

# A SECOND CHANCE FOR THOSE WITH AIDS

A faith-based organization helps to end the persecution of those affected with HIV/AIDS and allows them to find their own happiness.

BY AISHA BINTE ABDUL RAHMAN

“From hopelessness to hope.” A country in Sub-Saharan Africa, according to the UNAIDS (Joint United Nations program on HIV/AIDS) report in 2009, approximately 4.1 percent of the population are inflicted with the raging AIDS virus; an illness that has ravaged the society, and left many children orphaned and spouses widowed as the disease has torn families apart. With the sudden loss of their loved ones, life appears to be brimming with hopelessness for these orphans and widows. And it is in these darkest hours that ROWAN (Rural Orphans and Widows AIDS Network) offers a beam of hope for the Ugandan people.

Founded in 2004 by Pastor Paul Nyende, a Ugandan native and head pastor of the Church of God in the village of Mawanga, and Kelsey Young, who hails from the US, according to its website, ROWAN began as a vision to empower



Singing “Jesus, My Savior”.

Africa’s orphans and widows. Today, it is a faith-based organization that aims to uplift the lives of Ugandan widows and orphans through an

all-encompassing approach that meets the physical, spiritual and social needs of the communities they serve, thereby improving their quality of life.



Patients waiting for their turn.





George Katewu, 20, an orphan.

Currently reaching out to over 60 widows and 100 orphans in Uganda, ROWAN carries out many diverse projects that range from micro-enterprise, education to medical initiatives. Its micro-enterprise projects, which enable widows to generate sustainable incomes to support their families, include growing and selling pineapples, making necklaces to sell overseas and most currently, running a hair salon in Mawanga village. Its education projects ensure that each orphan and widow who desires access to education will be supported in their pursuit. These include the provision of secondary

school scholarships, and school supplies as well as literacy training for adults. Its medical projects, which ensure that all members of ROWAN have an improved access to healthcare, include routine medical/dental checkups and healthcare training/seminars for ROWAN and the larger community.

Looking at all its various initiatives, ROWAN's vision is clear – to transform orphans and widows into change agents, where every widow is a leader and every orphan, a beloved child.

ROWAN is a community-based, volunteer-run organization, and

about 99.95 percent of its donations go directly to its programs for widows and orphans. We speak to three beneficiaries of ROWAN on their experiences and how this organization has impacted their lives:

**GEORGE KATEWU, 20 YEARS OLD**

**ORPHAN, MAYIRINYA VILLAGE**

Katewu lives in Mayirinya village, one of villages that surround Mawanga, where ROWAN is primarily located. Coming from one of the 13 surrounding villages that ROWAN reaches out to, he found out about the organization from his aunt who lives in Mawanga. He described, "When my mother visited her sister in Mawanga, she shared with her about a faith-based organization called ROWAN dealing with orphans and widows. This was a great opportunity which made my future bright and restored my life."

Katewu was not always this optimistic about his life and future. One of eight children, he was left in the care of his mother, Tapesi Namunana and his grandfather, Erizephan Kigenyi, after his father's passing from AIDS (Katewu has yet to be tested for AIDS). Soon after their loss, the Katewu family began to experience persecution from their clan members. A common practice in Uganda to grab hold of land from widows for uncles and others, the clan took the land that belonged to them and chased them out of the clan and their home, leaving them homeless and with nowhere to turn. It was one of the lowest moments in Katewu's life. He shared, "The death of my father brought great sorrow in my life. At that time, I felt being abandoned, a dark future and a hopeless life."



Mary Kiwala, 30, a widow.

Fortunately, with the help of ROWAN, he soon discovered a newfound confidence for his and his family's future. With the spiritual guidance provided by ROWAN's pastors, he slowly gained strength to overcome his negative emotions. In fact, he is now a very active member of ROWAN and is benefitting tremendously from the programs that the organization has put in place that ensures the holistic development of the orphans under their care.

He has benefitted from the organization's spiritual classes and the educational opportunities that ROWAN offers to both children and adults

who have the desire and passion to learn. He is also a proud recipient of a Secondary School Scholarship that ensures that ROWAN orphans can attend school, and keenly takes part in the drama and music program that helps children express themselves and spread the truth about God. It is also used to inform people about AIDS and to help the children tell their stories, offering them a cathartic release.

Katewu explained, "Morning devotion and counseling has helped me to grow spiritually. Music, dance and drama have helped to exploit my talents in traditional music. Recitation of poems and health, and

social programs on sensitization and prevention of HIV/AIDS have helped me to live as a role model in the community."

The future, which used to seem bleak to him, is now brimming with promise and possibilities. In five years' time, Katewu expects to complete his university degree and study to become a pilot. As he reflected, "I feel better than I did with my future brightened with friends, family and education – and my hope restored." When asked what he would say to the passionate individuals behind ROWAN, he said, "I would say: Thank you for loving us."





