

Bush Fire Project

Helping Uganda's orphans & at-risk children

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Matthew 19:14

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Dear Friends,

Though more than twelve years have passed since we first began this U.S.-based support ministry to Bush Fire, we are amazed at how quickly that time seems to have gone by. The first children to be taken into Bush Fire Children's Home are now grown, have completed their schooling and are beginning a new stage in their lives. Though some of them have not made good choices and are experiencing the consequences of those decisions, others have chosen more wisely and are seeking to live for God. We are grateful that the Lord has enabled us to not only continue to be involved with them at this time in their lives, but has given us even greater opportunity to instruct, encourage, and influence them for the glory of God. Along with this passage of time has come needed change, as we all have learned and grown and striven to be obedient to what the Lord has given us to do. The purpose of this issue is to share some of what we've learned along with the big changes that have taken place in recent months.

When we started Bush Fire Project in 2005 as a way to support Uganda Family Resource Link's care of orphaned and at-risk children, one of the first things established was a child sponsorship program. Having had no prior experience with this, we followed the structure of other organizations, at least in some respects. The way that financial support was provided might have differed, because Bush Fire Project has always sent *all* the sponsorship money to UFRL for the care of *all* the children, not just those sponsored. Our use of the term sponsor was someone who chose to financially support the organization, UFRL, in its care of all the children, with the opportunity to get to know a child (or children) more specifically. Other aspects of the program, however, were modeled after other similar ones. For instance, we initially provided a photo and history of the child to the sponsor, sent updated photos and handwritten letters from the children, and allowed the sponsor to correspond. The children knew that they had a sponsor and there was the opportunity to develop a relationship through such letters for the purpose of friendship, encouragement and prayer.

In the first twelve years we have learned a lot of lessons, and we are sure we will learn just as many in the next twelve. Some of those lessons have caused us to re-evaluate how the child sponsorship operates from the perspective of the sponsor and the child. Over the years we have come to recognize the prevalence of "sponsorship" in Uganda and to understand the negative impact it often has on individual lives, families, and the culture.

One problem we've seen in that culture is that the acquisition of a sponsor has caused children to turn away from the authority of their parents because this outside source of support fuels an attitude of independence from their families. Another common problem is the family members themselves actually pushing children to get a sponsor or to remain in contact with one long term so that they no longer have to be financially responsible. Because Uganda does not offer free public education, the purpose of

sponsorship is often to provide school fees, among other things. It is not uncommon for a sponsor to pay even for a university level education, and help may even be requested beyond that point.

While the children at Bush Fire have been, to some degree, sheltered from these problems, this issue especially concerns us because the children may acquire these attitudes directly from family members with whom they still have contact or from other students on the outside who come to the Bush Fire schools. Not understanding how our sponsorship program operated, these may tell the children that having a sponsor means that they should get the money directly because it is *their* sponsor and therefore *their* money. There is a tremendous entitlement mindset within the Ugandan culture of which we have become very mindful, and we do not want to unintentionally feed into this destructive cycle of dependency. Furthermore, when we began, we did not foresee the rapid growth of social media, such as Facebook, which makes it much easier for young people to locate their sponsors and solicit support directly. Though this has not yet happened as far as we are aware with the Bush Fire children, it is something we are trying to prevent.

Therefore, going forward, we are implementing some significant changes to the sponsorship program. There will no longer be direct communication (letter writing) between the child and sponsor except for the few remaining cases where relationships have already been clearly established over a long period of time. The children will no longer be told that they have a sponsor. Sponsors will still receive a photo and history of their sponsored child, but it will be on a first name basis. If you are a current sponsor and did not receive the detailed explanation regarding the sponsorship program history and changes, please contact us, and we will resend a copy of that letter.

While Bush Fire has had an approved primary school for many years, followed by an approved vocational training school, the government has now given formal approval for the secondary school (equivalent to our high school) as well. In Uganda, schools are first started and then, following a period of operation, apply for government approval. A benefit of such approval at the secondary level includes the ability of the students to do on-site testing for the government required exams rather than having to be transported daily to another approved school during the lengthy exam process. Another benefit is that Bush Fire Schools would be given their own school test scores, which demonstrate the quality of the education that the school provides and draws in outside students whose school fees help pay for high operating costs. Along with approval however, come additional governmental requirements, the most significant of which are those relating to staff. With twenty-eight teachers for the secondary school alone, the operating expenses are significant.

To help offset these higher costs, Bush Fire has elected to take in boarding students along with day students who come from the local villages. Although boarding schools are very common in Uganda, there are a limited number of quality schools in rural areas. In addition to Bush Fire students performing well overall on the government exams, Bush Fire is an attractive boarding school because it almost uniquely requires vocational training for all secondary students, whereas most other secondary schools do not even offer such training. As a result, other Christian ministries are sending students, who make up the bulk of boarding students apart from Bush Fire children. UFRL is working with these other ministries, such as Compassion International, to identify children that would be a good fit for the school, particularly because they are looking for an educational program that is committed to teaching vocational skills as well as academics. The goal is to increase the number of day and boarding students to the point where operating expenses are covered and Bush Fire only has to pay the cost of school fees for the primary and secondary children who are under its full-time care.

