



# Empowering the Poor of Kenya

*Marianist job training programs in Nairobi help young women and men get a start in life.*

BY JAN D. JUDY

*"[He] has raised the lowly to high places."*

— The Magnificat, Luke 1:52

**I**T WAS JANUARY 1987, AND Veronica Wambui Gateri had just turned 21, the threshold of her adult life. While many young people this age are brimming with possibility, the young Kenyan woman found herself on the brink of despair. Three months pregnant, with no husband and no means of supporting herself, she had decided to abort her baby. But a chance meeting with a Marianist brother would change that.

"It changed everything about my life," says Veronica, now 40. "If I hadn't met Brother Peter Daino, I wouldn't be where I am today ... and my son wouldn't be alive."

A year before, Marianist Brother Peter Daino, who was working among the poor in Nairobi, Kenya, had chanced upon a plastic bag floating in a river. In the bag he discovered a dead fetus. It was a defining moment for Brother Peter and Marianist Brother Timothy Phillips, who were both working among poor families in Eastleigh, a slum area of the city.

The two men began talking with the women from the slums about family issues, unplanned pregnancies and living con-

ditions. It was these discussions that led to the formation of Maria House and later that year to a program called IMANI — Incentives from the Marianists to Assist the Needy to be Independent.

"Maria House started as a counseling center, a place where poor women could receive emotional and spiritual support," says Marianist Brother Peter Kiama, former administrative director of IMANI who now serves in the Philippines. But it quickly grew into more.

Today, IMANI, which in Swahili means "faith," is comprised of three Marianist programs: Maria House, Jobs Creation Program (JCP) and Chaminade Training Center (CTC). These programs were created to improve the lives of people living in the slums of Nairobi through job training and personal empowerment. Infused with Marianist spirituality, the founders of IMANI recognized that

**"Our mission is to move people from a situation of dependence and destitution to a situation of economic self-reliance. We see trade education as the primary means to achieve this goal."**

— IMANI's mission statement

*Grace Wambui Kariuki, a graduate of Chaminade Training Center, runs a successful dress-making and knitting business.*

spiritual and emotional support, as well as relationship skills, were as important as teaching business acumen.

### **KENYA AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN**

Veronica Wambui Gateri grew up in Thika, a community located an hour's drive northeast of Nairobi. Her story is similar to the stories of many poor women in Kenya. "There were five children in my family," says Veronica. "My father left my mother, so she went to work in a coffee plantation. It was very hard work. We used to rush home from school and help her in the fields so she could make her quota," recalls Veronica.

Like many young adults, Veronica left home for Nairobi, seeking employment and a better life. But the life she was looking for was nowhere to be found, especially for a poor, unmarried woman.

"In Kenya, a woman is supposed to be taken care of by her husband or father. So it's complicated when she is pregnant and doesn't have this support," explains

Brother Peter Kiama.

Attitudes toward women in African culture are beginning to change. Kenya achieved independence from British colonial rule in 1963, but it wasn't until 1978 that women received the right to vote in national elections and received a national identity card.

"Until that time, she had to show her father's or husband's card to prove who she was. Without it she had no identity," says Brother Peter.

Although women's place in society is starting to improve, political resistance has impeded this progress. For example, last year a referendum was defeated that would have given a woman the right to inherit property from her father or husband, a move that would have improved



women's financial status. The country's economic and health problems also are slowing the momentum.

*Women of Maria House receive child care assistance as well as counseling and job training.*

### **A COUNTRY OVERWHELMED**

Since the year 2000, Kenya has endured a series of hard blows. During this time, coffee and tea prices — which account for much of Kenya's economy — plummeted, pushing poverty levels to new heights, while the AIDS pandemic began imposing a monumental burden. According to public records, those living at the poverty level increased from 40 percent in 1990 to 56 percent in 2004. Nearly 700 people die from AIDS each day in Kenya, and one million children are orphans as a result of the AIDS crisis. In a population of 32.4 million people (a little less than the state of California), life expectancy fell from 57 years in 1986 to 45 years in 2004.

"Things got so bad in Kenya because men couldn't provide for their families, and many women were abandoned or left," says Brother Peter.

