

From Sheila Havard's Uganda Diary

(Chronicling her visit to the Bududa Learning Centre, a CFSC partner organization, during November 2011. Sheila is a member of the CFSC board of directors, and of Coldstream Monthly Meeting.)

November 1, 2011 – Arrival in Kampala

What excitement on feeling the balmy air of Entebbe as I crossed the tarmac at nearly 11 p.m. on arriving from Brussels. Mary Edgar was faithfully waiting amidst the welcoming crowd. And so was Sharon, her former house-girl, resplendent in new attire, as well as a businessman friend recruited to drive us to Kampala, some 25 km away. Traffic was thankfully sparse at that late hour although the route had been very congested when the three of them had left the capital in the early evening.

We hauled my 25 kg suitcase past the armed guard up the flights of chipped steps to the Citi Hotel. I nodded at the East Indian owner, who was still in the office at this late hour and vaguely wondered about his story. Where had he gone when the Asians were unceremoniously evicted from the country by Idi Amin? What had been his return experience? Did he just reclaim his property under the new regime or had it been a struggle? (The East Indian shop that had been reopened in Bududa had only lasted a couple of years for lack of customers.)

Gratefully I noted that the power was on. A dribble of cold water came out of the shower although it was hot the following day. Any attempt to use the plumbing resulted in pools of water on the bathroom floor – thank goodness for the flipflops provided in even the cheapest hotels.

Mary and I sat on our beds exchanging news to the background din of Kampala, which never ceases at any time of night or day. The “soap people” from Sparta, Ontario, are due to teach Mary’s partner organization, the West Nile Disadvantaged Women’s and Orphans Association (WENDWOA), soap making later this year. Soap will hopefully provide a more sustainable market than bead necklaces and baskets for demand for such products is limited and the market is soon exhausted.

November 2, 2011 – on the way to Bududa

Despite the sleep deprivation of the journey, I woke well before dawn. Our room overlooked one of Kampala’s busiest thoroughfares. Already the matatu minivans were hooting non-stop to attract passengers and their conductors were yelling out the destinations till they made themselves hoarse. To stop the driver when there is someone to be picked up, the conductor merely leans out of the van window and bangs on the roof. Similarly passengers bang on the bodywork to stop the driver when people have travelled for long enough to need a “short call” in some field or other.

The street and small square opposite look surprisingly clean. It seems most of the street vendors who used to sell trinkets and odds and ends while sitting on the sidewalks have been shoed away. Only newspapers can now be bought on the sidewalk. This first happened for the Commonwealth meeting and was supposed to be temporary. Not so, it seems. A huge hideous marabou stork was plodding across the tiny patch of lawn in the square, occasionally picking at the rubble. By 7 a.m. the sun was already brightly shining.

Up the hill were the posh hotels. In colonial times, the hilltops were “white”. My father lived on Kololo Hill for two and a half years in the 1960s. Now it is those who can afford over \$200 for a night in a luxury hotel who live there. A change of elites only. Like the change to a new elite on the death of the Soviet Union. Only this one is more visible because colour is involved.

The breakfast room looks the other way, downhill to the chaos, jumble and colour of the market. The hotel sits on the dividing line between one world and another one. The Jinja Road on which it sits marks the division. Beyond the market, the new and old taxi and bus parks are a sea of red mud and litter. It seems there has been a lot of rain. Maybe that's why the power is good – Owen Falls, built in colonial times near the source of the Nile – still supplies most of the electricity here.

Breakfast was the milk tea I had been longing for. Plus the usual white bread and Blue Bonnet (margarine). Funny British product brands are still prominent here – my favourite is Ribena, a welcome break after water and tea as the sole drinks. The fresh fruit on the breakfast table was welcome, the eggs so-so. After all I knew I would be eating the same omelette every day for at least two weeks.

Mary and I sallied forth to change money. There are now 2500 Uganda shillings to the US dollar. The shilling has depreciated quite a bit since my last visit but has recovered somewhat recently. After all Uganda now has oil near Lake Albert. Already the first reports of oil-related corruption can be found in *The Monitor*, the main non-pro-government newspaper. Inflation now stands at 30%. I imagine a lot of that can be accounted for by food and petrol prices.

Mary and I took turns lugging my 25-kg suitcase over the potholed sidewalk and four blocks uphill past a fundamentalist church blaring out exhortations even mid-morning to the office of the Elgon flyer. I just got on the bus before it left. In front was another mzungu (white person), a middle-aged man in an African style shirt. He asked what I was doing. "Oh community work," he summed it up. He in turn was "spreading the Bible." He did not address me again; maybe he caught my reaction from the expression on my face. However, he did engage in many an earnest conversation with neighbouring passengers. I cringed.

My first re-encounter with Ugandan currency was an embarrassment. The bank notes have new colours. After adamantly insisting I had given the office 50,000 shillings, I had to retract on being told by the conductor that I had given them 5,000. How I wish they'd just cut out three zeroes!

During the bus journey I recognized all the familiar landmarks. Everything was so green. The East Indian-owned sugar plantations coated the hills for miles around. The tea clad hills were even greener. Right after the sugar plantations comes a short stretch of tropical forest. I remember picnicking there as a teenager and running away, terrified, from a baboon.

The hydro dam at Owen Falls that I remembered from my teenage visit was swarming with birds as always. The reeds were white with egrets.

Once we passed Jinja, we were entertained by a travelling salesman, who stood in the aisle of the bus as we travelled, extolling the virtues of a series of remedies. First we had prayers and then he produced packets of large tablets of Paracetamol which, he assured us, were a proven cure for stress, tiredness and the like. He demonstrated by dropping a tablet into a passenger's water bottle, producing a fizzy drink. The demonstration convinced a number of people, and coins and crumpled dirty 1,000 shilling bills were handed down the line of riders in exchange for packets of tablets. The lady beside me was one such customer. We got into conversation and she explained that she went to Kampala every month for cancer treatment at Mulago Hospital, the major hospital in the country. Mbale, our destination, is the third largest town in Uganda and yet they have to refer breast cancer patients to Mulago?! *The Monitor* reports an appalling shortage of doctors in Adjamani in the north. A hernia victim in pain was told to wait about six months.

Nobody was there to meet me at the bus park although Mary had phoned Sabia, the Bududa Peace Corps worker, in advance to let her know that I was on the 10 a.m. bus. After waiting half an hour, for three hundred shillings I got a SIM card seller to call Sabia for me. Volunteer Julie was apparently on her way. When I saw a mzungu stalk into the far end of the bus park, I mistook her for Barbara: same pale skin, same wide-brimmed sun hat. Julie is a hybrid British/Canadian/American woman with a landscape gardening business, who has been asked to produce a strategic plan to make the Bududa Learning Center sustainable.

We travelled back by matatu minivan to the Bududa trading centre, after which Julie and I squeezed onto a motorbike taxi (helmets have not got this far!) and the suitcase was strapped onto another one. Each ride cost 2000 shillings and the matatu cost us 4000 each. That's a steep increase over the 2000 to 3000 I paid in February to travel from Bududa to Mabale by matatu.

A delicious smell of cooking welcomed us to the BLCguesthouse and Sabia flew out to meet me. We bonded instantly in February. I think Sabia must bond with everyone. She is a delightful Ethiopian-born, US-adopted 24-year-old Peace Corps worker, who ended up in Bududa after being evacuated from Niger following the murder of two Frenchmen. She both is and looks gorgeous, especially wrapped in her layers of Muslim finery.

Thursday, November 3, 2011 – first full day in Bududa

I had a lovely long sleep in the peace and calm of the guesthouse and felt much better. Evelyn, my former hostess, arrived to cook breakfast, baby now very visible. Our conversation illustrates the problem of eliciting reliable information in Uganda, and it is not just a language barrier.

News of my former hosts

Me: "So, how is Simon?" (Simon is Evelyn's husband, my former host and mountain hiking companion.)

Evelyn: "He's fine." (Everyone is always fine!)

Me: "So he no longer has a hernia problem?"

Evelyn: "Yes".

Long pause while I reflected. Mary had told me that "yes" to a negative question meant the opposite of what mzungus understand it to mean. In other words it does NOT mean "Yes, I agreed with what you said."

By way of confirmation, me: "So, is he in pain?"

She nods.

Conclusion: Simon is not fine after all.

