Teenage and living with HIV
An MCC-supported effort provides a safe space for Ugandan teens as they face a life-threatening disease.
Raising resilient children
By Arli Klassen
MCC Executive Director

Our Western societies place high value on a carefree childhood and long adolescence. Where have we picked up the idea that an idyllic childhood is one free of worry and care? Does freedom from fear best prepare our children and youth to be strong adults? Does any child actually grow up that way?

When my children were small, we debated what challenges or issues we would expose them to. Now that they are young adults, I find myself sometimes trying to “protect” them from life’s challenges, sometimes walking alongside and at still other times pushing them into adult challenges.

The stories in this issue tell us about children and youth whose situations force them to confront intense, adult challenges. And they are doing so with courage, hope and an astounding resilience. It is our privilege in MCC to walk alongside them, providing assistance that helps to nurture and strengthen that resilience.

While much research is being done these days on psychological resilience, questions remain as to why some people face challenges with strength while others crumble more easily.

What is clear is that an environment of love, encouragement and support can make other challenges more bearable.

We can’t change the situations of the Ugandan teens and children living with HIV. However, MCC can fund gatherings where they can meet with peers in the same situation. MCC helps caregivers find support and information about raising children with HIV.

As we build an environment of support for these families, we help provide a space where resilience can grow.

Thank you for your participation in MCC that makes it possible to strengthen resilience. In 1 Corinthians 13:13, we read that, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” May we each find numerous ways to share our faith, our hope and our love. It is in sharing that we build resilience in and ourselves.

Arli Klassen's e-mail address is arlik@mcc.org
In Kampala, Uganda, Dr. Margaret Mbabazi, left, meets with Tracy Kiconco, 13, and her mother Christine Rukundo so Tracy can get medication for HIV before returning to school. In the same consultation room, Dr. Vincent Kayina meets with Joyce Tugume and her 1-month-old daughter, who was born with HIV.

Teenage and living with HIV
As antiretroviral drugs keep HIV-positive children and youth healthier, the first generation of teenagers born with HIV faces the likelihood of growing into adulthood. Through an MCC-funded effort, these teenagers gather monthly, sharing stories, hopes and challenges.
Seventeen-year-old Esther carries a secret wherever she goes. At home in Kampala, Uganda’s capital, the secret blows like a smokescreen between her and her older brother. With her closest friends at boarding school, two hours away, she holds it tight, fearing it might slip out. If so, it might filter to other classmates who would point fingers and talk about her. Some, she says, would think she is cursed.

Esther, 17, who asked that her last name and recognizable photos of her not be used, is living with HIV, but hides her status from friends, schoolmates and even some family members.

Esther, who asked that only her first name be used, was born with HIV.

In many ways, she has already defied the odds. There was a time when infants such as Esther would not live into childhood, much less beyond it.

Worldwide, as recently as 2008, half of infants infected with HIV by their mothers during pregnancy, birth or breastfeeding were not expected to live past their second birthday, according to the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV and AIDS.

Today, as antiretroviral drugs keep HIV-positive children and youth healthier and extend lifespans throughout Africa, the first generation of teenagers born with HIV is looking at the likelihood of growing into adulthood.

Adolescence is a tumultuous time for any young person. But these youth also face the reality of living with a lifelong disease, the judgment and stigma that HIV still brings in Uganda, the pain of losing one or both parents and the realities of surviving as orphans.

MCC supports the work of a Ugandan partner, Mengo
Mengo clinic is the only place Esther knows of where she is free to talk about her status and where she can meet with other teenagers who have HIV.

One Saturday a month, more than 30 teenagers and young adults gather at the clinic, known formally as the Mengo Hospital Home Care and Counselling Clinic, to socialize, to discuss problems and to learn about HIV. MCC sponsors the gathering, as well as clubs at the same time for primary-school children with HIV and the children’s caregivers.

“I have learned self-confidence,” says 17-year-old Ramathan Ondoga. “I can speak without fear. I have learned that I am not the only sick one; there are many people. It has also helped me to realize this is not the end of the world. You can marry. You can be with a family. Being with HIV does not mean you are useless.”

