

# Janet's Story

## A cowshed is transformed into a hospice

"With a little so much can be done."



Janet, 33 years old, December 2008, very sick with AIDS.

The necessity for such projects as "Arise and Shine" has been prompted by the tragic devastation of the effects of AIDS which is ravaging these communities. The local Luo tribal traditions of wife inheritance and polygamy in this region have exacerbated the situation, and an orphaned generation is becoming a reality, with all the associated tragedy and complications.

The "Arise and Shine" project, situated on a hill-rise 4 kilometres outside Kisumu City, Kenya, on Lake Victoria, is developing into something much more than just an orphanage. It is becoming a vibrant centre of assistance and aid to a very needy local community of mainly widows, and hundreds of children. The government extends hardly any assistance within the bush communities in the form of medical or social aid. More than half the population of Kenya lives on less than one US dollar (\$) per day.

The ignorance concerning AIDS is appalling, as Janet's story will confirm. In most cases the stigma of the disease leaves people rejected and abandoned, often with only the children left to care for the dying parent or grandparent – a very heavy, often terrifying burden for many young children which can prevent them from going to school. However, years of potential life are robbed from these people, unnecessarily, though lack of knowledge and assistance, and many die alone after great suffering.

It is as a result of the "Arise and Shine" project's work within the community that Janet's story has been unveiled. It is with her permission that we share with you some of the details of her story with the intention of raising awareness, and highlighting an area of desperate need.

It was during our visit to Kisumu in April 2008 that we first discussed with Nancy and Jonas (the Kenyan leaders of “Arise and Shine”) the idea of having some modest form of “Hospice” on the site, with a capacity to house six desperately needy cases. We hardly imagined how this embryo idea would be an accelerated priority only nine months later through the dire need of Janet, a desperate widow linked to the project. Janet, who was only 33 years old, lives in the hills about 25 kilometres from the orphanage.

We first met Janet in April 2008, after she had been elected by the widows in the community as one of the twenty “Desperate Widows” who receive special home-based care from the “Arise and Shine” project.



Janet, April 2009, with 4 of her children.

Janet’s husband died of AIDS in 2003. She was the second of his four wives, two of whom had already died leaving Janet to raise her 2 children, Festus and Grace, as well as the 3 children of one of the other deceased wives, Susan, Edwin and Winni. 3 of her five children, Grace, Susan and Edwin, have been resident at the “Arise and Shine” orphanage since 2005 and her eldest son, Festus who is supported by the orphanage, stays at home to look after his mother.

On that April visit it was clear to us that Janet was quite sick. The scars of repetitive skin disorders, infections and lack of weight were shocking to see and yet her spirits were high that day. During the visit she discussed her plans to build a new home on her land. She gave us a chicken, mangoes and some banana trees to plant on the orphanage site.

Janet later shared with us that she did not know about AIDS until she decided to get tested in 2007. She said it was because she was always getting sick, and also because she had heard some rumours about a “strange disease”, otherwise she was totally ignorant about AIDS. It seems to us amazing that only 25 kilometres outside Kisumu, the third largest city in Kenya, there is little or no information reaching probably the neediest people who have neither radio nor television and many of whom cannot read. When she was tested positive she received a month’s supply of drugs and told us she felt so much better for a while. Short of money, she was not able to return to the hospital for the necessary follow up treatment, and since then, her health had rapidly declined. Without outside help she would have lost all hope.



A chicken for her guests.

We learnt, however, that as the year progressed, her health deteriorated, and just as we returned to Kisumu in December 2008, when the school summer holidays commenced she asked to have all her children with her at home. It was clear that she felt the need to have them with her because of her weakened and helpless condition, and so Nancy and Jonas accompanied the children to her home for the holiday period.