As a regulated foster care facility, the Bush Fire base has also undergone changes in regard to housing. As mentioned in a previous newsletter, dormitory-style housing was established in order to meet governmental requirements. Now, with the increased amount of staff and students, the number of



Dining hall converted to secondary school classrooms

people on the base is over six hundred on a school day and about two hundred seventy at night. In order to accommodate all the students, the dining hall has been converted to secondary school classrooms and a number of classrooms in the former secondary and vocational buildings have been converted into boys' dormitories. Girls' dormitories are now in a converted warehouse and in a couple of the homes that originally housed mixed age students. The

young children, those under the age of twelve, still reside in a mixed gender setting with boys' and girls' sleeping rooms on opposite sides of the home, separated by a common living room area and the house parents' room.

Back in 2009 Bush Fire established a for-profit business for the purpose of providing income for Bush Fire and teaching business skills as part of vocational training. Due to competing priorities within the ministry, this business experienced very little success, and the efforts were essentially stopped after a few years. Beginning in 2017, the business was revived and now operates completely independent of the ministry. Outside investment provides the substantial start-up capital necessary to launch and operate this new business enterprise.



Rice milling machine and bagging of rice bran



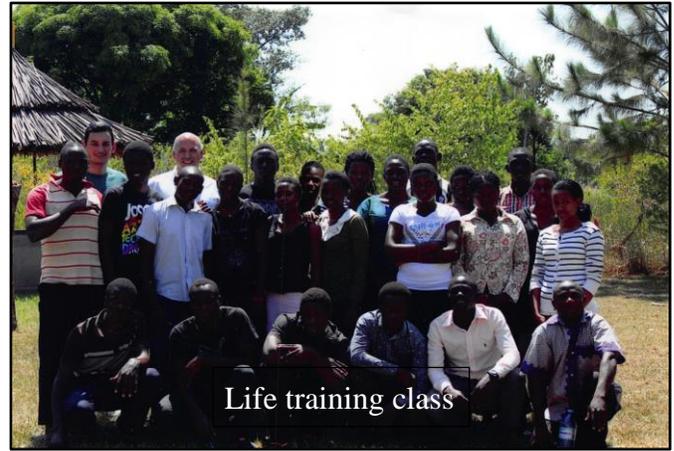
Fourteen-unit rental housing near Bush Fire

The new company is Bushfire Business Center (BBC). Several of the business activities are located in a nearby trading center where grid power is available. Current business activities include maize and rice milling, woodworking, a small retail store, rental housing and both chicken and goat farms. In 2018 the business plans to expand into a commercial water project, cooking oil pressing, and bulk animal feeds. Currently, there are nine full-time employees, mostly young adults associated with Bush Fire. In addition there are ten students from Bush Fire who are doing a one-year vocational internship through BBC.

The business is co-managed by Sam Kitanya and Eric Rockett and operated with a "Business as Missions" mindset. Some of the business goals are to demonstrate Christian work ethic and business practices in a Muslim trading center, provide living wage jobs in the village, and offer vocational training opportunities for Bush Fire School students. Though financially separate from the ministry of Bush Fire, BBC is a significant part of our involvement in Uganda. While your monetary donations go to the ministry aspect, we will be sharing updates on the business side as well because it fits into our larger vision of not simply caring for orphans during their childhood, but to impact their lives in a more lasting way that affects future generations. We are a small organization working in only a very limited part of the country, but we want to be faithful to the opportunities we've been given and trust the Lord with the

outcome. The changes may seem small compared to the immensity of the overall problem, but change must start somewhere. We are very grateful for your prayer support in all of this and will keep you updated on the business so you can pray more specifically.

We continue to make regular trips to Bush Fire to assist with the work there. Eric and son, Chris, taught an intensive two-week class for 24 young adults. Each day Chris taught on heart issues that can hinder our walk with the Lord while Eric taught them about applying biblical principles to the many aspects of life. They covered topics such as marriage, money management, work, lifestyle choices, etc. as a group and then followed up with many individual conversations and counseling. This was received so well that Eric and Chris plan to return again later this year to repeat the training with the next group of young people. In



January Eric visited Uganda and taught a weeklong course on biblical principles of business to the nine young adults who are now working in leadership roles for the Bushfire Business Center. There are plans to make additional trips this year to help the new BBC staff get the business off to a strong start.

Following are some specific prayer requests that we would like to share:

- Pray for the health and wellbeing of the students and staff of the school
- Pray that the education would be Christ-centered and that the children would have hearts that are open to the Gospel and to living for God.
- Pray for wisdom for Sam and Eva Kitanya as they make decisions about how to meet all the diverse needs of the ministry.
- Pray for the right day and boarding students to attend Bush Fire Schools and that their school fees would be paid on time.
- Pray that the new business staff would be a strong witness for Jesus in the trading center.
- Pray that the new business would prosper and expand its influence.
- Pray for a continued trust in and dependence upon the Lord to meet the ministry needs, no matter how difficult the circumstances become.
- Pray for the pastors of the church at Bush Fire and the additional churches that have been started in other villages by Bush Fire staff that they would preach the word boldly and live in such a way that their lives continually reflect the truth that they teach

We thank you all very much for your continued prayers and support.

Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, to God who alone is wise, be honor and glory forever.

Eric and Nancy Rockett

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