RAFIKI CALLIXTE FROM LES ENFANTS DE DIEU

Firelight Grantee Gives Children Hope for the Future

RAFIKI CALLIXTE is a man with a vision of peace and prosperity for his country. He knows that change begins with instilling hope in children by teaching them to care for themselves and their communities. Rwanda is perhaps too well-known for the genocide that took place in 1994. The survivors of the 100-day genocide, especially the children who were orphaned, were left with little sense of hope and personal dignity. One of many who describes the periods of his life as “before” and “after the genocide”, Rafiki is looking to change not only the lives of orphaned children, but the world around him. His love for children is what fuels his commitment to integrity and creative problem-solving. These traits help Rafiki empower the once disempowered youth to solve their own problems, make plans for the future, and change their lives and their worlds. He believes that lasting change begins with the next generation, which is why he chooses to work with children.

After putting himself through college, Rafiki became a teacher. He loved learning from his students as much as he loved teaching them. It was this love that led him to work with children and families. The International Committee of the Red Cross recruited him to help children who had been separated from their parents. There he introduced a program called ‘photo-tracing,’ which uses photos to identify and reunite family members. Later the International Rescue Committee recruited him to help orphaned children raised in institutions learn to become independent. This work led him to a local Rwandan organization called Les Enfants de Dieu (“Children of God”) in 2004.

“...If people themselves don’t change, we will never solve the problem. That’s why I work with youth: When you want to give shape to the tree, you must begin very early.”

-Rafiki Callixte

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RAFIK CALLIXTE

Les Enfants gives children living on the street hope by showing them that they are worthwhile. The organization provides short-term shelter for more than 100 male youth, equipping them with literacy and vocational skills while working to reunite them with their biological families or integrate them into foster families. Les Enfants helps them develop self-esteem by showing them that they are capable. It guides them in developing decision-making and responsibility by having the youth run seven “ministries” or clubs: sport & culture, health, education, administration, social affairs, home affairs, and agriculture. The boys, ranging in age from 15 to 18, make all of the decisions, action plans, and program assessments.

Rafiki says, “We are empowering them so they can become peace-builders and change-makers.”

The Firelight Foundation was one of the first sources of funding for Les Enfants. With their first Firelight grant, Rafiki built and furnished a school and employed teachers. Continuing support from Firelight has enabled the administration of a socio-economic reintegration program that assists families in sustaining themselves and their reintegrated children. Les Enfants not only supports the children directly, but also the creation of an effective and sustainable infrastructure in which the child can grow into a productive and self-sufficient adult.

The successful collaboration between Les Enfants de Dieu and Firelight has led to better lives and greater opportunities for the children of Les Enfants. It is Firelight’s donors who enable this great work. Rafiki says, “My dream is to have our children talking to Firelight donors…telling them how they were sleeping under bridges...eating from dustbins…and how now they have better lives and are productive members of the city.”

Rafiki will be at Firelight’s Open House on November 16th to tell you about the successes of the children he loves whose lives have been changed by Les Enfants.
CATCHING UP WITH CATHY ARONSON
Firelight Donor

From June 18 to July 22, Cathy Aronson rode her bike 1,800 miles from Anacortes, Washington to Fargo, North Dakota to raise awareness about children, HIV, AIDS, and poverty in Africa, and to raise funds for the Firelight Foundation. Her successful cycling trip raised nearly $6,000 that will directly fund a grassroots organization helping children and families in Africa.

The 2010 cycling trip was Cathy’s third fundraising ride for Firelight. Previous rides in 2004 and 2006 have brought Cathy’s total funds raised to more than $20,000, and her total miles pedaled for Firelight to 8,300. Humble about her achievements, Cathy says, “I get to do something I love—bicycling—and also help people at the same time. It’s a win-win.”

Cathy currently resides in Jackson, Wyoming, where she owns a digital printing business. She learned about Firelight through its founders, Dave Katz and Kerry Olson. The three have been friends since the late 80s, when Cathy and Dave worked together at the University of Michigan.

“I like the work that Firelight does. I was really taken by the video that was done a long time ago of one of the grantee-partners. It was so sad that there were that many children orphaned by AIDS,” says Cathy. “I think it’s horrible that children have their families die around them and have to give up school and being a child to take care of sick family members.”

To turn her cross-country cycling trips into fundraising events, Cathy calls on her friends and family members to make contributions in her honor during the ride. Hundreds of these donations have had a real impact on Firelight’s grantees. A typical grant is $10,000, so all of those cycling miles have added up to two years of funding for one organization.

Rather than taking to the highways of the northwestern states alone, Cathy joins supported rides run by WomanTours, a bike tour company that runs trips just for women. “It is very inspiring for me to ride with this group of ladies,” Cathy says. “The oldest woman on the ride is 72. I hope to be as fit and active as she is when I am that age.”

Do you have a great fundraising idea? Would you like to help at our offices or at our next event? Firelight welcomes you!

Please contact: development@firelightfoundation.org or call 831.429.8750.
These are exciting times for those working on children and AIDS. Scientists, experts, funders, activists, and people living with AIDS gathered at the 2010 International AIDS Conference in Vienna this past summer where global leaders and health experts agreed that it should be possible to eliminate the transmission of AIDS at birth by 2015.

As chair and co-founder of the Coalition on Children Affected by AIDS (CCABA), I am excited about the work we are doing to help children. CCABA is a philanthropic collective that includes the Bernard van Leer Foundation, the Children Affected by AIDS Foundation, Comic Relief, the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund, The ELMA Foundation, the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the Firelight Foundation, the Nelson Mandela Children’s Fund, and Stop AIDS Now.

Since its founding in 2004, CCABA has done a number of things, including funding a symposium focused on children and AIDS before each AIDS conference; helping child-focused organizations develop abstracts for presentations; commissioning high-quality research on key children’s issues and information gaps; providing a ‘roadmap’ to child-focused sessions and activities at the conference; and successfully advocating and raising funds for a senior specialist on children within the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria. CCABA’s work helps Firelight carry out its mission of improving the well-being of vulnerable children in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Ending pediatric AIDS will require solid efforts in research, advocacy, policy, and service delivery. With continued collaborative work and support from our generous donors, we just may see the first generation of healthy children born to HIV-positive mothers.