Nancy expressed to us her concern, particularly about the girls being left to live there alone because, in order to get money, they would be sent out to market to sell fruit and eggs, and the danger of them being exposed to sexual abuse was high. On the other hand it was obvious that Janet needed to be surrounded and cared for by her only family as, apart from the visits from the “Arise and Shine” team, she was shunned. Nobody else would visit her because of her sickness. The children kept in touch with Nancy by a mobile ‘phone and it was clear that the burden of witnessing their mother’s condition was extremely distressing for them. The three younger children tearfully pleaded to come back to the orphanage.



Janet’s feet before she received treatment.

Later, in December 2008, we visited Janet again. She was still weak but now able to get about. She had an open wound on her leg. With great delicacy and diplomacy, Nancy explained to Janet that it would be better for the three younger children to come back to the orphanage and we would come back to get her and Festus at Christmas, to share a few festive days with everyone on the orphanage site. We left her a food pack and some money to pay for a local doctor. We found it very difficult to leave her but there was no alternative.

When she arrived for two weeks at Christmas she was very ill and spent most of the time resting in Nancy’s mother, Angeline’s home, five minutes away from the orphanage. On Christmas day she visited the orphanage and managed to eat some ice-cream but she was clearly not at all well. It was agreed that the best thing would be for her to extend her stay at Angeline’s home for a little while longer. After another week of nursing, good food and plenty of loving company, Janet returned home, taking Festus and Edwin to help her with the daily household chores.

Three weeks later, in January 2009, we made an unannounced visit to check up on Janet’s condition and also on the well-being and schooling of the boys who had remained at home to help look after her. We arrived, unexpected, and Janet was in an awful state and was sitting hunched over on the floor at the doorway of her hut. She had a blanket wrapped around her waist and she was unable to get up. She later admitted to us that she had been waiting to die. Because Janet was too ill to do anything, the boys had gone to school that morning knowing that they would have had to prepare and cook a meal for their mother and themselves at lunchtime, before going back to school in the afternoon.



The original cowshed.

We spent a long time talking and encouraging her and, as Janet sat resting, we prepared and cooked the lunch for the three of them ready for when the boys arrived home from school. Janet’s face, legs and feet were covered with open sores. It was obvious that she could not be left alone in such a dreadful condition. We came up with the idea that we could convert part of the cattle shed on the orphanage site, into a small room, using some money we had earmarked for other work, and get Janet onto the Orphanage site as soon as possible, where she could receive immediate medical care and be looked after. We shared this idea with Janet and she welcomed it.

One bit of joy during this whole sad visit was that a hen was sitting on some eggs in a pan in the corner of the room, clucking away and hatching out the eggs, with little chicks spilling out from under her. It was such a contrast, new life blossoming even in such tragic circumstances. Amazingly, this dear lady, crippled with illness and desperate, was attempting to build a new home next to the old one and talked to us about her hopes of starting a small business on the market, growing and selling vegetables, to earn money to look after her children – such spirit!

At this time we felt that she epitomised what the hospice concept was all about. Left alone to continue as she was, she could not possibly have long to live and would very likely die with only these young children to be with her and care for her the best they could – a very sad and lonely end. So the hospice concept rose up on the list of priorities. We realised that Janet could be the first person to benefit from such a structure. If she survived long enough, Janet could be cared for, be close to her children on the orphanage site, and could die with dignity, knowing that she was loved and her children would be in good hands and have a future. There was also the possibility that her health could pick up enough for her to return home again. Janet has such a strong will to live. However, when you see the photos – it is hard to believe that she was only 33 years old!

We returned to the orphanage and immediately examined the old cow-shed, the only potential building that could be adequately and quickly converted at relatively cheap price. With the help of a kind impromptu donation from some friends and some additional funds from New Dawn Association, work was able to be started immediately.

In the meantime, Janet was taken to the Kisumu District Hospital where she underwent extensive tests and received proper medication to build her up and heal her wounds.



The cowshed being transformed.

