



JOHN AND JOYCE WANDA

John and Joyce Wanda



John and Joyce Wanda transform lives at the Arlington Academy of Hope. The thousands they've helped include Rachel, one of seven children raised by a single mother in Uganda. Her family was living in dire poverty and marriage seemed to be Rachel's best hope for survival until she was offered a full scholarship by the Arlington Academy of Hope.

Rachel became one of the Academy's best students, earning top scores on her primary-level exams and receiving an AAH scholarship to continue her education. She went on to become a student leader at her secondary boarding school in Kampala. Rachel's mother started her own small business with help from the Academy's microfinance program, and still volunteers for AAH though her children have all graduated from the school.

Now they can lift their community up and give back, like the Wandas have done for the past 12 years. "We know service to others is the most important thing you can do. When you serve others, you are serving yourself and humanity," John says. So he and Joyce have worked to provide quality education, medical care, and community development to districts in Eastern Uganda. Besides its school and scholarship programs, AAH also provides health care to over 30,000 patients a year, partners with the Kamal Foundation in Washington, DC, to rebuild five primary schools in Eastern Uganda, and works with the Women's Micro-Finance Initiative to provide hundreds of women with small loans to start businesses of their own. There's also a training program for local teachers, and a weekly radio program that challenges local parents and students to focus on education and search for joint solutions to the problems rural Ugandans face.

There's a desperate need for answers, as the Wandas

know from growing up in the villages of Bumwalukani and Bupoto, where mud huts dot steep green mountains near the Kenyan border and children share rough banana-leaf mats while sleeping on the floor. The average monthly income is \$50, hunger is common, literacy is low, and the average life expectancy is 48 years. "We had very humble beginnings," Joyce recalls. "There is no electricity or running water in Uganda, and many kids go to school but end up dropping out." Like hundreds of other kids in their village, the Wandas thought they would never leave or have a better life. Yet they made their way to the U.S. where they found good jobs, sent their kids to good schools, and threw a ladder back for those they left behind.

They stood out from the kids they grew up with because they had the chance to get an education. John's home was the only one in his village of 10,000 to have any books, and his father, a coffee farmer, was determined to educate his children. John and his six siblings attended a patchwork of primary schools, sometimes walking five or six miles each way on empty stomachs. Their father sold off his few possessions to pay for their schooling, and eventually all the siblings graduated from high school. John figured he would some day settle in Kampala, where he attended university and met Joyce. When she saw a newspaper ad for a U.S. State Department visa lottery, she applied and was accepted.

In 1995, the couple and their infant son boarded a



plane and landed in Washington, DC. John found work as an accountant with the American Chiropractic Association, rose to vice president of finance and administration, and now works at Chapman Cubine and Hussey, an award-winning marketing company in DC. He and Joyce bought a house in Arlington, Virginia, and sent their four children to school three blocks away. “After coming to the U.S. and seeing all the things that are different here,” John says, “our dream was to share this with the kids we left behind, with people who never have a chance to see this in their lives.”

No doubt people in Uganda would have marveled at his children’s education. At Arlington Traditional School, the Wanda children worked on computers and took field trips to museums. They got personal attention, hot meals, and as many books as they could read. By contrast, kids in John’s village walked barefoot to a rickety structure with no books, no electricity, no windowpanes, and hardly any furniture. Teachers often didn’t show up. Children sat in cramped rows on a dirt floor, 75 to a room, reciting lessons by rote, and malaria kept half the students home.

As the Wandas thought about these children they realized, “We came here for a reason.” And that reason was to bring hope to the people back home. But it wasn’t easy, John explains. “We were two young people coming from Uganda who did not have anybody in

the US. We had four kids to take care of. We did not have any networks or contacts. We didn’t know how to raise money. We had to figure out how to take care of ourselves while helping people in Uganda so they could rise to a new level. We wanted them to see there is something better.” And they were able to achieve their goals because Americans welcomed them, Joyce says. “We were surprised at how people received us and shared things,” including their funds. With support from their church, the Wandas began providing scholarships for children in government-run schools. But it became clear to them on a trip home that kids with scholarships were still receiving a substandard education.

So they reached out to their community, church, and local schools for help in building a model school for the children of Eastern Uganda. As the money trickled in, John and Joyce began pulling long days. After work, they came home to take care of their kids and then stayed up late corresponding with Uganda on the progress of the school. John and Joyce stopped taking vacations and seldom went out, but they were still happy because they were changing people’s lives. “For me doing this was as important as my family,” John says, “because I consider all of these people as my family.”

He and Joyce wanted the best for them so they didn’t stop after building a great primary school that now has 300 students. Over the years, they have created



a scholarship program that sends 300 kids to high school, and 80 of them are now in college. They have two medical clinics that serve community members, and their microfinance program for women helps local communities be more self-sufficient. Small loans of \$100 to \$200 have allowed the women to make baskets, do crafts, sew clothes, and plant sugar canes, as Joyce saw on a recent trip where she met with 300 women. “Their lives have really changed,” Joyce, says. “Many of them are now able to support their households and send their children to school.” Most of important of all, John adds, they’ve come to realize that “every single person, whatever their means, can help others and make their community grow.”

You can do great things if you believe in yourself. And there’s no better example of this than President Barack Obama, John says. “He has a heritage that stretches not only to Kenya but also Uganda. So those of us who come from East Africa see him as one of our own who has been able to overcome obstacles and rise all the way through the ranks. There is no person more respected for their achievements than this man with an African background who rose to become president of the United States, and we are very hopeful that after he leaves the presidency, he will do greater things both for this country and the world.”

John and Joyce also urge young people to consider

the world their home. They encourage their own children to think big and be at the forefront of change. “They were born here,” John says. “They are growing up here, but we want them to be advocates for kids around the world, to stand up for their rights, to share what they have learned, and to know they are truly citizens of the world.” The “key is to think about how other people live,” Joyce says, and realize that “love must reach across borders.” Though America is important, as John points out, it cannot be safe when other parts of the world suffer.

So he calls on the young people of this country to spread the values of democracy and human rights across the globe. “We want them to go out and interact to build connections. We want a better world where people grow together, so we don’t leave pockets of poverty and desperation. If we fail to act, it will eventually catch up with us. So let’s not build a wall around this country. Let’s not build a wall around our communities. We want young people to know they belong to something bigger. We want them to reach out and consider the whole world their home.” The Arlington Academy of Hope is a start, and it’s not just a school. It’s a global project that shows love can cross continents and borders to change lives. If we embrace the world as our home, we can bring hope to humanity as a whole.