Mengo clinic’s medical staff, as well as MCC-supported counselors who specialize in HIV, spend all morning and part of the afternoon with youth, preparing them for the decisions that accompany living with HIV.

At the clubs, young people can get answers to questions like these: Why should I keep taking medicine all the time? When do I tell a boyfriend or girlfriend that I have HIV and how? What do I do when my guardians treat me meanly because I am an orphan?

Commonly orphans, the adolescents often feel rejected by their parents’ deaths and by the relatives who, in many cases, pass them from place to place and treat them as less significant than their own children. In the worst situations, children with HIV are deprived of education or job skills because their guardians think they will die any day, says Dr. Edith Namulema, founder and director of the clinic.

So when it comes time to disclose their HIV status to a friend, let alone a boyfriend or girlfriend, adolescents are understandably afraid of being rejected. Some will try to hide their status, even if in doing so, they risk their health. Esther, for instance, weary of classmates questioning her about her medicine, quit taking it for six months—a situation common for teenagers, Mengo clinic staff say.

Antiretroviral drugs must be taken twice a day, exactly 12 hours apart, says Dr. Namulema. If the teens are playing soccer, at a party or in class, they have to interrupt their activities to go take a pill. In Uganda, it is unusual for anyone to take medicine, so it attracts attention.

In addition, Esther, put on antiretroviral medications as a very young child, didn’t remember being sick with HIV.
or related illnesses. “I thought, there is no headache, no nothing. Why am I swallowing this? So I just stopped…”

Unfortunately, the hiatus brought Esther from Stage 1 of the disease, where she lived with no symptoms, to Stage 2, making her more susceptible to minor infection. She developed resistance to her medicine, so she is now on a second-line medication, the last course of treatment available to her in Uganda.

Young people in the club want the same things that their friends hope for: boyfriends and girlfriends, marriage and healthy children. Yet, because they have HIV, these youth face issues others don’t have to.

Dr. Margaret Mbabazi, who specializes in children and adolescents with HIV, stresses that having young people think through the consequences of their actions before they are sexually active helps prevent the spread of the disease. This, she says, is one of the few places where teenagers can get accurate information about sex, because the topic is seldom discussed at home.

Topics such as abstinence and self-control are stressed, as well as birth control and protection from sexually transmitted diseases. The club provides a space to talk about marriage for someone who is HIV-positive and methods available to prevent an HIV-positive mother from transmitting HIV to her child.

Counselors advise young adults to think about how they will share their status when they are considering marriage or a serious relationship. They tell the teens how Mengo works with couples, testing both people and helping them talk together about the results.

Mengo staff encourage teens to be open about their status in general, but to do that teens need the support of a group that, for some, has become like family. They need to see their peers’ experiences and hear their stories. And they need to hear the message that their actions — taking medicine regularly, having regular blood counts to monitor the virus, eating healthy food and controlling opportunistic infections — really can maintain their health and hope for a long life.

For many, this is a far cry from how they felt when they first learned of the diagnosis.

“I thought to myself, should I kill myself or what?” 19-year-old Samuel Baguma remembers thinking when he learned at 16 that he had HIV.

No one else can tell how long he or she is going to live, regardless of HIV status, counselor Asimwe tells the teens. He, himself, could be killed tomorrow in a motorcycle accident. “You take medications, you listen to your counselor, and you treat the infections that come along.” Baguma has taken that message to heart. He is one of the senior members of the club and has done some post-high school training to become an HIV counselor. He dreams of somehow continuing his education.

“I think I can live more than 50 years,” he says. “When you are taking medicine well and you are not missing your appointments, you can live.”

Linda Espenshade is MCC’s news coordinator. Silas Crews is MCC’s photographer and multimedia producer.
I never imagined that my son would die of HIV. When he died 10 years ago, I thought he had malaria. His wife had already died before that, and their son, my grand-son Francis Kalanzi, was just 3 years old and sick too. After my son died, no one else in my family was able to care for Francis—not my brothers and sisters, or my other children. So I took care of him. I was 65 then. I was very, very afraid that he would die too because he was so, so small, and he was coughing up blood.

