



Ms. JD: Funding the Legal Education of Ugandan Women

By Janet L. Wallace

L to R Above: Monica, Patience, Joanne, Brenda, Gracious, Sarah and Esther

Let me introduce you to two young women: Joanne Nanyange and Monica Athieno. Joanne wants to become a human rights activist for women and children. Monica wants to be a judge who ensures that suspects are treated fairly and that the rule of law prevails. These two women will soon be graduating from law school, after four years of study.

What makes this graduation so noteworthy, so distinctive, is that these women are graduating from law school in Uganda, a place where more than 45 percent of women over the age of 25 have no schooling at all, a place where men are more than twice as likely as women to have access to higher education. To put those numbers in context, over 99 percent of women over the age of 25 in the U.S. have had at least some schooling, and men are less than 1 percent more likely than women to have access to higher education. What's more, Joanne and Monica will be graduating from Makerere University, the premier educational institution in East Africa.

Joaninne and Monica almost didn't get this opportunity. By our standards, the cost to attend law school in Uganda is a real bargain — approximately US\$3,000 per year including room and board — but for Joaninne and Monica, both orphans, the cost was insurmountable. As Monica explains, "I lived a happy childhood until the fateful day, 4th of April 2001, when my father passed on... My mother single-handedly struggled hard, as a market vendor to put food on the table." Joaninne's story is similar: her mother died in 2002 and, after her father disappeared, Joaninne was raised by her aunts. Neither had the funds to attend Makerere University.

To their rescue came Ms. JD, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to the success of women in



Patience and Brenda

law school and the legal profession. I currently serve on the Board of Directors of Ms. JD. I was also serving on the Board five years ago, when Ms. JD's founder, Elizabeth Pederson, proposed expanding our mission internationally. While our efforts had previously focused on women law students and lawyers in the United States, Ms. JD had been looking to support the rise of women lawyers worldwide. Following a year of dedicated work with the Carnegie Foundation,



Esther Niwamanya — Law Year I

Makerere University's Gender Mainstreaming Division, and pro bono counsel, the proposal was put to a vote: would the Board agree to transfer funds to Uganda's Makerere University, for the purpose of sending two Ugandan women to law school?

The ayes had it. The Board of Directors launched the Ms. JD Global Education Fund to enable women in developing countries to pursue legal educations who otherwise would not have access to further education.

Soon, Joaninne and Monica started school, with the distinction of being Ms. JD's first international scholars. Their tuition, books, room and board were paid, and they were each given a little pocket money for incidental expenses. In the four years since Joaninne and Monica started the law program, the Global Education Fund has made it possible for six additional Ugandan women to pursue their dreams of becoming lawyers by attending the law program at Makerere University.

One of these scholars, Brenda, aged 21, is the third of four children. Her mother died when she was three years old and her father soon remarried and moved away. In a letter to Ms. JD, she wrote:

"[We lived] under the care of our ailing grandmother. My elder sister who was then aged about eight years took on the responsibility of mothering us, and for sure it was a hell of [a] life for the four of us because most of our relatives had abandoned us. A normal day began as early as 5 a.m. to the garden, the only place which we were sure that could provide us a meal for a day or two, collection of firewood, drawing water and receiving a thorough beating from our elder sister as a way of pouring out her rage for taking on the responsibility of mothering us. I never enjoyed any of those childhood days and only wished my mother, whose memories have been completely erased, was there."



Sarah Olala Akoth - Law Year I

Brenda is an advocate for increasing the number of women in the field of law, and bridging the educational imbalance in her country. Her passion is helping women and children.

Scholar Mary Nakale was raised by her HIV-positive mother while her father was incarcerated. Mary was motivated by the injustices she witnessed as a child to become an agent of change. She also wants to help women and children. She cares deeply about ending domestic violence and dreams of one day opening an orphanage for children in need.

Scholars Gracious Atuhaire and Patience Winnie Apai were also raised by single mothers. Patience's mother earned a salary of US\$98 per month which she used, together with a bank loan, to send Patience to

school. Both Gracious and Patience intend to use their law degrees to improve their communities.

The Global Education Fund's two newest scholars, Esther Niwamanya and Sarah Olala Akoth, recently started classes at Makerere University, and we eagerly await reports about their first semester learning the law.

Each semester, the Ms. JD Board of Directors receives a status update from the women, detailing the classes they took, the grades they received, and their reflections on attending school in Uganda. Their letters are full of gratitude, like this note from Brenda:

"Thanks once again to you for having made this possible, for if it was not for your support, God knows where I would be, perhaps in the village married off to some old man, but because of you, I can say I am a proud student of a Bachelors of Law... Thank you, thank you, thank you, and in my local language they say 'Asante Sana' to mean: thanks a lot."

Through these reports, we also discovered the obstacles the women faced. We learned that they were unable to gain access to study materials because free library resources were scarce. The wealthier students accessed a fee-based membership library. And so, we built a library for the scholars. Total cost for a complete set of books? A mere US\$600. We learned that the women did not have computer skills, and

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Brenda

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Q: What would you write to a future you 100 years from now?

A: If I were to write to the next “me” in 100 years, I would only tell myself to not be frustrated and to continue trying to get better. I would imagine that after 100 years I would be tired of working and tired of fighting uphill. I would tell myself to not lose the desire to keep trying — it is easy to get discouraged and frustrated from failing to meet your own expectations, others failing to meet your expectations or experiencing some sort of personal failure. I hope that in 100 years, the passion for improvement and willingness to change isn’t gone. I would tell myself to continue to get better and not be afraid of change. I would also congratulate myself for being alive 100 years from now — I would be 131!

I recently read a quote: **“To succeed in life you need three things: a wishbone, a backbone and a funny bone.”** Dustin has all three. ■

- Jennifer Alton is a partner with Alton & Allen in San Luis Obispo and the producer and director of the documentary film, Passion & Purpose.

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so we invested in technology training. This year, the women will be living together on campus, eliminating the long commute to class via crowded minibus and allowing them to mentor one another.

Here in America, we’ll be playing Pomp and Circumstance, as we celebrate the graduation of our law students in Uganda. Though we’ve only met them via e-mail and Skype, the women sometimes refer to Ms. JD as their “parents” and, like most parents on graduation day, we will be immensely proud.

The victories of these two women represent a victory for all women in Uganda, for women worldwide and, indeed, for society. The World Bank notes that investment in education for girls has one of the highest rates of return to promote development. In particular, educating women helps them earn higher wages and participate more actively in the labor force and political sphere. Providing education to women also has some less obvious benefits such as reducing child and maternal mortality, improving child nutrition and health, preventing the spread of HIV, and protecting girls from exploitation and abuse. ■



Joannine and Monica

- Ms. JD is a national nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to the success of women in law school and the legal profession. To learn more about Ms. JD or the Global Education Fund Scholars, visit www.ms-jd.org.

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