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School of dreams

Kenya's Aids crisis has left a generation of children not only without parents, but also without the basics needed to raise themselves from poverty: food, shelter and education. In the most deprived part of Nairobi, a new school, set up by a Jesuit priest together with a local Aids charity, is a lifeline

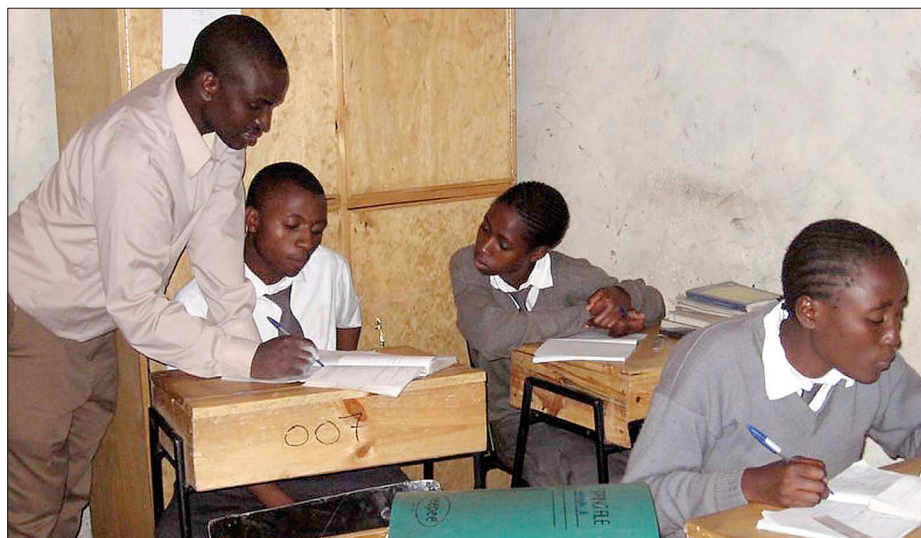
Stephen's voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper as he leans forward to share his dream with me: "I want to make history, to be someone from a poor background who makes it," he says, his large, black eyes shining.

I meet the 19-year-old Kenyan boy in his school in Kibera in Nairobi, Africa's poorest and largest slum. Courteous and smart in his uniform, Stephen tells me how life for his family is a daily struggle for survival. His father died in 1997 and it is very hard for his mother and two older brothers to find work.

Stephen talks about his tough background matter-of-factly, displaying strong family loyalty but not despair. He appears undaunted by the barriers standing in the way of his dream. His hope and resolve are nurtured by his school, St Aloysius Gonzaga, a unique institution that offers free secondary education to children from Kibera who have lost both parents to Aids or who have a surviving infected parent. Co-founded in 2003 by the local Christian Life Community (CLC) – part of an international movement following the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola – and an American Jesuit, Fr Terry Charlton, the school prepares students to qualify for Kenya's competitive tertiary education institutions and instils Christian values.

Seeing Kibera, I wondered at the audacity of these objectives and of Stephen's dreams. "I think of hell on earth when I come to this place," the young Jesuit accompanying me said grimly. Covering an area of barely 2.5 square kilometres, Kibera slum is home to around one million people. Endless waves of low-lying rusty corrugated iron roofs conceal an ocean of mud and misery in the shacks beneath. Running water, basic sanitation systems and electricity are distant dreams in rooms accommodating up to eight or 10 people each. Most slum residents live in extreme poverty, hard pressed to find casual labour to fill their stomachs every day.

In this seemingly hopeless place, the vision to set up a school was born when Joseph Oganda of CLC started to visit people with Aids. His fellow Christian community members joined him and they formed an Aids ministry called Hands of Love. The volunteers soon discovered that sick people were deeply worried about the future of their children, who could not attend secondary school because fees were prohibitively



A teacher supervises pupils' work at St Aloysius Gonzaga. Photo: Mbugua William SJ

expensive. Fr Charlton, CLC chaplain for Kenya, remembers his surprise when Joseph Oganda announced in December 2003 that Hands of Love wanted to start a secondary school. "I prayed for a minute and said, 'You're right – we should,'" Fr Charlton told me. "We had only a month to prepare or else we would have had to wait for a whole year. We needed teachers, money and a place. Amazingly we were able to do it on time." Start-up funds from the African Jesuit Aids Network (AJAN), which supports Aids initiatives by Jesuits throughout Africa, enabled St Aloysius Gonzaga to open its doors to 56 students in January 2004. Once classes were under way in four rooms in Kibera, more funds came from the Chicago Jesuit Province and other donors in the US and Europe, allowing the school to expand so that today there are 240 students.

Calls for teachers went out in mostly Catholic circles around Kibera. The salary offered was extremely low but still teachers came and the vast majority have stayed despite initial misgivings. Dionisio Kiambi, the school principal, admits he doubted whether the school would succeed. It was meeting the children that made all the difference. "As I got to know the students and the situations they live in, I decided I would work not to earn a living but to help them," said Mr Kiambi, who is a member of CLC. "I feel I am called to do this. I feel privileged

to be doing something for the children's lives."

Apart from imparting sound academic knowledge, the teachers do their utmost to give the students support, guidance and friendship. Mr Kiambi believes that this makes the school unique: "Our overall objective is to make the students men and women for others. This goes beyond the curriculum and makes us different."

Fr Charlton is full of praise for the teachers' efforts to provide "good value-oriented education" in the Jesuit tradition, which promotes intellectual, moral and spiritual formation. "I am personally inspired by the staff. The fact that we have teachers living Christian values is the most powerful influence. Their dedication and the way they act make a difference. They treat the students as people, with respect."

The students agree. "The teachers have hope in us, they encourage and give us a wider view by sharing their experiences," said 18-year-old Marion, the head girl. "This school provides a home for us." What makes their school doubly precious in the children's eyes is that it meets their basic needs, chief among them food. St Aloysius provides daily breakfast and lunch, the only regular meals many students get. "The people looking after you may not find work every day so there will be no money for food. If there is none, you just stay like that," explained Marion. "But when you go to sleep hungry, you can say to