I spent a lot of money taking him to doctors. Eventually, they discovered he had HIV, and he began getting medi-cine.

Francis is now 13 and in grade 4. I never thought that he would get better, but he did. Now I realize that everything is possible.

Francis and I go to Mengo’s clubs for youth and care-givers once a month on a Saturday. I go because I learn many things. I learned how to feed my grandson, how to keep him healthy and how to keep him clean, which maintains his health.

If I have problems, I can ask a friend at club, “How can I get through it?”

The friend can tell you because we have the same prob-lems in the club. We have sic children. The mothers are sick. There is no need to hide around.

I have hope for my future because I have brought this boy from a very bad condition. Now the boy is better, so I hope that one day the boy will be of help to me. I am 75 now. The boy already helps me. He sells eggs. When he goes out for a party, he brings food home for me. I know he will continue to help me as I grow older. He loves me.

Milly Nakasujja and her grandson Francis Kalanzi, 13, live in Kampala, Uganda, and receive assistance from an MCC partner organization, Mengo clinic, which is formally known as the Mengo Hospital Home Care and Counselling Clinic. Linda Espenshade is MCC’s news coordinator. MCC funds Mengo’s clubs for children and adolescents living with HIV and pays for children’s school fees, supplies, uniforms and shoes. MCC funding also supports home-based care and stipends for staff.
Carrying knives and poles, parents advanced on Mancilla Open Community School in Lusaka, Zambia’s capital city, prepared to take vengeance on the school leader and to damage the school if they didn’t get answers.

They were angry because none of the school’s ninth-grade students had gotten results from the national exams they were required to pass to go on to 10th grade.

The parents had done their part. Despite living in one of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Lusaka, they had managed to pay the fees for their children’s exams on top of the monthly school fees.

By this time, several months later, they concluded the fees had been misused. As the school supervisor continued to stall in providing answers, parents decided to take up arms.

When they got to the school, though, they were met by Moffat Mutebele, a leader of the school’s MCC-supported peace club, and he asked them to leave their weapons outside.

“Your metals, poles and knives you have come with will not give us a solution to the problem,” parent Kitete Kuza remembers Mutebele telling them. “Select a few people who can come in and talk. What is important is dialogue, communication.”

The words calmed the parents and immediately resonated with Kuza, whose ninth-grade son, Amani Kuza, previously had questioned the long-term consequences and effectiveness of using violence to resolve the situation.

What Kuza didn’t realize was that when he did not act on his son’s concerns, Amani told peace club leader Mutebele the details of the parents’ plans, hoping that Mutebele could formulate a peaceful plan to thwart the violence. As members of peace club, Amani and other students had learned that violence is never a good resolution to conflict.

That concept is central to the curriculum used in MCC-sponsored peace clubs in 16 Zambian schools. Through the clubs, students learn to resolve conflicts without violence. As they use their skills, they and the teachers who train them influence families, schools and entire communities for peace.

Peace clubs, which MCC has supported since 2006, grew out of work that Issa Ebombolo, a refugee from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and colleagues at an MCC partner organization in Lusaka, Peace Center, were doing to address issues between a refugee camp and the local community.

In the process, they polled families and children in nearby schools and discovered it was not just the refugee

At Kamulanga High School in Lusaka, Zambia, students, from left, Chilowa Chila, Mubila Chaila, Mirriam Chinyanta and Sydney Kahalu use a peace club curriculum prepared by MCC workers.
children who were struggling. Young people needed an avenue to deal with conflicts as well as abuses by adults, including the threat of sexual abuse. Ebombolo’s answer was peace clubs. He began training teachers, including Mutebele, in skills of conflict resolution and informal counseling.

The teachers in turn taught the skills to students in upper primary grades through grade 12. Ebombolo now is executive director of a new organization, called Peace Club, and MCC helps fund its work to form and support peace clubs. (Read more at acommonplace.mcc.org about Ebombolo, who received peace training and a college scholarship from MCC.)

