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One verse in the Nserester School anthem reads:

*Nserester vocational secondary School
Let's all try practical training
So as to eradicate job seeking
And mold us to be job creators.*

At the graduation ceremony, the students stand with their hands over their hearts and sing with pride their anthem.



One hundred thirty one students have graduated this year. All of them have a skill and all of them already have employment or direction for higher education. It is Rev. Dr Isaac Nserenko's fondest desire that each student will take what they have learned here, be of service to humanity and give back to their communities, their country and the world what they have learned here.

It is not only education and skill development that is taught at the Complex, but basic values of honesty, faith and integrity. The children are raised to be loving, kind and self-reliant so that they can discover their own self-worth and actualize their full potential as young adults in the world.

This year's graduation ceremony was particularly meaningful as many dignitaries from Uganda, Singapore, UK and the USA were present. Members of Uganda's parliament were there along with special guest Rev. Dr. George Wan Tian Soo and Brother Leong Po Lye from Singapore. This gathering was a testimony of the growing global community Rev. Dr. Isaac is weaving together.

I sat in the middle of this ceremony draped in academic robes listening to each honored guest as they speak of their own dreams for the graduates. Each one knows the importance of education and the good works that are being accomplished here at the Nserester Complex. These were not idle words. Each spoke from their hearts as they lend support to the school and its vision for a better world.

It is this graduation theme, Transforming Communities, which is evident in every aspect of school and its mission. Much has been accomplished and I was impressed with what they have completed in just one year's time. It was my first time to Africa and to the orphanage and school. I have spent a lot of time in Nepal over the past 15 years coordinating with Nepal's Center for Community Development and Research, and came here with an understanding of the challenges facing developing countries. I have an idea of what it takes to organize a vision and execute it so the goals and objectives are met. What I saw here was a community that is well organized and one which aligned in purpose. And maybe, most importantly they are highly motivated to become self-sufficient.

There is an amazing amount of creativity flowing here at the complex as students and staff look for ways to improve their economic condition, modernize their educational system, strength their own health and reduce social injustice. Sustainability is the key to set them free from the need for outside aid. There are many exciting projects that are developing now with this in mind. Here are a few examples:

1. At the farm, on this 32 acre plot, nearly 98% of the land is developed providing food for the orphanage and for market. There are experimental plots for teaching, and a Nursery for propagation. I saw corn growing, Mangos and Banana trees, vegetables, Tractor and a Maize mill. With the planned installation of irrigation system, the land can produce three crops a year instead of the two which is established already. The Maize mill provides a savings for school and is run as a small micro-industry providing milling to the local community. And, there are

pigs being raised for market. Importantly, the pigs are being raised to fund the teacher's salaries. Little piglets are being raised and sold for \$15, when they are one month old. Others when grown to full size, at approximately six months old weighing 80-100 Pound of kilograms, are sold for \$200 and more. A sow can be sold for \$100 when she is done breeding.

Currently, one unit has been built with 20 stalls and is 80% complete. Each stall holds up to 6 pigs. At a cost of US\$6,000, unit one can be completed and units two and three can be built covering 100% of the teacher's salaries in just six months time making the salaries totally self-sustaining through the pig project. The goal is in sight.

2. This year the girl's dormitory was completed and now sleeps over 300 girls. The newest section, Suna's Hostel, now sleeps 51 girls and they are loving their new space filling it with their personal touch.
3. The children's orphanage is in the process of securing the final \$2,100 needed to purchase land necessary to build a dormitory. This building will serve the youngest orphans ages 1-11. The total cost of the land is \$9,000 and all but \$2,100 has been secured. Nserester is seeking donations for this effort.
4. *Voices for Peace* is a social activist outreach program based outside the capital city of Kampala. Moureen Nakiyaga, manager, works to gather the disempowered in the community who's political and gender-related rights have been violated. Voices of Peace also has a micro-industry raising chicks to support the center. Each chick sold at 6 weeks brings \$3 to the project. They now have two small incubators and are looking to expand their operation with larger incubators to insure a steady income and to expand their services to the disenfranchised.
5. The Widow's Project is another good example of the outreach that is going on beyond the walls of the Nserester Complex. Outside the town of Jinja with the assistance of Nserester, 40 widows have organized themselves into a sewing cooperative. Within this past year they have built a building which houses their training and sewing machines. They have secured steady work tailoring uniforms for the local schools. Two teachers are working there to teach the women reading, math and business skills to grow their enterprise in a good way.

Here I witnessed self-empowerment at its finest. The women are well organized and highly motivated to succeed. With skills and education, these women are becoming self-sufficient and regaining their dignity and self-worth. As the program grows, more women will be able to participate and become useful members of their community.

Importantly, as the women begin to make money they can support their own children at the Nserester Complex buying the necessary books and uniforms and class fees for their education. Nserester benefits fully by helping these widows help themselves. As the economic status of these women improves, their children are supported, Nserester is supported and they become a model of sustainability in their community.

6. Micro-lending is yet another way to create sustainability for Nserester. Loans are given out to support individual endeavors. This could be a loan to start a business or a loan to begin a project. As Nserester invests in its graduates and community, this investment comes back in finances for the school, and in resources, skills, dedication to the cause. A prime example of this is graduates who have gone on to higher education and have come back to teach at the school.

Conclusion

The heart of the people here is palpable. I was greeted everywhere with a warm embrace of song and dance that was sincere and joyous. The students, the teachers and the staff are highly motivated to succeed, expand and modernize. Teachers are hungry to learn more and to improve their materials and knowledge. Students graduate with a clear sense that it is up to them to succeed and as the anthem says, become job creators. There is unity among the staff as they work in unison to achieve their goals.

Creativity and motivation abounds. It appears that all the members are encouraged to have a voice. As each is heard, self-esteem flourishes and progress is assured. As far as the eye can see, Nserester Complex and its outreach programs are growing in a good and sustainable way. Rev. Isaac is a visionary leader for his mission and is respected and loved by many. The staff is dedicated and happy and all who enter feel something special going on behind and beyond the compound.

There is a great opportunity for this vision and work to make real and substantial changes in the lives of all they touch. This goes beyond the immediate staff and children. Even as a visitor and guest, I have a very deep feeling that there is hope and direction for a better world.