Nairobi's slums began to swell with people desperate for work and cheap housing. Many of these people ended up at the doorstep of Maria House and at the Chaminade Training Center looking for any means to make an income.



*Eunice Atieno Onyango, program coordinator for the Job Creation Program, and Brother Peter Kiama, former administrative director of IMANI now serving in the Philippines*

## THE TRAINING PROGRAMS

IMANI's vocational programs are housed at two locations. Maria House operates in a gated compound near the Eastleigh slum. IMANI's headquarters also are housed there. Besides counseling and support, Maria House offers four job training programs (*see below*).

Also housed in the compound is the Job Creation Program, an administrative arm which provides business seminars, financial assistance and micro loans to graduates of the Marianist job training programs.

Across town from IMANI's offices, in the slum area of Mukuru, the Marianists operate Chaminade Training Center, which provides training to young men and women in eight vocational trades (*see below*). The CTC has a licensed social worker on staff to address the social and relational needs of the students.

Each year Maria House graduates 100 students from its program; the CTC graduates 180 young men and women. Most graduates from these programs go to work for someone else, says Eunice

Atieno Onyango, program coordinator for the Job Creation Program. Some of these jobs are with established businesses in the private sector, but many graduates find work among shops and businesses in the slums.

"There used to be a high dropout rate among these workers," says Eunice, who has been working for IMANI since 1991. "We studied the problem and discovered that many graduates couldn't afford the bus fare to their new place of employment."

Less than five percent of Kenyans own cars, and more than 40 percent of Nairobi's residents can't afford bus fares.

In addition, most students have little or no work experience and need time to adjust to the demands of working, building customers and learning their trade.

To address these needs, the JCP instituted a three-month program which offers graduates a small stipend to offset costs of transportation and time to adjust to the work world. Today their success in maintaining a job is much higher.

## Education in the Trades

*Marianist job training programs enable young people to make a living.*

Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, IMANI continues to provide men and women living in the slums of Nairobi access to job training and work.

**Maria House** offers training and job assistance to young, unmarried women — many of them with young children — living in the slums of Eastleigh. There are four training programs:

- Dressmaking
- Hairdressing and beauty care
- Machine knitting (sweaters, jackets, shawls, woolen suits)
- Print finishing (quick printing)

**The Chaminade Training Center** offers eight training programs to men and women between the ages of 15 and 25 living in Mukuru slum. The programs include:

- Carpentry
- Catering
- Dressmaking
- Electrical installation
- Hairdressing and beauty care
- Machine knitting
- Metal work and fabrication
- Tailoring



## "WHAT YOU THINK IS WHAT YOU ARE"

Nelson Mandela once wrote: "Money won't create success — the freedom to make it will." Freedom to pursue a livelihood and the skills to do so are core beliefs at IMANI. But most important, says the staff running these programs, is a person's attitude.

"Some come into these programs so broken and hurt that much of the work is getting them to believe in themselves," says Fredrick Njoroge, program coordinator and lay Marianist at the CTC. "They have to believe they can be empowered. Some believe they are born to be poor and desperate."

Not Prexidis Kasema. "From day one, I didn't believe I was meant to be poor," says the 41-year-old woman who graduated from Maria House in 1992 with a certificate in dressmaking. In 2001, she became involved with an international nutritional supplement business and now oversees distributors in 13 countries outside Kenya. She is the top sales agent in Africa. Having catapulted herself and her family out of the slum through this

network marketing enterprise, she is a stellar example of what can happen.

"We need to show girls what is possible and give them the tools, the training and a dream," says Prexidis.

Most important, she says, is to help people believe in themselves. "I believe in that saying, 'What you think is what you are.'"

### THE ENTREPRENEURS

About five percent of the graduates of IMANI's programs become business owners. For those who want to start an enterprise or improve their business

skills, the JCP offers business training and seminars. Students must take these classes before they are qualified for a micro loan. The loans are very small, but enough to purchase equipment

*"We need to show girls what is possible and give them tools, the training and a dream."*

— Prexidis Kasema

such as sewing machines, knitting supplies or electrical tools. Once a person has demonstrated an ability to repay a loan, they are upgraded for bigger loans, the biggest amount being 50,000 shillings or about \$700 U.S. dollars.

