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LASALLIAN WOMEN OF HOPE: REMOVING OBSTACLES TO EDUCATION

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It was a simple question with an answer that inspired change:
“What obstacles must you overcome in order to attend this college?”
The obstacles are many for female students attending Mwangaza
College, a Lasallian school in Nakuru, Kenya.

Even more challenging are the complexities of living in the fastest developing city in Kenya. While Nakuru is growing its commercial and professional reputation, it is also growing one of the largest human trafficking and prostitution industries in East Africa. Fortunately, for some women living there, a post-secondary education provides a path away from the harsh realities that many young women experience.

The question regarding obstacles to education surfaced during a 2016 visit by Lasallians from the District of Eastern North America (DNA). The students began to answer. “Funds to pay the tuition.” “Transportation. Just

getting here can be very difficult.” “A safe place to live and study.” And then, a young woman, speaking in almost a whisper, shared, “Sometimes I cannot come to class because I cannot afford to purchase hygiene items for my monthly period. But, if it is an important class or an exam, I will go into town and find a man or two just so I have enough money to buy what I need so I can attend class or take the exam.” Silence filled the room. After she spoke, the heads of several other women nodded slowly in agreement. The reality of her very personal testimony—that she had to engage in “situational prostitution” in order to attend classes or sit for exams—made it clear that something had to be done.

PROTECTING THEIR DIGNITY, GIVING THEM HOPE

Following that discussion, conversations were held with Brother Oscar Okoth, FSC,

A Lasallian Women of Hope grant is funding a menstrual hygiene management program and providing a year's supply of personal hygiene supplies to young women served through the Tumba Community in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Courtesy staff of Kunda Dia Zayi Institute, Tumba



Mwangaza principal, and Jane Wambui Mainah, Mwangaza's administrative assistant, about how to accompany young women on their Lasallian educational journey so that their dignity was protected, their right to an education was guaranteed, and equal access to opportunities were provided.

It was decided that a program would be established to educate young women on personal health and hygiene to complement the college's existing efforts to serve female students. Additionally, funds for feminine hygiene items would be made available to the college through private donations. The new project would be called Lasallian Women of Hope (LWH); it would boldly promote the mission of helping girls and women gain full access to Lasallian education.

"Lasallian Women of Hope is a powerful program which has transformed lives of many young women in our college," Brother Oscar reflected. "The program has helped our girls have some basic things which were beyond their reach. We are very grateful to the program and those who contribute toward this life-changing activity."

MOVING BEYOND MWANGAZA

Witnessing the impact LWH had on young women at Mwangaza, steps were taken to expand the project. LWH was a topic of discussion at the 2017 Lasallian Global Women's Symposium in New Zealand. An inspiring delegation of women from Papua New Guinea (PNG) expressed interest in LWH as they had started a small project to meet the needs of female students. With the help of LWH, that project was expanded under the direction of Grace Wrakia, national coordinator

at the Lasallian Family Office PNG.

The momentum continued, and as providence would have it, Jane Wambui Mainah, Grace Wrakia and other women who had attended the symposium in New Zealand were attending the 2018 Buttimer

Institute of Lasallian Studies. A meeting was held to learn about LWH and resulted in a commitment to propose this beneficial work as a project of the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools. Work began and on November 5, 2018, LWH was welcomed as an official project of the Institute through the Solidarity and Development Secretariat.

As Lasallian Reflection 5 states, "Looking at our world, we find great, positive things in committed people and in social movements that fight for rights and equality, and that are consistently committed to the care of creation."

EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN

As more people become committed to LWH initiatives, energy continues to build. LWH is now led by a committee of women from around the world and offers grants to projects



A girl from Fatima Secondary receives pads. Courtesy Schola Hori



*Women who attended the 2017 Lasallian Women's Symposium from Papua New Guinea expressed interest in Lasallian Women of Hope as they wanted to meet the needs of their female students.
Courtesy Maryann Donohue-Lynch*

gift but most of all they were so proud and happy. I could see that they were thinking and wishing that they could be able to use such things everyday in their lives but they are unable to do that.

in Kenya, Papua New Guinea, Congo, Haiti and South Africa. Under the direction of Brother Joseph Kiely, FSC, one of the projects is being expanded at the Tsholofelo Community in Rustenberg, South Africa, which serves students who live in local “squatter camps.” The LWH grant will provide menstrual health education, a year’s supply of personal hygiene items, sewing machines and training to produce reusable sanitary pads. The project will be self-sustainable and personally empowering.

Students at Hobe Primary in PNG now know that feeling of empowerment. The first LWH-funded sanitary pad distribution took place in July 2019. Teacher Karen Mondo noted that of the 15 young women who received pads, only two had ever used one and only four had underwear. To address such needs, each initial package includes a four-month supply of sanitary pads and two pairs of underwear, along with a toothbrush, toothpaste, body soap and laundry soap.

“Almost everything in the package was new to them so before doing the distribution I showed them everything in the pack and demonstrated how to use those things,” Karen wrote. “It was so emotional during our discussion before the distribution of the pads. The girls were so excited to receive the

That really touched me and I was silently in tears. They didn’t know how to say thank you because they thought that their thank you won’t be enough.”

Life-changing testimonies like this drive the important expansion of LWH. The committee, accompanied by the Solidarity and Development Secretariat, continues to identify additional ministries to help, to engage the support of Lasallians throughout the world, and to collaborate with like-minded organizations in order to continue touching the lives of young women.

Note: COVID-19 has greatly impacted females in developing nations. There have been significant increases in violence against girls and women. Additionally, the fear exists that when schools do reopen, girls and young women will find numerous obstacles to their return. Kindly consider a donation to help female students reengage in their education. To donate to Lasallian Women of Hope, visit www.LaSalleInternational.org. ●

Maryann Donohue-Lynch, associate executive director for DENA’s Office for Mission and Ministry, co-founded Lasallian Women of Hope with Brother Oscar Okoth, FSC, and Jane Wambui Mainah. For more information about the project, contact Maryann at donohuelynch@fscdena.org.