

## East Africa

### Volunteer James Thibeault Brings Expertise to Kenyan Handicrafts Group



Life has always been a challenge for women living in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, but with HIV/AIDS prevalence rates as high as 10 percent in Kenyan women (6.7 percent overall), women who were already struggling to provide for their families are increasingly having to cope with the extra responsibilities resulting from the deaths of husbands and other family members and to undertake the care of AIDS orphans. Many are HIV-positive themselves and are unable to do physically intense work. This decline in productivity has highlighted the importance of low-energy income-generation activities for affected communities.

Not being physically demanding, handicrafts—such as textiles, batiks, pottery, beadwork and woven products made from banana fibers—are an important source of income for these women. Jisaidie Cottage Industries (JCI) was created to market these items, but, although Jisaidie (Swahili for “help yourself”) had successfully brought together producers to work as a group to access the local market, develop new products and institute quality control, marketing remained a challenge. To gain the knowledge needed to

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penetrate new markets, JCI applied to ACDI/VOCA’s Farmer-to-Farmer Program in Kenya to receive expert guidance from a short-term expert volunteer.

After careful review, Farmer-to-Farmer Program Coordinator Sebastian Wanjala Oggema chose James Thibeault of Malden, W. Va., as the man for the job. Armed with more than 30 years of experience in handicrafts and marketing, Thibeault traveled to Kenya as a volunteer consultant in 2003 to address marketing constraints. Through his ACDI/VOCA assignment, he helped transform Jisaidie’s marketing through a promotional campaign called “Colors of Life.”

The idea was to penetrate European and American handicraft markets utilizing a label specific to Kenyan artisans living with HIV/AIDS. The logo reflects the group’s newfound hope, says Thibeault: “The theme is reflected in the use of green and yellow in their products. Green symbolizes life, while yellow symbolizes sunshine or light.” The campaign has been enormously successful, and JCI’s products have found a



# Success Story

ready market in the U.S. To better reflect this new strategy and to safeguard against identity loss, JCI changed its name in 2004 to Colors of Life Africa (COLA). In 2005, Thibeault returned to help refine COLA's marketing strategies and product differentiation.

COLA has been able to expand its business and access credit from a local microlending facility operated by the Equity Bank to finance the transportation costs to the U.S. and to make upfront payments to producers for whom steady cash flow is critical. Thibeault is still active in the U.S. in linking the organization to markets. Today, COLA has evolved into a networking and marketing coordination hub for handicrafts produced by selected rural client groups and promotes the products of over 200 Kenyan groups and individuals. COLA also provides training and advisory services to partner organizations, with the assistance of rural development organizations.

In November 2005, Isabel Mwangi, an owner and the marketing director of COLA, won the "Best Woman Entrepreneur Award" and the "Most Successful Entrepreneur Award" under the UNDP-organized Year of Microcredit Activities and Global Microentrepreneurship Awards.

"One thing I know is that without James Thibeault there would be no Colors of Life. JCI would still be there subsisting, but there would be no sales to the U.S. and definitely no credit facility to support an enterprise with potential for growth," said Oggema. "James, along with the ladies at COLA, came up with Colors of Life, and by facilitating the process and judiciously offering advisory follow up, ACDI/VOCA achieved one of its key objectives of enterprise development while ensuring that even people living with HIV/AIDS are engaged in income-generating activities, no matter how small."