It was a bit chilly sitting on the terrace drinking tea and contemplating the mist-shrouded valley this morning. No longer the milk tea of Kampala, alas, but a few tea leaves topped up with boiling water from a thermos and a few drops of long-life milk, that is until we run out since milk has to be bought in Mbale. By 11 a.m. it was sunny and then, at noon, we had a terrific downpour with fabulous thunder and lightning, which lasted a good two hours, delaying my plan to go visiting.

A typical morning of frustration

The morning was somewhat typical so I will describe it. After breakfast we went down to the main BLCschool building alongside the road. Greetings and handshakes all round with the staff.

“You are welcome!” “Welcome back!”

Me: “Thank you.”

They: “How is there?”

Me: “There is cold. Here is nicer.”

The wording seems standard. A variation is: “How is up?” (Up is the guesthouse.)

For three hours I struggled with the internet and finally managed to read a dozen or so messages and briefly answer three. I was constantly disconnected. The laptops are boosted with the generator in the school office but reception is best outside so they are constantly being carried about. The speed is dismal. One could read a chapter in a novel while one message is loading. Sabia was good enough to interrupt her work with intern Martha to initiate me into the intricacies of modems and Macs. Fearful of becoming disconnected again, I skipped the mid-morning tea break – tea and groundnuts (peanuts) - with the teachers. As I sat outside on a stool waiting for a response from the Internet, I watched as the infected foot of a boy sitting beside me was treated. His “good” foot was completely twisted inwards and the cast had to be trimmed back on his other leg because an area was becoming increasingly infected and swollen. The tailoring teacher chipped away at the cast for ages with a sharp knife and scissors. The boy had crutches but they were apparently too short for him.

I was also naughty and skipped lunch. I will have to be sure to eat with the staff tomorrow. The food is the same rice, cabbage and beans, every day but it looks stand-offish if the mzungus eat up in the guesthouse. It’s bad enough trying to desegregate the male and female teachers. The men always used to sit at the table, leaving the female teachers to sit on the side benches with their food on their laps.

First visit to one of the Children of Peace with Teacher Hellen

Once the rain finally let up, I walked the 35 minutes into Bududa. When I banged on the door to teacher Hellen’s compound, her small niece, Becky, opened up for me. Housing relatives’ children is common here. After the rain, the tiny compound was awash with red mud. Everything gets caked with it. There was already an inch of mud protruding from under the soles of my boots. It clings to everything.

Hellen, who teaches at the Saturday school program for the Children of Peace orphans in addition to her full-time job in an elementary school, looked in good shape. She had lost weight. She ushered me into her best room, which was spick and span as always, with doilies on all the furniture and new light coloured linoleum on the floor. The same religious posters still decorated the walls, reminding readers that God moves in invisible ways. There are so many public displays of religion here. I prayed with an Evangelical Friend and our Catholic guide when we reached the 4000 metre summit of Mount Elgon. Prayers sent me off on my way every time I left the village. The local people must find us Westerners very strange. Their faith is touching. My friend Kevin – a woman incidentally – does not take medicine for her malaria – or perhaps she simply cannot afford it – she leaves it up to God. When I deeply commiserated with her for the death of her daughter – also a malaria case – her immediate response was complete acceptance of the loss - it was God’s will.

After tea – unfortunately without milk – slices of white bread and very tough roasted corn on the cob, Hellen and I exchanged news and planned visits to the Children of Peace orphans sponsored by

Coldstream Friends and people around London, Ontario. Hellen has closed her private school because it was in deficit. Her current money-making scheme is to sell Western clothes, which are better quality than local ones. I am not sure where she thinks she will get her supply. Her benefactor in Toronto did not manage to ship any to her. Mark, her eldest is now in his first year of a three-year university course thanks to the partial sponsorship of Barbara Wybar. He went to private boarding school near Tororo. Barbara visited him there. Each child had a bed and one metal trunk, which contained their only possessions. Their diet was not much more than posho (maize (corn) meal porridge) for every meal. To go to Mackerere, the best university in Uganda, is a real achievement for a Bududa boy. But it is costing a fortune – over one million shillings just for tuition per semester. The Children of Peace program only covers elementary school fees. Beyond that the child has to somehow raise money. Mark spent all summer industriously making necklaces for Barbara to sell. The tiny bedroom he shared with his brother was like a regular factory when I visited.

One of the younger Children of Peace, Bisikwa Doreen, daughter of the program's teacher James, lived nearby so we paid a call on the family. She was still on her way home from a small private school. Private schools charge a small fee and offer a better education because the classes are smaller than the 100 odd pupils per class found at government schools. Living conditions were not too bad. Bunches of beans hung from the roof, drying. A cow was tethered nearby, but well away from the cooking hut. So by Bududa standards, with crops and livestock, this was a middle class family or even upper middle class since teacher James has a salary. Problems raised were the lack of shoes – compulsory to go to school although the children are not sent home if the teachers are aware that they don't own shoes – and the need for a new latrine since the existing one is dilapidated and shared by several families and the hole is nearly full. Latrines are of course not covered by the program.

Construction of the new Bududa Learning Centre Building

Following this I visited the site of the new Bududa Learning Centre next to the trading centre. Robert, the deputy head and supervisor of the construction was not to be seen although I was assured that he was "around". About two dozen workers were hard at work on the girls' hostel. The main classroom block, which seemed much larger and more elaborate than the existing school in Konokoyi, was partly built. Robert reckons that construction will be completed in January. The land is on a 50-year lease from the local authority. The new plot is fenced in and stops well short of the swamp and river so there should be no drainage problem as there was on the old site. The next building planned is the bricklaying and carpentry shop, with a second story to house more classrooms. A boys' hostel is not on the books at the moment.

Family Planning Problems

Simon, my former host, descended from the wooden scaffolding, caked in cement, to greet me as I entered the site. He looked so old, tired and worn out. Thoroughly exhausted, he could not even muster his usual bewitching smile to greet me. Apparently, the workers were offered a choice of schedule and settled on 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., and Simon is in his seventies! However, two months of work is a regular blessing; perhaps he will even be able to pay some of the school fees for his eight children. When I had asked the due date for her baby (a complete surprise and unplanned) Evelyn had merely smiled demurely. Simon was more forthright. I could not quite understand whether he was saying that the family planning "medicine" she was given was fake. Ugandans often complain that the medicine they receive is just powder. The story I had heard was that the nurse had not been at the clinic when she had gone for her three-monthly injection. He now talked about having "the cut", as they say here.

He can't feed his existing children let alone pay their school fees. Two or three of them are sponsored as Children of Peace and are at secondary school.

I scurried back up the winding red road to Konokoyi, fearful of being overtaken by the dark. I can't get used to the hours here – light at 6 a.m. and dark about 12 hours later. I am used to it getting light at 7 a.m. here. I felt really at home, being greeted by friends and acquaintances along the way, Perez, who accepted my offer of free prescription glasses, Peter Kutosi, a neighbor of Simon, etc.

Candles were already lit (the electricity from the generator does not reach the guest house) and dahl was almost on the table when I arrived but there was just time to pour a bucket of cold water from the water barrel over myself in the banana leaf shower first, a much easier method of performing one's ablutions than splashing oneself with water out of a basin in the nook off the guesthouse bedroom.

Friday, November 4, 2011

Another morning in the office

If I don't learn patience in Uganda, I never will! One more morning spent dealing with a laptop and the power supply. But first I saw Julie and Anna off to Kampala. They are taking a break and then Julie will write her report in the peace of a guesthouse with a good power supply! It will be nice to be alone in the guesthouse with Sabia for a few days and to go hiking with her on Sunday.

Our patience was first tried when Julie announced that there was no more propane to cook on. We had managed to make some lukewarm tea. Evelyn arrived and got a flame for a little longer. Then teacher Robert, Barbara's left hand, the building teacher and deputy head arrived and explained that we could have gas for a little longer. So Sabia and I cancelled our plan to immediately lug the two heavy empty bottles into Mbale to get them filled up at the service station.

