV and AIDS patients. She helped me to better define my Upendo Village dream and introduced me to the Wheaton Franciscan community leadership, which had been involved with HIV and AIDS ministries. The Wheaton Franciscans recognized that in global solidarity with the Kenyan people, they could lend support to the community. Sr. Sheila Kinsey, OSF, then the director of the Wheaton Franciscan Office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation, also mentored me in ways of turning the Upendo Village idea into a reality.

In June 2001, the Wheaton Franciscans contracted me to spend two years supervising the development of Upendo Village as a means of addressing the Kenyan AIDS crisis. The Franciscans were confident that I would develop a successful program because, as a Kenyan, I was close to the situation and had in-depth knowledge of the issue. The Wheaton Franciscans’ role in the development of the project was to empower me and provide the necessary resources to address the needs of the Kenyan community.

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Inspired by the parable of the Good Samaritan, Sr. Marge Zulaski and I explored how we could offer support to Kenyans with HIV and AIDS. First, we established a partnership between the Wheaton Franciscans congregation and the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi. It was vital to get the community members' buy-in for a HIV and AIDS care program, study models for success, build a program infrastructure, secure funds, recruit staff, and interact with government agencies. Upendo Village ensures that the physical, economic and emotional safety of people suffering from HIV and AIDS is catered for. This partnership has enabled the Wheaton Franciscans, the Assumption Sisters of Nairobi, and the Kenyan community to live a simple principle: *"We are called to help each other."*

Fortunately, as an Assumption Sister of Nairobi, I have refused to sit back while HIV and AIDS plagues my country. I hope that with the help of the Wheaton Franciscan community, international and local donors, we shall bring some sparkle back to the affected and infected Kenyan people.

Upendo Village has provided home-based care to 1,406 people living with the virus mainly women, men and children in Naivasha since 2003, just four years after the government acknowledged the severity of the problem. The staff strives to give hope, love, care and support to those who have been devastated by the disease using resources from donors and friends of the Village who share our dream.

My message doesn't dwell on the death of victims, but shows the potential for those living with the virus to have longer and healthier lives. The beneficiaries of Upendo are becoming stronger and self-sufficient, learning trades like bee keeping, crafts and organic farming. Some of them have been given solar ovens, more productive livestock and emotional support.

I pray that Upendo Village will continue to be a safe haven for Kenyan women, men and children...a community of love that builds bridges of hope and healing for people infected and affected by the HIV and AIDS pandemic.

We wish them God's blessings as they make use of the haven as it was intended.

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