



# Seeds of Grace

*Naperville women's journey to help kids in Kenya*



*"Be the change you want to see in the world"*  
—Mahatma Gandhi

Far, far away from the friendly confines of Naperville, halfway across the world, there is a community in eastern Africa, the town of Meru, Kenya, whose population is about a third of the size of Naperville.

In Naperville, women arise to prepare their children for school, feed them a warm meal, make sure they are well-prepared for the day, and whisper "I love you," reassured that the children will get home safely that afternoon. In Meru, Kenya, children also arise, but many are unsure of what or if they'll eat that day, many of their mothers aren't there to whisper "I love you," since many of these children are now orphans, or are being raised by grandparents. Their parents have either died of AIDS or are debilitated physically or stigmatized socially by the HIV virus. Women... both here and there... all loving their children, all just wanting the best for them. But we're here and they're there.

The paths of four women have crossed—two from Naperville, Julie Utter and Annette Swanson, and Kenyans Florence Mubichi and Gladys Gitonga—a fortuitous meeting that has bonded these women forever in friendship and spirit. Together they work, with miles, strife, and barriers between them, to help families and children whose lives have been ravaged by AIDS/HIV.

This isn't just another Oprah story. This is the story of two strong-willed, compassionate Naperville women, who are dedicated to reversing the course for the women and children in Meru. As Julie says, "Meeting Florence was providential... God brings people into our lives and we are just his instruments, affecting change where we're needed." Annette adds, "We didn't go searching for this, it simply found us."

It all began about seven years ago. Julie via her church, Grace United Methodist, was asked to offer a ride to Florence, who was then a graduate nursing student at Benedictine University. Their friendship immediately blossomed with Florence joining their Bible study, where Annette was a member. "Florence just had an aura about her," recalls Annette. "She was very humbling and gracious." Annette became a pen pal of Florence's sister, Gladys Gitonga in Meru.

Both mothers themselves, Julie and Annette were so moved that they accepted the sisters' invitation to visit Kenya in 2005. With the help of their church, they raised enough money for a 17-day, 18-person mission trip, where they helped build a home for a family orphaned by AIDS and worked in a Kenyan hospital. *(Quick stats: An estimated 1.5 million adults and 650,000 children in Kenya have been infected by the HIV virus. Although government programs are doing a noble job of distributing educational materials and antiviral medicines, the damage has been done.*

"We are dealing with basically a lost generation of people," says Julie. "The irony is that although these people's lives have been devastated, they are resilient, dedicated to surviving and determined to provide a better life for themselves and their children. We are just the catalyst to help them do this."

How do they help? In 2006, Annette and Julie founded Seeds of Grace, a non-profit organization that raises money to support community-based organizations in Meru. The money pays for needy children's educational fees, family AIDS counseling and education, and communication between Naperville and Meru.

Money is raised through the sale of jewelry made by the women of Meru—with 100% of the proceeds wired to community-based organizations. They also have occasional fundraisers and graciously receive individual donations. Ultimately, the goal of these Naperville women is to raise enough money (an estimated \$285,000) to build a counseling center for AIDS families and orphans, while continuing to pay for school fees, as well. Only \$5 pays for the immunizations an infant needs (think of forgoing one Starbucks latte a week); \$15 feeds an orphan for a month; \$70 pays for school fees for a child to attend primary school; \$1,500 pays for a basic house for a needy family.

So along with these two compassionate women in Naperville and their activist African friends, imagine a bridge across the vast and murky divide that has been created by AIDS/HIV. Seeds of Grace is merely reinforcing many needy children and families on their journey, and helping the Kenyan people get to the other side—strong, educated, and ready to face their tomorrow together.

To help: [www.seedsofgracesite.org](http://www.seedsofgracesite.org)

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