I wrote my diary up at the guesthouse while Evelyn and her daughter Doreen cleaned. If I understood correctly Doreen has been booted out of school because the fees haven't been paid. However, the school year is nearly over. I will have to check with Barbara whether there is some way for the program to pay the fees next year. Otherwise Doreen will have to go to a government school. Even there, there will be expenses. Students are expected to arrive wearing shoes and the school uniform and to bring pencils and exercise books with them. Teaching materials are practically non-existent and learning is mostly by rote and sometimes poorly understood and just repeated parrot-fashion. In the past I have paid fees for up to four of Simon's children but I informed him a few years ago that I could no longer do this. I went down to the school, sure that I would be able to find the guesthouse key in the hiding place I had been shown if I needed to go back up there. Almost immediately I needed something out of the guesthouse but the key was not in its place and none of the school staff had the key. So I was locked out. Never mind, I thought, I have the laptop and can work in the office. After an hour of trying various cords we still had not found one that would work. Computer teacher Anatoli (sounds Russian, doesn't it?) eventually saved the day for me by producing the right cord and I have finally caught up with my diary.

November 5, 3011

Saturday School for the Children of Peace

By 9 a.m. the grounds were swarming with Children of Peace orphans in their yellow uniforms. They then dispersed to their various classrooms for supplementary schooling. This extra day of school has made a big difference to their grades. There are classes for Primary 1/2 to P7 and a joint secondary class (S1-S5), which is not so well attended as some of the students are at boarding schools in Mbale and elsewhere and only come during the holidays.

Two Home Visits

At lunchtime, teacher Jane and I walked to the centre of Konokoyi, the village where the BLC is located, to visit the caregiver of M--- B--- J---. He is a total orphan, and his blind auntie looks after him. She remembered me from last February and seemed delighted to greet us. Her first complaint was that the kitchen was too small and the latrine needed fixing. Both seemed fine to Jane and me. More credible problems were bedbugs and insufficient food. The auntie gets some assistance from the association for the disabled that she chairs but we decided to recommend that M--- B--- J--- be given extra rations of posho or beans to take home on Saturdays under the Children of Peace feeding program. Auntie recounted how she had asked the project for food and been given two slices of bread. She found this hilarious and said she would not ask again. I joined in the general mirth. To feel properly fed, Ugandans need a large quantity of starchy food. Bread may seem a novelty because it is relatively expensive, but it goes nowhere in satisfying their appetite.

After school lunch of rice, cabbage and beans, Hellen and I took the school truck to the Bududa trading centre. The students stood in the back while Hellen, another teacher and I squished into the two front passenger seats. A matatu took us to Bubulo and then B--- B---and I squeezed onto one pickipicki (motorcycle taxi) while Hellen got on another one. The path up the mountain was very narrow and steep. At times it was so potholed and rocky I wondered if we would get stuck half way up. The house was spick and span but the child's bedroom was in an appalling state. Although he did have a bed, the thatched roof overhead was full of leaks and, upon inquiry, B--- B---produced the mosquito net he had been given by the project, still in its original packaging and unopened! His father was prevailed upon to promise to look for grass to re-thatch the roof and B--- B---said he would use the net. The latrine lacked a roof and one wall and the water supply was a filthy puddle that dries up in the dry season. On the positive side, B--- attends Saturday school regularly and was placed about 60 out of 200 according to his school report. He has been receiving the school lunches paid for by the project.

Back in Bubulo, poor Hellen broke one sandal. She hobbled with one bare foot to the mattress shop, where we picked out three medium quality mattresses, which we will pick up for three of the Children of Peace.

On the way home, I came across a couple in the middle of the road at a bend. A sack of coffee beans had spilled and the man was sweeping them up off the mud while the woman picked them up one by one.

Another Wet Evening

I ended the day as before sitting on the terrace in the dusk listening to the rain drumming down on the corrugated iron roof. It always sounds as if it is raining harder than it really is. This is supposed to be the beginning of the dry season but there is no sign of the daily downpours letting up. As we were instructed by a retired teacher on a walk, Bududa has reliable precipitation – reliable at least in quantity it seems, although not in distribution throughout the year.

Sunday November 6, 2011

A Soaking Walk

Today Sabia had to do a follow-up visit to an orphan high up the mountainside and she invited me along for the climb. We left around 10 a.m., equipped with rain gear as it was already threatening to rain. Before we left the road it was already raining. We slipped and slithered up the narrow muddy path, supporting and pulling ourselves up with anything handy – banana and cassava trunks, elephant grass etc. Before we reached I----'s home, there was a regular downpour and we were soaked right through. A woman saw our plight and invited us into her best (front) room. The walls were completely covered with pages from the local newspapers. She brought us fresh mandazi (donuts that are chewy and not very sweet) and the tough corn on the cob. Outside a member of the family was holding an umbrella and feeding coffee beans into a machine that separated them from their outer coat. These outer coats are then fermented, which explained the odd smell about the house. After enjoying our hostess's hospitality for about an hour – she even brought us warm jackets - we stood up to leave, but were made to understand that milk tea was on its way. The milk was straight from the cow and it was delightfully hot and comforting!

One more Visit

At I----'s some of the promised improvements had been made. Bricks had been laid on the floor of the banana leaf shower so that it was possible to stand out of the mud. But the house itself was very poor.

Trespassing again!

Last February, Sabia and I had unintentionally strayed into the national park and received a severe lecture from a park ranger, who threatened us with arrest before relenting when Sabia indicated that we had free eye glasses to give away! This time, we did not anticipate that the ridge ahead of us was also in Mount Elgon National Park. We continued to squelch and slither our way up the narrow muddy path, which became steeper and steeper as we progressed. Eventually there were no longer continuous shambas (small farms) and the patches of crops became more widely separated by uncultivated areas and poorer in quality. The stamina of these mountain dwellers, who carry sacks of tomatoes and cabbages down these steep inclines to market, must be incredible.

The walk Sabia had in mind involved climbing up to the first of three humps, walking along over them all and then descending a long winding ridge on the other side of the valley. However, the path up to the ridge petered out after a while and we had the choice between going back and making our way through the bushes and trying to find the ridge path. We chose the foolhardier of the two options, namely, to continue. We were so high now that we were entering a zone of mini-bamboo and there was also a great deal of bracken that soared over our heads. The thick vegetation made it almost impossible to see where we were putting our feet and find footholds. At times we hauled each other up over rocks. We pushed our way through the sopping vegetation, hanging onto handfuls of stems and sometimes making our way up on all fours in the most precipitous places. Eventually, with a lot of hesitation, backtracking, discussing of options and puffing and panting on my part, we reached the first hump and found a barely perceptible trail along a ridge that was less than a metre wide. The ground fell away precipitously to the valley on either side. Despite the poor weather and the mist, the views were fabulous, mountain after mountain, dotted with the silver coloured roofs of the huts. Some mountains, extinct volcanos, were pointed, almost looking as if they had come from a Japanese painting. The other side of our narrow ridge was unmarred by any human dwellings and there, soaring above the other peaks was Wagagai, the highest peak of Mount Elgon National Park at over 4,000 metres. It was so near I began to suspect that we might be inside the national park. This suspicion was confirmed when we saw one of the white boundary stones. The question now was whether there were rangers around who might spot us. As a precaution we tucked our cameras into our bags – these had been a problem when we had previously entered the park by accident. Nobody was around and we exited the park safely. Then we were greeted by a gaggle of youngsters of all ages, who swarmed around us and accompanied us on our way until sent packing by a villager who was ascending towards us. At this stage, despite all precautions, Sabia fell headlong into the mud and I myself sat down in it a couple of times. Mud coated and weary, we were quite a sight to behold.

We reached the road back to Konokoyi just before it got dark and I hailed a pickipicki shortly afterwards. At one stage the road deteriorated into large puddle-filled ruts and the ground was so soft that the motorcycle driver told us to get off and walk a short distance.

Back at the guesthouse, we heated two large pots of water on the bottled gas stove. For the first time since my arrival, I washed in warm water!

From Sheila Havard's Uganda Diary
Episode 4

Monday, November 7, 2011

The Girls' Club

One thing I forgot to mention on the Wednesday when I arrived is the girls club. Any of the Children of Peace can attend in the evening. The girls gather up on the guesthouse terrace and get a chance to use crayons and cut out pictures, which is a real treat for them because the schools have practically no learning materials and people in the village never get to read newspapers or see magazines. Most of the girls present were teenagers. Girls here are brought

up to be very submissive. For instance they curtsy when they greet you – as do women, even elderly ones for that matter. They also speak in a very soft voice. Sabia, who was teaching the girls' club got them all to introduce themselves to me but they spoke so softly I could not hear the names.