Nancy mixed up a batch of a special high protein booster porridge meal for her with sorgam, groundnuts, soya, sesame seeds, millet, rice and maize. A month's supply of this porridge, for one person, which then has to go to the mill to be ground, costs 1,030 Kenyan shillings (approximately 10 Euros).



The restoration work in progress.

It is wonderful to witness and experience, the coming together of such different people in such circumstances. A small hut was rapidly constructed in part of the old cowshed on the orphanage site. The old part of the building was demolished and a new wooden framework erected. After a delay of two days, while awaiting delivery of water (as there was not enough on the site due to the drought), the cement was able to be mixed and a new concrete floor laid. New corrugated sheets were fixed to the roof and other sheets were salvaged for the side walls.

Lengths of bamboo canes were fixed over the sheets on the inner walls and the whole building was painted white, inside and out, including some of the adjoining structures. Even a little garden was prepared outside the front door. Everyone, staff and resident orphans, joyfully joined in with us in the construction, painting and refurbishment of Janet's hut. Within the space of 9 days everything was in place, ready to welcome Janet into her new hut, on the orphanage site.



Janet's house completed



Tender loving care.

A late afternoon festive party was prepared with sodas, popcorn and cakes. Everyone involved joined in the singing and dancing as Janet was escorted from the orphanage gate to her hut. It was a moving moment for her own children, who are resident at the orphanage, to witness such a loving welcome for their mother who had, been shunned and rejected in their own village. Receiving flowers and small gifts, Janet prepared herself to spend her first night in this safe haven.

Janet stayed six weeks at the orphanage. At first, very weak, she remained much of the time bedridden, but gradually she got stronger. She was constantly visited by most people who visited the site. She was able to take part in the weekly widows' fellowship meetings and Sunday services on site and the resident orphans were always in her hut reading, singing or telling her stories. It soon became evident that Janet was on the road to a miraculous recovery.



Soda party in front of Janet's house.

After five weeks she was taken to have another complete check-up and the doctors were amazed by her progress. Nearly all the open sores on her body had healed, she had gained nine kilos and her white blood cell count had increased enormously. Janet declared that she felt ready to go home again. She was persuaded to stay for another week to really gain the maximum benefit from the total rest and care that she was getting, and then we drove her back to her home in the hills to rejoin her eldest son who lives with her. Janet was given a month's supply of the high protein flour and also a good supply of medication. She was also given some produce to enable her to set up a mini-business on the local market on the edge of the road, near her home.



Janet with adopted baby.

Two years later in February 2011, Janet was still in good health and had some amazing news to tell us. Through a series of extraordinary circumstances, the authorities of her local district have asked her to care for a baby girl who Janet had found one day, abandoned on the marketplace. At first, everyone thought the baby's parent(s) would come to look for their child, but no-one came and so, for over nine months, Janet has cared for this child as though it is one of her own. Such love, hope and gratitude shone from her eyes with her little girl in her arms Janet, who two years ago thought she was dying, now lives today and is herself caring for an abandoned child who perhaps would otherwise have died.

Janet remains one of the widows within the "Desperate Widows" group attached to the Kogony Community project, and she will continue to receive monthly visits and food packs. Needless to say Janet's gratitude is immense. She proclaims that the help she has received saved her life and was an answer to her desperate prayers.

Janet's story powerfully exemplifies how, "with a little so much can be done." The cow shed that became a hospice, saved Janet's life. This story powerfully demonstrates how love, care, medical attention, prayer and a small financial investment can radically transform a situation of despair into one of joy and victory. It illustrates beautifully the spirit of the "Arise and Shine" Kogony Community project.

One of the future goals of the project is to build a 4-6 bed hospice on the site. As far as we know, such a thing does not exist in Kisumu, or in the surrounding region. An area on the site has already been earmarked for this future project. Alongside the hospice, a simple day-clinic would also be a wonderful blessing to this very needy community. The basic cost of building this hospice is in the region of about 15,000 -17,000 Euros.



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