During the past two years, MCC workers, under Ebombolo’s guidance, have written curriculum to help students resolve conflicts without violence and to stand up for themselves in case of abuse or sexual abuse, common problems that students report.

The curriculum is designed so that students will recognize conflicts in their own lives and relationships and learn how to address them.

When Maria Buchinke, 17, learned about demands on children to do chores they are not physically capable of doing or work that infringes on their education, she recognized her own situation.

Because her parents required her to clean, cook, bathe her younger brothers and take them to school before she could go to school, she was always late. At school, administrators would beat her or punish her with more chores. As a result, Maria’s grades were slipping and she sometimes didn’t go to school.

Her peace club leader advised her to explain the problem respectfully to her parents, even though it is not culturally acceptable for an unmarried child to question her parents.

“When she brought the news, we felt very bad because we thought this girl wants to bring revolution in this home,” says Esperance Musau, Buchinke’s mother.

However, Buchinke’s parents realized, after thinking about it, that their expectations of her were negatively affecting her performance in school, which they were paying for. The parents agreed to get up at 5 a.m., instead of 6 a.m., so they could do more of the work in the morning before they went to work. Buchinke’s job, they told her, was to get to school on time and complete her homework and evening chores.

Her grades improved, and her final exam qualified her to attend the university. Her brother’s behavior improved when he began attending peace club because he saw the positive effect on his sister, and Musau began to talk to other mothers about the problems of work demands on children.

“If someone is telling us something important to him, we parents need to listen,” says Buchinke’s father, Leonard Tshishiku Muntenemuine. “I know in the traditional pattern it was not like this. It’s always top down, top down, but this time, we are getting something new now from the bottom up.”

Andrew Membwe, left, and Richard Tands talk about a peace club exercise with Maria Krause of Langley, B.C. As a participant in MCC’s Serving and Learning (SALT) program in 2010-2011, Krause helped to write curriculum for peace clubs.

Maria Buchinke, right, her mother Esperance Musau and her father Leonard Tshishiku Muntenemuine talk about how peace club helped their family.
Books within reach

By Marla Pierson Lester
Photographs by Christa Marshall

I

n the new library of an Anabaptist school in Nicaragua’s capital city, Managua, students hover over brightly colored illustrations of elephants and clowns, dogs and dolls, then line up with the book they plan to take home. It can seem like magic — walking into a library, looking at books, then, for the first time, checking one out.

MCC’s Global Family education sponsorship program is bringing this experience within reach for students in four Anabaptist-supported schools in western Nicaragua.

“At the opening of Colegio Jesús El Buen Pastor, in Managua, a school of about 800 students, teacher Maria Lumbí says, “I am very happy that we have a library in our school.”

From a small and relatively isolated school to a vibrant center of learning, students are relishing the chance to go to the library, browse and take out books.

Today, through this program, four new school libraries have opened, three in traditional schools and one in a preschool and tutoring center. The program’s collection of books — including those from Claassen Thrush, a number of other donations and purchases — is split among the four libraries. Books are rotated every few months, ensuring that each school will have a fresh selection for students without making new purchases.

But even outside of special lessons, students are relishing the chance to go to the library, browse and take out books. As they do, Shank notes, they are overturning the idea of what a library can be.

“The idea of a lending library is something that’s totally new here,” she says. “Nicaragua’s view of libraries is basically a place you go to do research or investigations. Typically, people would use library books onsite. Books would be stored in nonpublic areas instead of on open shelves; patrons would need to request a specific title that library staff would retrieve.”

The MCC effort, Shank notes, is part of a movement in Nicaragua to establish new, more user-friendly and child-friendly libraries.

“We have the textbooks, but we have a lot of storybooks too,” Shank says. “It’s been really exciting to see children start to read for fun.”

And in homes of students such as Edwin, that excitement is contagious.

His parents applaud his interest, Edwin says, telling him that “it’s good for me to read so I can learn things like how many planets there are.” But it’s his 4-year-old brother who is keeping the closest eye on the books Edwin brings home.

“My little brother constantly begs me to read to him,” Edwin says. “He goes to my book bag and says, ‘Read to me, read to me!’”