The theme this time was self-esteem, although the concept wasn't actually named. The idea was to help the girls think well of themselves, realize they have rights, can say no, etc. Casual sex and unwanted pregnancies, including amongst teenagers, are appallingly common. Just the other day Sabia had to buy a pregnancy test kit for a student at the Bududa Vocational Institute. One of the Children of Peace I am to visit is thought to have run away from home to the big city where her future will be in doubt. Last February when Sabia was teaching a session of the girls' club, it was clear from their questions that the girls had no clear understanding of the human reproductive system. Another subject addressed at these sessions is health. It is hard to imagine how a teenage girl who becomes conversant with the basic rules of hygiene could influence her caregiver or mother to improve the running of the household since she would have so little say. But perhaps the greater knowledge will be applied when the girls found their own households. In none of the homes I visited this time is the water treated in any way or boiled and, in some of the poorer homes, the cooking is done right next to the cow shelter.

Domestic chores

Neither Sabia nor I had sore muscles as a result of our 7-hour hike. Evelyn woke me at 7 a.m. by banging on the metal door of the guesthouse and I awoke from a sound sleep and hurried to draw back the huge metal bolts to let her in. Until breakfast I did chores. Washing my own clothes gave me a taste of one of the most common and arduous tasks of a Ugandan housewife. Although I was only washing light clothes, I took a break for tea between each rinse! Finally, today the weather was fine and there was practically no rain so I actually got the clothes more or less dry. The ones I had hung up before our climb were so wet they had to be wrung out again. Barbara's room, which was vacated only a few weeks ago when she left for a holiday in Eastern Europe, smells strongly of mould due to the humid weather, as do the clothes I left in February. They all need re-washing.

Market Day

As today teacher Hellen is to give us a lesson on how to cook sweet potatoes in groundnut (peanut) sauce, Sabia and I started the day with a trip to the market. She tempted me to buy a badly needed new outfit and I got some fabric for serviettes for a present in Kinshasa. Sabia is an excellent bargainer. When dissatisfied with a price, she will say "that's a mzungu price," and stalk off with a toss of her head. Sometimes the seller gives in and calls her back. Because of her appearance, Sabia is called an "African muzungu"! (She is of Ethiopian origin and much fairer than the Bududans.)

Two Visitations – M--- T---and M--- P---

M--- T---acquired a sponsor following Barbara Wybar's visit to Coldstream in September of this year. He is a bright child and is doing well at school – he came 2nd out of 25. The grandmother

he was living with died, and he and his four brothers and sisters are now living with a neighbour who has three children of her own and no husband. M--- T---has been given a bed net and a mattress by the project. Like all the children interviewed, he needs a school uniform (also supplied by the project) and shoes for the next school year. Hellen and I also recommended that he be given supplementary food at Saturday school, which he attends regularly.

M--- P--- was away when we visited. In February his mother had complained that he was “disturbing” (i.e., being disruptive) and not attending to his schoolwork. Somehow the parents have found the means to send him to a private school and he is now doing much better. Living conditions were poor; the cooking area was just a fire outside and the latrine hole was nearly full.

New Mattresses for M--- A---and K--- C---

Hellen had arranged to have the mothers of M--- A---and K--- C--- meet us with their children at the mattress shop. Their sponsor had given me some money to spend on them at my discretion. The owner’s daughter roped the mattresses together and M--- A---set off with his mattress on his head. I photographed the children and their mothers with the mattresses and then the mothers gave me such a hug of gratitude that I nearly dropped the camera. Hellen did point out to them that the sponsor had provided the funds but I fear they may think that I paid for the mattresses. It often seems that intermediaries are thanked for something for which they cannot take credit. Hellen and I took a pickipicki to the BVI and we passed M--- A---striding along easily with the huge foam mattress on his head. We also passed a pickipicki with no fewer than three mattresses strapped to it. Children who go to boarding school often have to supply their own mattresses, as well as other items such as brooms, a bag of cement and their few personal belongings.

Hellen’s Cooking Lesson

Back at the guesthouse, Hellen showed me how to cook groundnut sauce with a tiny quantity of grated mixed vegetables sautéed, to which groundnut paste dissolved in water is added. The result is delicious and far superior to any recipe made with peanut butter.

Tuesday, November 8, 2011

Nursing Student Sponsored by Coldstream Attenders

A Coldstream couple have committed themselves to seeing N--- M---- through her nursing studies. This is a fantastic blessing to her. She lives with many brothers and sisters and a sickly 55-year-old mother, who works digging occasionally. A bread-winner in the family would be a terrific boon. N--- M---- is doing an internship at a medical clinic beside the Arlington School after completing her first semester of nursing. The internship lasts one year and is followed by six more months of studies and another one-year internship. So she will graduate after a total of three years.

Arlington School

Arlington is a school started by a Ugandan couple from this area who had lived in the USA for many years. It is a model school in many ways and Barbara has frequently sought advice there. Unlike the BLC, it is run entirely by Ugandans. The teachers are all Ugandans, as they are at the BLC. The Americans present are volunteers and play a support role. These volunteers pay \$2000 for the privilege of working for free at Arlington! (At the BLC, volunteers are asked to pay \$800.) I noted the many posters exhorting people to use condoms along the road to the neighbouring village and wondered if they were the work of the school.

N--- M----

I explained my business to the lady who came out to greet me from the clinic and N--- M---- then appeared, looking very neat in her nurse's uniform. After I had apologized for the interruption, she led me to a shelter in the grounds with wooden benches, where I completed the visitation form. She seemed happy and healthy and her eye problem has been resolved. She is living at home during her internship and the home situation seems to be unchanged. She was away when the project distributed nets and blankets so I can ensure that she gets these. The family might qualify for supplementary food but, since she has to work on Saturdays, she would be unable to come to Saturday school to pick them up.

What a Mzungu can expect when out walking in Bududa District

N--- M---- saw me off part way down the road to Choholo village and explained where I could get a pickipicki. A man strolling down the road tagged along with me and we chatted. The conversation was typical so I will describe it. After I had greatly astonished him by explaining the discomfort of snow and ice, the bother of having to pile on winter clothes and the dangers of driving in icy conditions, the conversation moved on to his children. One is apparently being interviewed for Arlington. Another is at a government school in a class of 60, although the students seem to be divided into three groups. Then he told me that he had 14 orphans living with him in addition to his own children. Typically the word "suffering" would then come up in such a conversation and I would be left to conclude that assistance from me would welcome. Sometimes people ask outright but this fellow was content to make his point without actually asking. Luckily when the conversation had reached this stage, we arrived at the pickipicki station and he helped me find a driver.

Change of Scenery

If possible the landscape around Arlington is even more stunningly beautiful than it is around the BLC. The school is part way up the mountain up an extremely rutted track. The motorcycle had to weave in and out and circumvent large muddy puddles. It is surrounded by peaks even more pointed than those around Konokoyi where the BLC is located. To get to Arlington from Konokoyi we travelled past the small mosque, the Bushika police post and market, the large mosque and the mountain Sabia and I had climbed. The long three-humped ridge Sabia and I had negotiated on Sunday looked mighty impressive from the road. The market place was empty. The ditches on either side of the market were strewn with trash and banana leaves from the matoke (plantain) brought to market, but the stands in the market place no longer displayed

goods for sale. Everywhere along the road, coffee beans were spread out to dry on tarpaulins and bunches of beans hung drying from most roofs.

Visit to K--- I---

After lunch of sweet potatoes and groundnut sauce left over from Hellen's cooking lesson the previous evening, I met with teacher Jane to visit K--- I--- . This family consisted solely of 12-year-old K--- I--- and his 16-year-old sister. At my previous visit in February, the roof of the house was leaking and I was surrounded by a huge crowd of the most ragged and dirtiest looking children while I completed the visitation form. There was no latrine. As I had brought funds specifically for latrines from a London Ontario sponsor, Robert arranged for one to be built. (The families of K---- C---- and M---- A---- also received new latrines.) K--- I--- was also taking home food at that time but the project is no longer giving out food because, at this time of year, food is more plentiful and prices, although still high, not quite as high as in February. However, I am recommending food for a number of the children I visited.)

The Art of Waiting

The afternoon was another lesson in patience and it also illustrates why cell phones are so popular here. After lunch in the guesthouse on the remains of the sweet potatoes and groundnut sauce, I waited for Jane until 2 p.m. Sabia eventually got through on the phone to her. She wasn't coming to accompany me to K--- I--- 's. No reason was given. We will have to go after Saturday school when Jane is here anyway.