Samuel Kifuko, 28, a volunteer.

**MARY KIWALA, 30 YEARS OLD**  
**WIDOW, BUDHERO VILLAGE**

Kiwala has led an exceptionally difficult life. Widowed in 2008, she was suddenly entrusted with the sole responsibility of caring for her seven children (five boys and two girls) after the death of her husband who was her security economically, emotionally, socially and medically. Kiwala's husband passed away from stomach ulcers and was never tested

for AIDS. Unfortunately, a stigma still exists in the community of men getting tested for AIDS. Likewise, Kiwala and her children have yet to be tested for the virus.

And despite her dire circumstances, no help came. As Kiwala recalled, "I was covered with a lot of fear and nobody was ready to help me. Not only that but I was also persecuted by my brothers-in-law who wanted to take over the small land and also to inherit me but I refused because I

feared they carried AIDS and it would spread to me."

Her worries about providing for her children were her utmost concern. She added, "Loneliness and fear in the house, lacking money to buy uniforms, books, pens, clothing, food and medication for my children. I felt like life was no more because no one was helping." But she persevered and drew strength from her belief in God. Eventually, she found out about ROWAN from Pastor Nyende, the

co-founder of the organization, and registered as a member after a week of the start of its operations.

Since joining ROWAN, she is more optimistic about her life and that of her children. Through the organization, she and her family now receive basic medical needs such as treatment of malaria, toothache or headache from the private clinic in Mawanga. This is because ROWAN ensures that all of its members receive routine medical/dental checkups, access to medical care when an emergency arises, healthcare training and seminars, and assistance after a death in the family. She has also benefitted from the micro-enterprise projects that the organization carries out, which equip ROWAN widows with the business knowledge, skills and opportunity to generate their own income. As Kiwala shared, "The pineapple project (the growing and selling of pineapples) has helped me to get skills, as well as the necklace project (the making of necklaces to sell overseas)." In addition, she and her children are receiving more educational opportunities with ROWAN. While her children receive free nursery education, she is also enrolled in the ROWAN Adult Literacy Program where she is learning how to read and write in her own local language, Lusoga.

Instead of hopelessness, she now looks to the future with a strong belief that the tides have turned. She reflected, "I feel I am living a better life compared to how I used to live. This is because medication, which was ever a challenge, I now get. I am getting educated and I am growing strong in my faith." In five years' time,

she envisions her family growing a lot of maize, her children progressing in their education and overall attaining an even better life than now. Looking further, Kiwala also has high hopes for the future. She shared, "To see my children studying at a university, have a pineapple garden, encouraging other widows to join ROWAN and helping them grow spiritually."

When asked what she would say to the passionate individuals behind ROWAN who have reached out and given her a helping hand when there was none, she said, "May God bless them for the medication, education, love and financial support they have for me. They have truly touched my life and are touching hundreds more!"


**SAMUEL KIFUKO, 28 YEARS OLD**  
**VOLUNTEER, KANSONGOIRE**  
**NANKOMA SUBCOUNTRY,**  
**BUGIRI DISTRICT**

A current volunteer with ROWAN, Kifuko works with the organization as its project clerk, records manager and field officer in charge of HIV/AIDS, hygiene and sanitation. A well-educated man, he is definitely equipped for the multi-tasking job. He currently holds a certificate in HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention from Emmanuel International Sub-Saharan Africa, certificate in counseling of HIV/AIDS clients, certificate for training in Church Leadership and is a graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Bible and Theology awarded by the Global University in the US. Introduced to the organization through Pastor Nyende and a firm friend, he has found the work with ROWAN,

enlightening and fulfilling.

He explained, "I have been able to discover and know the challenges of widows and orphans. Not only that but through several field-work conducted, I have been able to discover a big number of people living with HIV/AIDS and this has helped me to exercise my counseling knowledge and advance my spirituality."

A person living with AIDS himself, Kifuko is acutely aware of the persecution that the ROWAN widows and orphans have faced as a result of their situation, and hopes to be a change agent in reaching the unreachable through the organization. As he recalled, "Being humiliated by others in the community because of my life situation, I felt the worst I have ever felt. It was through reading the word of God, meditation and friendships in my life that I was delivered."

ROWAN has offered him an opportunity to join hands with them to help impact the lives of the widows and orphans in Uganda. And he is ready to take up the challenge. When asked what does ROWAN mean to him, he noted, "According to me, it's having a servant heart to serve others but not to be served (stewardship) and living a life of sacrifice." 

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

ROWAN – [www.loveROWAN.com](http://www.loveROWAN.com) or write to: [info@loveROWAN.com](mailto:info@loveROWAN.com)

UNAIDS – [www.unaids.org/en](http://www.unaids.org/en)