Agnes Muthoni Kiamenju, 24, opened her own hair salon in 2004 with help from the JCP. "The advisors at the JCP showed me how to manage my finances and gave me a loan. I now have three people working for me," she says with a proud grin.

Agnes' hair salon is in the heart of Eastleigh slum, about a half mile from IMANI's offices. It is a dangerous area.

Everything in the slum is risky, say the business advisors at IMANI. There is no land ownership, no public infrastructure and no police protection.

Agnes and other shop owners must pay a private vigilante group to patrol the slums at night. "It's very dangerous here after dark," admits Agnes, who lives by herself at her shop.

Agnes is confident that her business will succeed. Impeccably dressed in a crisp, black suit, her hair immaculately braided,



she stands outside her storefront amid trash bags, mud and mounds of rubbish. "I named my salon 'Miracle' because I am operating it with the hand of God."

*Agnes Muthoni Kiamenju, graduate of Maria House, in front of her hair salon*

### WITH THEIR WHOLE HEARTS

Today, Veronica Wambui Gateri is a successful business owner selling hardware and other supplies for home construction. She is a role model for other women and has sent hundreds of women to Maria House for training. "I am very thankful to God and Maria House," she says. "They were my light, my torch to see where I was going in life."

Other women and men are finding their paths through these training programs.

The energy and excitement of starting their own enterprises have many graduates coming back to share their experiences. Victor Onsemble Kafuna graduated seven years ago with a certificate in electrical installation. He now operates three businesses. "I do this with my whole heart," he says, beaming.

"Our most successful business owners are running three or four small enterprises," explains Eunice.

Some, like Joyce Muzungu, 26, owner of a hair salon, have added employees, thereby creating jobs for others. Joyce intends to expand her operations by opening a school of hairdressing.



Students of the Chaminade Training Program learn their trade through hands-on projects.

"Before I came to the CTC," says Joyce, "I didn't have a job. But now I have a job. I earn my own money. I solve my own problems.

"I love my career. I do it with my inner heart," she says.

"I thank the people of the CTC and the Marianists for their part in my life," says Joyce. "They have empowered me."

With a burst of confidence, she adds, "There is nothing I cannot do." ■

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## One Way to Visit a Nairobi Neighborhood

*How your donations can make a difference.*

*New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman wrote an editorial shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, saying it will be increasingly impossible to ignore the problems of the poor living in desperate situations. "If you don't visit a bad neighborhood," he wrote, "a bad neighborhood will visit you."

Unable to ignore the fact that we are inextricably linked to our poor neighbors living in the slums of Kenya, the question arises: What can we do?

Fredrick K. Njoroge, program coordinator of Chaminade Training Center in Nairobi, outlines some ways your gifts of kindness may help.

"Our programs are at full capacity," he says, "with a waiting list twice as long. We don't do any advertising. It's all by word-of-mouth."

More than expanding their course offerings, Fredrick wants to improve the facilities and current programs. For example, there is only one computer for use by staff members of the CTC.

"We need at least five computers to start a computer lab for the students and staff," says Fredrick. The same holds true for upgrading computers and providing computer support to students at Maria House. Here is a list of needs:

### Computers and software

- CTC: \$10,000
- Maria House: \$7,500

### Equipment and supplies (carpentry tools, hairdressing equipment, sewing machines, knitting equipment, etc.)

- CTC: \$2,000; \$3,000; \$5,000 donations
- Maria House: \$2,000; \$3,000; \$5,000 donations

### Textbooks and instructional materials

- CTC: \$500; \$1,000; \$2,000 donations
- Maria House: \$1,000; \$4,000; \$5,000 donations

### Scholarship/tuition

- CTC: \$100 per student per year
- Maria House: \$100 per student per year

Funding for IMANI comes from international donors, local Kenyan businesses, tuition fees, marketing of student products, the Marianist Mission and Marianist friends. ■

*You may make a financial contribution by using the envelope inside this magazine or by contacting the Marianist Mission toll-free at 1.800.348.4732 or [www.marianistmission.org/donateafrika](http://www.marianistmission.org/donateafrika). See inside back cover for more information.*