Visit to N--- S---

So I switched plans and took a chance of going up the hill to see N--- S--- . She lives in a hovel right next to teacher Grace, who would have to interpret for me. I reached teacher Grace's half way up the "cell tower" hill but nobody was home except a girl who wouldn't or couldn't speak English so I walked round the madukas (small shops) and waded into a runny mixture of mud and manure up the steep bank to N--- S--- 's hut. I was of course immediately surrounded by ragged children with bright curious faces. After a very short while a lady arrived from the madukas and said she was willing to interpret. N--- S--- arrived from school shortly afterwards in her pink check school uniform, clutching three dirty exercises books on which I couldn't make out the name at all. As I'd been planning to visit K--- I--- , I did not have her form but I remembered the details from my last visit: 10 children, father died when mother was pregnant with the last; cow shed right next to the kitchen; mother unemployed except for work at the project as a cook on Saturdays; etc... On inquiry, nothing much had changed except that the cow now apparently belonged to the family (?) Which didn't surprise me as it is always hard to obtain information on such details. When I asked to go inside, I found the floor almost as muddy as outside as it had not been smeared. The child showed me her bed, a dirty foam mattress, and her clothes were a pile of rags on the floor. I poked about them and with the end of my pen looking for the mosquito net she had been given by the project. Outside again, I asked the neighbor to find out where the net had gone. The answer was simple: "The rat ate it." This produced gales of laughter all round. Later I broke the news to Sabia and we just stared at each other in helplessness. That was a brand new net obtained a few months ago from USAID. They

were distributed to all the Children of Peace by Sabia. I hastened to assure her that I had indeed seen nets that were being used properly over the children's beds. I felt equally helpless filling out the form. How to help such a family when everything needed redoing, starting with the house and cowshed?

Comings and goings

Anna is back from Kampala after a break. I'm delighted that she brought me brown bread, which can only be obtained in the capital. Julie is returning tomorrow after writing her management report and Barbara comes back from her holiday on Thursday. I can't wait to see her. Tomorrow Sabia takes R---, a boy with two club feet, one of which has been operated on, to Entebbe – beyond Kampala – for further surgery. Peace Corps workers are not allowed to go to Kampala because it is considered a terrorism threat, but Sabia obtained permission – or thought she had obtained permission. After she had made all the arrangements, her Peace Corps supervisor banned the trip.

Wednesday, November 09, 2011

Sabia left at 5 a.m. this morning for Entebbe. I had promised to make her tea before she went as I often lie awake and read at night – head lamp permitting - but I never heard her stir.

I can't email today as the modem is out of time. I have to take it to Mbale tomorrow, and also take the empty bottle of cooking gas to be refilled at the service station. I have two mosquito nets to deliver to one of the Children of Peace who is at secondary school in Mbale, one for her and one for her brother. Hopefully, "the rat" won't eat them! I told Robert the rat story and he thought that the net had probably been diverted to another family member, a suspicion I have also entertained from time to time in the cases of other children.

New Bududa Learning Centre Construction Site

I travelled to the new site next to the trading centre on the back of Deputy Principal Robert's motorbike, which has been provided by the school to enable him to scoot back and forth between his duties at the school and his duties supervising the construction. "Scooting" is relative; he was the most careful driver I have been with, slowing so much for one particularly treacherous pothole that he stalled the engine. He certainly wouldn't make ends meet if he ever had to work as a pickipicki driver!

Robert showed me round the site. Construction started in April. One further grant may be forthcoming in December.

Main Classroom block: The main building is an impressive 100 feet by 25 feet, and it will be one story high. Instead of being built out of local bricks the workers are using interlocking blocks made with a rented machine. However, local bricks will be used at the top because otherwise there would be too much weight on the foundation. There is no drainage problem as there was on the old site. This building will contain three large classrooms and two small offices next to each other. It is now about half built.

Girls' hostel: This consists of the "boys' quarters" (which have nothing to do with boys!) but involve two rooms for the live-in matron plus a latrine and a kitchen. They are separated from the girls' bedrooms by an unroofed corridor. There will be 4 bedrooms for the girls, each containing 3 sets of two-tier bunks. In addition, there will be a common room in which the girls can socialize and do their homework. The current charge for a boarding student, which includes food, is 191,000 shillings (\$1 = 2,500 shillings) but Robert thinks it will have to go up. Inflation is currently at 30% in Uganda. As well as the matron, there will be a cook.

Latrine block: This has been completed and looks very smart.

Storage/cooking block: This has also been completed. Melikia, wife of a pastor who lives above the BLC and who was one of the cooks at the very first workcamp I attended in 2005, was stirring a dish-washing-sized bowl of posho (white maize meal) on a very smoky fire. This was the workers' lunch. The workers start at 7 a.m., get a mid-morning break and half an hour at lunch and finish at 6 p.m. Simon, who is 67 years old and used to be my host, did not look quite as tired this time but the last time I had seen him was in the middle of the afternoon, towards the end of his day, when he looked really exhausted.

Workshop block: This has not yet been started. It is planned for the bottom of the site. Eventually, it will have two stories, classrooms on the ground floor and workshops above them. But, to start with, the workshops will be on the ground floor.

Fence: For greater security, Robert would like to replace the barbed wire fence with a wall of interlocking blocks. At the moment the police are paid to watch the site at night. They receive 30,000 shillings a month for this.

Boys' hostel: There are no immediate plans for such a building. The boys will doubtless be lodged in a rented building nearby, as they are at the current BLC site.

Cost: The cost of some building materials, in particular aggregate, has gone up considerably since Robert estimated the costs. His estimates were (\$1 = 2,500 shillings):

- Main classroom block: 50 million
- Girls' hostel: 20 million
- Latrines: 6 million
- Cookhouse and store: 16 million (but it was completed with 10 million). Robert buys the food and pays the cook 80,000/month

After photographing some Bududa Vocational Institute students using bought murrum (soil) to make the interlocking blocks with the rented machine, I visited the mattress shop in the trading centre to make an appointment for Saturday to buy the mattress for M---- B---- with his sponsor's money. After being let down by teacher Jane yesterday, I wanted to be quite sure that someone would be at the shop when I came.

Visit to A--- K----

I slithered up the muddy path around patches of maize and groundnuts and past scattered banana trees and cassava to the house at which I spent several happy months. It was locked up but A---- arrived from somewhere as I was leaving. He told me that he was no longer in the project as he was considered too old. He has completed Secondary 4 but failed Secondary 5 last year and is now at home at a loose end. He looked a very pathetic figure and I couldn't help feeling sorry for him. We discussed his plans and he talked about a one- or two-year catering course in either Mbale or Tororo (also in eastern Uganda). All I could do was promise to inform his ex-sponsor.

Visit to K--- I---

K--- I--- is not sponsored by anyone from around Coldstream, but I had visited him last year at the request of Barbara because of his painful jiggers problem. (Jiggers are parasitic worms that live in dirty conditions and enter the victim's feet. If not promptly treated, they lay many thousands of eggs and are very painful.) He was not at home but I was able to interview his stepmother, with A---- interpreting. This lady's husband (the boy's father) has been away in Kenya for over a year – local people often go to Kenya in search of work. The boy was using the net donated by the project but slept on a blanket directly on the floor. The family cares for somebody else's cow. The latrine was new but not completed. The boy attends Saturday school regularly and was 25th out of 50 in school. He is eating the school lunches provided for by the project. The stepmother's requests were the usual: supplementary food on Saturdays and help with school fees.

D--- K----

As D--- K---- had been home from school helping E--- at the guesthouse because she had been thrown out of school for lack of fees, I visited the Wilbra school bursar to ascertain the situation. Sure enough one and a half term's fees had not been paid; some 100,000 shillings are owing (\$1 = 2,500 shillings). The fees went up to 65,000 shillings a term recently. I met her mother going home on the road. She looked worried but assured me that she was just tired. Since both parents are now earning, I asked her to discuss with her husband tonight how much of the fees they can pay to enable Doreen to sit her exams next Monday. If the fees are not paid she will not be allowed to take them. D---- is not one of the Children of Peace. She has two brothers in the program (three before A--- had to drop out).

Thursday, November 10, 2011

Shopping for supplies

Everything takes twice as long here, not just the Internet. Today illustrates how what would be a simple couple of hours of shopping in the West turns into a day-long excursion. My main purpose in going to Mbale was three-fold, to visit Mbale Secondary School to see K--- H---, who is sponsored by a Coldstream Monthly Meeting attender, to get the bottle of cooking gas filled and to put more time on the modem.

Before getting transport to Hellen's, I struggled down the hill from the guesthouse with the empty gas bottle, just avoiding falling in the mud. Julie, who disapproved and thought I should not be trying to carry such a load phoned down to the office, and I was met half-way by the grinning cook, who slung it up on his head and took it the rest of the way. I like to demonstrate that mzungus too are capable of manual labour but perhaps I could have found an easier way of doing so.

Betty, the hard-working school secretary hailed a pickipicki and the driver produced a long rubber cord and secured the bottle to the back of the motorbike. I squeezed in behind the driver and was sandwiched in between him and the bottle, hitching my backpack up onto the top of the bottle as there was no room otherwise. This produced quite a spectacle for the many pedestrians along the way, especially the kids, who chant non-stop "How are you?" to see the reaction of a white person. But although not immune to it, I am becoming used to being a source of local entertainment.

I alighted, as they say here, at the mosque opposite Hellen's and somehow lugged the bottle up the slippery mud to her house, skidding sideways and breaking a maize stem in the process. Hellen was already dressed up in her finest suit and, after a few finishing touches to her hairdo, we set off. It was an hour to Mbale and then the bottle had to again be tied onto a pickipicki before we could drop it off at the filling station.

Hopes Dashed

When Bududa was chosen as the district headquarters a few years ago, hopes soared. A new road was built parallel to the existing one in town with the idea that it would be lined with shops. There was feverish land speculation. My former host Simon bought a plot near the new road. People were convinced that the road to Mbale would finally be tarmacked. However, after a few years, little has changed. The new road is barely used. Instead of a row of shops, there are just a few stalls like those found in markets and a few empty-looking modest buildings. As for the road, there has been no perceptible progress since I started coming to Bududa in 2005. The only change is the loss, one by one, of the magnificent soaring trees that line the road in places – I wish I knew the name of the tree. Some are disfigured by having limbs lopped off; others are completely felled, leaving nothing but mutilated red stumps.

My first errand was to change two \$100 US bills. The first bank rejected one, even though these were uncrumpled bills of the year 2000 and up, because there was a red mark in one corner. Barclays Bank was more accommodating. Fixing the modem was easier. The yellow MTN building was recognizable from afar. Finding a bottle of wine – a request of Julie's to celebrate Barbara's return – was a bit of a problem. Evangelical Friends do not drink so Hellen could not help and I did not have a clue where to find wine. There was no sign of it in one of the supermarkets. Hellen suggested a bar. I was a bit dubious but, having made her traipse all over town with me, I didn't want to argue. In the end we were directed to the "wine and spirits" shop where, sure enough, there was one single bottle of wine, which turned out to be very sweet and bubbly but put a nice touch to Barbara's home coming.

Meeting with the Uganda Yearly Meeting Clerk

At noon we met with Apollo Wopicho, the clerk of Uganda Yearly Meeting. I had promised to put in a word for Justine and Pastor Michael about the need to finish Elgon Church to thwart unwanted intruders. Apollo was more interested in obtaining help to organize the church. There are churches (Meetings) in Kampala, Busoga and Lira, as well as one in the west. Some, like the Lira one, have no building and meet under trees. Apart from funding, which I stressed was unlikely to be forthcoming from Canadian Friends' sources, Apollo seemed to want advice on organizing and centralizing such widely scattered groups of Friends. He is attending the Friends World Committee on Consultation so I pointed out that this would be an excellent networking opportunity. It seems Uganda Yearly Meeting has given up on the project of using legal remedies to retrieve the property in Kampala that was fraudulently sold. The legal costs were skyrocketing. Apollo graciously gave us a ride and even bought me a delicious milk tea and Hellen lunch.

Visit to K--- H--- at Mbale Secondary School

We tracked K--- H--- down in the girls' hostel, where she boards. She looked delighted at our visit and I handed over her mosquito net but forgot the letter from her sponsor, which she will be given by Hellen at Saturday school when she comes home for the holidays. Her home situation, although poor, seems to be stable. She is classified as "needy" and is not an orphan as both her parents are alive. In fact they have been able to pay the hostel fees, while the project has paid the tuition. After we had chatted for a while, I noted the cost of her next year's tuition, board and registration and then Hellen turned to me and asked me if I had brought the sugar for K--- H---. As I was completely at a loss, Hellen suggested a small donation of money to enable the girl to buy sugar. It was explained to me afterwards that the hostel provides hot water. It is up to the students to buy the tea and sugar. And Ugandans load their tea with sugar.

Mbale Market Burns Down

This morning the bursar reported that Mbale market had burnt down and a lot of "property" had been destroyed. Today's "Daily Monitor" reports that the entire market has been lost and the police fire trucks took several hours to reach the scene, by which time it was too late to save anything. Apparently, a police officer had accidentally (?) had gone off with the key(s) to the fire truck(s). He is being charged. The government is supposed to compensate the vendors for their loss but it's past record of paying compensation is far from encouraging. I have never seen Mbale market but if the stalls are simple stick structures as they are here in Bududa, I can see how inflammable they would be.

Erosion on Mount Elgon

Encroachment on Mount Elgon National Park due to population pressure seems to be continuing unabated, with resulting impacts in terms of erosion and drainage. The latest worry is a large crack developing on Mount Elgon, which may produce further landslides. The 2009 landslides around the mountain from Bududa are still fresh in people's minds, but I have not noticed any

increased digging of ditches along the contour lines to slow landslides and collect the descending soil and rocks.

Barbara Returns

It is great to have Barbara back. She returned bubbling with enthusiasm about both her holiday in Prague and Vienna and about the tasks before her: the 2012 budget, the annual fund raising letter, etc.

Another Year at Wilbra for Doreen

What is more Barbara and I worked out a way to pay D-----'s overdue fees and next year's fees so that she will be allowed to sit her exams next Monday. It is so heartening to enable these kids to continue their studies. Most parents and many children are fully aware that education is the only route to enable them to avoid a life of living on the brink.

Julie and Anna had turned the guesthouse upside down tidying and cleaning and Barbara exclaimed in delight on seeing how neat they had made it. We had a special meal to celebrate her return. In addition to the bottle of sweet white wine, there was some meat for the first time since I've been here, followed, incongruously enough, by banana custard. (How it took me so long to realize that we had custard powder in the kitchen is beyond me.)

We discussed the cases of various Children of Peace. It is the Children of Peace side of the project rather than the vocational school that needs more organization. The children are by no means being visited every six months – to do this would require a full-time staff member. The task is too much for volunteers, who come and go and fail to provide any continuity. Follow-up also fails to be performed sometimes because there is no system in place to ensure verification of particular problems. This is why the idea of computerizing the Children of Peace visits and follow-ups is excellent.

The moon is fabulous tonight, a great luminescent globe surrounded by slightly pinkish clouds. Really awe inspiring. One of the most rewarding things of being here is brushing my teeth on the terrace while gazing over the valley with its sparse scattered lights – probably homes illegally and dangerously hooked up to the electricity supply – and with the moonlight flooding the whole valley.

Friday, November 11, 2011

School Fees for D----

I rode on the back of Robert's motorcycle to Wilbra, D-----'s school. Today she had not been thrown out of school – perhaps because of my inquiry about fees owing the other day. Luckily the bursar was in the office. She confirmed the total I had calculated for the amount owing for 2011 plus next year's fees, except that the fees for next year had gone up so I was short 13,000 shillings. While I sat in the office waiting for the bursar to unlock the drawer with the punch so that she could stamp my receipt, I watched the schoolchildren squatting on the patchy muddy

lawn in their blue check uniforms having a whale of a time making mud pies. They were all bare foot so apparently the “shoes only” rule is not being enforced. During my last visit I had observed Betty, the principal, standing at the gate to the school compound armed with a switch with which she swiped the bare calves of any child arriving with a less than perfect uniform.

Sights along the Road to Konokoyi

Uganda has one of the highest fertility rates in the world and the area around Mbale has a high rate even for Uganda. So it is not surprising that there are three or four schools within the half-hour's walk to Konokoyi. It seemed to be break time and the yards were swarming with school children, all in their distinctive differently coloured uniforms. After Compassion, the large Anglican primary school at which S----'s second eldest, N----, was sponsored, I passed a fish pond. I have never been able to make out who benefits from these fish ponds; at various times I have been told that they are cooperative enterprises or belong to the local authorities. Further along the road is a pile of coarse rocks beside a pile of gravel. At times a handicapped man with one good and one partial leg sits there chipping away at the rocks to make gravel. Fifteen minutes away from Konokoyi are three houses of successful Bududans. They are spacious, brightly painted, and set in grounds ornamented with flowering bushes, datura, bourganvillia, hibiscus, etc. Ugandan flowers, also wild ones, all seem to be huge. Some of home the owners are away in Kampala making their fortunes far from their impoverished former neighbours.

Three Visits to Impoverished Households with Teacher Jane

Jane arrived an hour and a half after the appointed time and we set off equipped with rain coats, snacks and a water bottle to walk up the mountain from the Bushika market. Our first stop was at K--- B---'s. This Primary 7 (P7) child had dropped out of school and had not been living at home for two months. She made an appearance sporadically. Her mother had six or seven other children including a young baby. K--- B---'s father was not around and an “uncle/stepfather” was living with the family. Perhaps this had something to do with the reasons for her escaping from home. Living conditions were atrocious – latrine, cow next to the kitchen, unfinished walls and roof etc.

As we puffed and panted our way up the mountain (or at least as I did since the climb did not seem to bother Jane), she described the horrors of illegal abortions that teenagers sometimes resort to at the hands of local women. Apparently, the doctors in hospital are too afraid of the threat of a seven-year prison sentence to touch abortion work. On the other hand some teenagers seem to welcome unplanned pregnancies; motherhood brings status and they have no clue that it may also ruin their future.

K--- P----'s house was equally dirty and run down. I was surprised to find no new latrine even though money had been left with Robert for that purpose in February. (I later learned that the money had only sufficed for three latrines and K--- P---- had been last on the list.)

At K--- I----'s we found a new latrine, except that some of the metal sheets had obviously been misappropriated and replaced by old rusty ones. The latrine structure itself was leaning and looked about to topple over. K---- I--- lives with a teenage sister in a leaking house with the mud peeling off the walls. His bed was on a mat and the mosquito net was full of holes. The cousins who crowded into the house after me – his neighbours – first said that the holes were candle burns and then suggested that a rat had eaten the net. However, a more likely explanation was that the new net had been appropriated by another family member and the child given an old net full of holes instead. And so it goes on...

As for K--- I----'s latrine, Jane and I were told that the hole had been dug in the wrong place, with the result that there was no solid ground into which to fix the poles for the walls. When I later discussed the situation with Robert, who had been in charge of the building, he assured me that it frequently happened that new materials were stolen or diverted but that he could fix the structure to make it solid.

Saturday, November 11, 2011

A Gardening Session à la Bududa

As I had nothing specific to do with the Children of Peace during Saturday school, I decided to tackle the sadly neglected guesthouse garden. Volunteers come and enthusiastically sow rows of seeds but then depart for home, leaving the garden to become a tangle of wandering Jew weeds and a variety of twitch grass that produces an incredible mat of roots. Perched on a stool, with its legs sunk deep into the rich wet red soil, I hacked at the sticky earth, disentangling and discarding the weed roots. My chisel-shaped tool snapped in two almost immediately, and I used my hands instead as a digging hoe would have weeded out the vegetables with the weeds. Progress was painfully slow but I managed to expose a row or two of six-inch high tomato plants. Whether or not they ever will bear fruit will depend as much on the care of future volunteers as on weather.

Tracking down N--- A----

Teacher Bosco and I managed to reach N--- A----'s house in Bushika by pickipicki before the afternoon rains started. Our worst suspicions were confirmed. Her brother, with whom she had been living, informed us that she was pregnant and that the boy had “run off”. One more teenage pregnancy – the girl is in Primary 7, 16 years old. She had not been seen at school since April and had not been attending Saturday school because she was ashamed. After a discussion, we arranged that her brother would ask her to go to the office on Saturday for counselling and to consider whether she would like to take the tailoring course at the Bududa Vocational Institute once the baby could be left with a caregiver.

Detective Work Tracking down the USAID Mosquito Nets and like Problems

Back at the project, only slightly wet from the rain, the mystery of the missing and old and holey mosquito nets at the homes of some of the children I had visited was still not clarified. The children “stubbornly” – a favourite word here – maintained that they had been eaten by rats. One

bedraggled shifty looking young child was standing outside the office. Teacher Jane was speaking to him intently in Lugisu and Barbara was laying down the law in English. Teacher Eric, with whom the child had been living after running away from his grandparents, listed the accusations. I--- was “cunning” and constantly ran off. Moreover he had been stealing the coffee beans off Eric’s trees. (For 1 kilo of beans, he could get 1,500 shillings.) In the end, after more exhortations and under the threat of losing the presents from his sponsor that Barbara was dangling before his nose, I----, who did not utter a sound and avoided eye contact during this entire scene, was put on probation so to speak. He was given another week at Eric’s. Some of these children are indescribably emotionally messed up.

Mattress for M--- B----

With Hellen and Barbara, I hauled myself up into the school truck. The children going Bududa way scrambled up into the back of the lorry. The mattress lady was not in her shop so I sat in Olivia’s restaurant and took the opportunity to interview K--- H---’s brother, M---, who appeared on a bike looking for Barbara. After my few depressing visits, it was heart-warming to see how eager he was to earn money for his school fees at Bubulo Secondary School. He had dug the latrines for the Children of Peace for whom I brought latrine money in February and he is now to dig a latrine for K--- P----. In addition, he has been making bead necklaces – although these are becoming more and more difficult to sell. Finally, I was able to pay for the mattress and photograph M--- B---- grinning next to it before he set off home with the mattress rolled up on his head.

Sunday, November 12, 2011

Off to Lira – Know your Matatu

I slept in the “boys’ quarters” in the room next to Sabia as we wanted to get a really early start. We both woke at 3 a.m. and left shortly before 5 a.m. The moon was barely showing as I stumbled down the path from the guesthouse, firmly gripping Sabia’s hand to avoid falling. We had been told that a matatu came by at 5 a.m. We stood on the road, watching fireflies dancing in the bushes. Shadowy figures emerged from the shadows walking up the road towards Bududa, either coming from an all-night church service or bound for an early one. There was no sign of the school watchman and this was the second time he had been missing. As we shivered in the morning chill, we kept our spirits up: “I hope it’s a Muslim matatu,” (i.e. one with “Allah is Great” written on the front) I cracked. Matatu drivers are known for often driving at top speed over the rutted roads, causing their passengers to sway back and forth and jerk up and down. They announce their coming with semi-continuous hoots, sending children jumping up the banks and chickens scurrying cackling into the ditches. Some passengers purposely opt for matatus with “Allah Akbar” painted on the front on the assumption that their drivers will not have been drinking even if this means letting several “God Saves” matatus pass them by.

When asked on which side people drive in Uganda, the only answer I can come up with is “It depends on where the potholes are.” Vehicles have brushed past me within inches of knocking me flying even when I have been walking facing the oncoming traffic. Accidents here can be horrendous. They are frequently hit and runs as a driver who injures or kills a villager risks

being lynched by a vengeful mob. Justice does not extend to the rural areas. Apparently such lynchings are even more common in Kenya but they are certainly not unknown here. One year the African Great Lakes Initiative workcampers came upon the corpse of a policeman being loaded into a pickup. An outsider, he had ventured into the village alone to investigate some suspected crime and had been set on by a mob. Mary Edgar has witnessed the body of a child lying untended in the road, “like a dog,” as she said. It seems the purpose was to provide proof when the police eventually came. “They really need a crash course in driving,” I exclaimed. Sabia pointed out the unintentional pun.

Stunning Mountain Scenery on the way to Mbale

Having decided that the 5 a.m. matatu, whether Muslim or Christian, was not going to materialize, we set off on foot for the “circle”. This is a roundabout where bodabodas, pickipickis and matatus congregate, where the road running around Bududa and a string of villages in the foothills of Mount Elgon meets the turnoff to Mbale. The puddles glistened in the semi-moonlight, but the projecting rocks and potholes were harder to spot and I stumbled along wondering how Bududans can negotiate the mountain paths in the pitch dark without as much as a flashlight. Then the sun started to appear behind the silhouettes of the grandiose mountains. The contrast between the shabby run-down one-story shacks and the lush greenery could not have been greater. The glorious scenery and majestic peaks make one overlook the ugliness of the stained cement and rusty roofed shops strung along the road. Similarly, the fun-loving nature of so many of the Buguisu people make one forget, if only momentarily, the dire circumstances in which so many live.

Transport to Lira

Sabia and I jammed into the back seat of a matatu, our knees to our chests because of the spare tire underfoot. This is the jerkiest part of these minivans but one is less disturbed here by the need to “alight” to let other passengers out – the seats reach right across the width of the vehicle but the left-hand seats fold up to allow people to get out. The view was excellent and I had a window seat with an open window. The craggy mass of Wanali stood out against the morning sky. Along this ridge runs the back road to Mbale, which was used by villagers desperate to peddle their produce for supplies in town during the time of shortages under Idi Amin’s regime. Some of the older ones recount, not without bitterness, being forced to carry Baganda – members of the main central Ugandan tribe - or mzungus piggyback over the mountains in olden times. I have not verified the truth of these allegations.

At the bus park we stocked up on groundnuts, bananas and rolex (chapatis cooked on a charcoal stove on the sidewalk and rolled around an omelette) and bought the Sunday Monitor, the opposition newspaper. We were told that the Lira bus was “about” (i.e. coming). Some 15 minutes later the bus did indeed “reach” (i.e. arrive). Sabia had warned me to be aggressive climbing up into the bus and it was indeed a regular scrum with everyone for themselves. People clambered down the steep steps against the surge of heavily laden passengers pushing and elbowing their way in and it seemed that the bigger and fatter they were, the more they shoved and pushed. My backpack was a considerable hindrance and, in the end, a bystander ordered the

way to be cleared and I gratefully climbed in. We managed to get a window seat and sit together.

Lira is some 160 kilometres north of Mbale and it takes about 5 hours to get there. The first part of the way, to Soroti, is murram and badly potholed. The Soroti-Lira section has been tarmacked. Stops are frequent: for police checks, for the numerous enormous speed bumps or “humps” and to pick up passengers. Soroti brought back pleasant memories of a visit during my teenage years and grim memories of being “felled” by sickness halfway to Lira a few years ago. Luckily after a bout of gastrointestinal pain, I found solace in a comfortable hotel room and recovered sufficiently within a few hours to spend the evening with a beer and Al Jazera! We were now passing through Teso and the scenery was flatter with occasional enormous rocky outcrops. A great deal of land seemed to be fallow and the cultivated areas – cotton, paddy rice and the usual maize and cassava – were larger.

Children of Hope Lira – Esther Atoo

The Children of Hope in Lira was an offshoot of the original African Great Lakes Initiative project in Bududa. The main fundraiser is now Lorna Pitcher in Toronto. The project pays the school fees for a number of local orphans and trains some in tailoring. Last year I attended the graduation of 57 tailoring students, who proudly paraded round town in gowns and mortar boards behind a police brass band and were then presented with their certificates and a new sewing machine each. Esther is well organized and manages the program well. Crafts are taught and there is a small library in the project office. Thanks to donations by the father of a former student of Lorna’s, a vocational school with 250 students has been started in Barlonya, the site of a major massacre by the Lord’s Resistance Army. Esther’s husband, Solomon, runs the school. Unfortunately, he had just been involved in a motor vehicle accident and so was unable to drive us to see the school.

Esther has a large garden, or perhaps it could even be called a farm, and raises crops etc. as a fund-raiser. She showed me her new variety of banana. It produces a mass of side shoots, which she intends to have planted in the school grounds. She also keeps bees and two sows, one of which has piglets. The latter raised about \$2000 dollars for the project last year. Her pawpaw trees were bearing heavily. At the school itself, plots of orange trees have been replanted. The original trees were dying of drought when I visited in February. The fish pond has so far not been so much of a success.

Esther and Solomon are adding two new guest rooms to their compound. Sabia and I slept in the existing two rooms. There is a flush toilet and we had the luxury of a shower although the water was cold. A generator produces electricity in the house but not the guest rooms. They are hoping for volunteers to help with the school. One volunteer, a young Canadian, has stayed with them so far. Unfortunately, he had unrealistic expectations of the school and was disappointed and felt it was too primitive. As a result, he returned to Canada and produced an unfavourable report. This shows the importance of orientation in the country of origin before volunteers go overseas.

Monday, November 14, 2011

I spent the early morning sitting in the compound glancing through the secure metal door at the pigs and beyond them the garden, and reading *Blood River*, which describes a Daily Telegraph journalist's journey down the Congo River in 2004 in the midst of great adversity. The night was somewhat disrupted by mosquitoes as the mosquito net was missing from my room, but I nevertheless felt quite refreshed and caught up on my sleep. Esther and her housegirl struggled with the charcoal stove for quite some time – apparently, the charcoal was of poor quality – and finally, produced some absolutely delicious milk tea made with whole untreated milk.

Visit to the Children of Hope Office

We wound our way on foot into Lira along what resembled rough field tracks but actually circumvented a residential area. Everything was much greener than last February and the crops were growing apace, but they were very weedy. We strolled down Kampala Road into Lira town, alongside a metre-deep uncovered ditch, dodging cyclists and motorcyclists. Lira was bustling with the usual chaotic town life: brightly dressed pedestrians, street traders with their neat pyramids of tomatoes and other vegetables, and men sitting around idling away the day playing cards and drinking.

In the office we were greeted by the administrator. The library looked well organized. Crafts made now include straw sunhats and stuffed animals and I was given a large bagful to take back to Toronto. The administrator had been visiting the caregivers of some of the orphans in an attempt to encourage them to follow more hygienic practices – dig latrines and rubbish pits sufficiently far from the house, etc. Some of the mud latrine walls have collapsed due to the heavy rain. Thousands of people have been displaced because their homes have been damaged or destroyed by floods in various areas of Uganda including north of Bududa. The newspaper predicts continued heavy rain until the end of this month.

We took a lunch break at an internet café opposite a vacant lot in which masses of fruit bats congregate in tall trees. Here we had a choice of Western or local food – Esther chose the latter, the usual chicken and rice. This is a mzungu hangout and it was pleasantly cool as we were on the third or fourth floor and a refreshing breeze blew through the windows. After a short nap on the comfy sofas and a battle to get into the email, Sabia and I walked back to Esther's. Sabia carried a huge bag of stuffed toys for Toronto on her head and I lugged along the standard black plastic bags full of groceries. Needless to say, we attracted constant attention from bodaboda riders as we progressed and had to repeatedly turn down their offers of a ride. We also attracted much hilarity and many comments from bystanders.

Northern Uganda is more disadvantaged than the south and the north/south divide can clearly be observed from the bodabodas. The further north you travel, the fewer pickipickis (motorcycle taxis) there are and the more bodabodas (bicycle taxis). In Bududa nowadays it is hard to find bodabodas but they abound in Soroti and Lira. I'm not sure if the pickipickis, which obviously require more investment, are putting the bodabodas out of work or if bodaboda riders are starting to drive pickipickis.

Tuesday, November 15, 2011

Back to Bududa

After a breakfast of starchy pumpkin, white bread and Blue Band (margarine), milk tea and the sweetest pineapple I have ever tasted, we said goodbye to the three children, C----, who attends a Catholic private school and loves mathematics; J---, named after Lorna's husband, who is full of mischief and a great climber – he was once found on the roof – and baby L----, as sunny as they come. Esther and Solomon accompanied us to the bus park where the person in charge seated us on a bench on the sidewalk and told us that the bus was “about”. An hour or so later, after I had managed to read most of the daily newspaper and photograph the bus park, the bus from Gulu did indeed arrive. This time the scrum was worse to purchase tickets than to climb on board.

Back at the guesthouse, Barbara was already planning for her next batches of volunteers. She will have a full house for quite a while and volunteers may even need to share the four guest rooms. Julie was hard at work updating the lists of sponsors and sponsored children and alphabetizing them, a task that badly needed undertaking. After supper computers and phones were brought out and, after a bit of social time, everyone worked away separately. Keeping in touch with “back home” is an important part of guesthouse life.

Here ends the compendium of Sheila's reports from Bududa.

Before returning to Canada, Sheila went to Kinshasa, D. R. Congo to join the five-member team of Canadians who are taking part in election observations organized by CFSC's partner there, Project Muinda. Her reports from Kinshasa can be found at <http://quakerservice.ca/our-work/peace/project-muinda/>. Look for the link to “November 2011 election observer team reports”.