Marka Pierson Lester is managing editor of A Common Place magazine. Christa Marshall served in Nicaragua through MCC’s 2010-2011 Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program.

Over the past year, she has worked with schools and teachers to explore how they can use picture books in classrooms and how crafts and drama can help make reading and stories come alive. She describes with excitement how teachers are having preschoolers act out the story of the three little pigs — in the school library’s version of this story, the wolf at the end uses his big, bad breath to blow up balloons for the children.

But even outside of special lessons, students are relishing the chance to go to the library, browse and take out books.

That’s the situation that a former MCC worker, Elizabeth Claassen Thrush of Upland, Calif., found when she began lending books out of her Managua home in 2007.

Children loved to read but had little access to lending libraries or reading material. Claassen Thrush started sharing books with children who came to her door asking for food or treats, then gradually built up a collection of several hundred books that she checked out to neighborhood youth.

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(Read more at acommonplace.mcc.org about how Claassen Thrush began lending books.)

Through her work with MCC as a connecting peoples coordinator, she heard from Anabaptist schools about their need for storybooks and school libraries. Claassen Thrush passed on her books, coordinated meetings and the MCC-supported program, Biblioteca Móvil Jehová Jireh, which translates as “Mobile Library The Lord Will Provide,” was born.

The program’s collection of books — including those from Claassen Thrush, a number of other donations and purchases — is split among the four libraries. Books are rotated every few months, ensuring that each school will have a fresh selection for students without making new purchases. The program also funded the purchase of textbooks for libraries, a much-needed resource for students and teachers.

An MCC worker, Marisa Clymer Shank of Harrisonburg, Va., serves as a literacy promoter and coordinates the library program.

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At Colegio Jesús El Buen Pastor, a school in Managua, third-grader Jeshua Rodriguez checks out a book from school administrator Reyna Lumbí as second-grader Angélica Mena watches.
A composting effort
Faced with rising costs of fresh fruit and vegetables in local markets, many Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon are rediscovering the benefits of using compost to enrich their soil. Through an MCC partner organization, Popular Aid for Relief and Development (PARD), MCC is supporting composting efforts in eight Palestinian communities, training women such as Jamileh Ruheimah, pictured above with her grandson Jameel Ibrahim Bassiouni. Now, says participant Farea Mousa, her family has less garbage and an abundant supply of food and yard waste to produce organic, nutrient-rich compost for their garden and olive trees. “Instead of buying chemicals we are using natural fertilizer,” she says. “It is free, it is saving us money and we can make it at home.” As the project progresses, ideally compost that is not needed for household gardens can be sold, creating a source of income for needed for household gardens can be sold, creating a source of income for needed for household gardens can be sold, creating a source of income for needed for household gardens can be sold, creating a source of income for...
**A company’s gift**

By Marla Pierson Lester

Through sales representatives, notices tucked into invoices and a message on its trucks, an Ontario feed company is inviting farmers to donate to MCC’s account at the Canadian Foodgrains Bank (CFGB).

It’s a unique initiative that gives Wallenstein Feed and Supply, a family business, a way to extend the amount that it gives to MCC—and a way to let customers know how they can make a difference in addressing hunger across the world.

Globally, “a huge percentage of the people who go hungry every year are farmers. Our aim with this effort is to give farmers a tangible way of helping farmers around the world,” says Shelley Abdulla, whose family has run the feed mill for more than half a century.

As business owners and long-time MCC donors, the family was drawn to explore how they could promote MCC within Ontario’s farming community, Abdulla says.

Working with MCC Ontario resource development director Dan Driedger, the company created Grains of Hope. Through this initiative, farmers tend and harvest a crop, donating the proceeds to MCC’s account at CFGB, which is used to support MCC food and water projects around the world. Wallenstein Feed and Supply gives farmers $100 for each acre of land they plant for this effort to help cover their costs.

Farmers already have a strong tradition of lending a hand to others in their community. “We just wanted to extend that sense of community to countries that are a whole lot worse off than we are,” Abdulla says.

Last year, the first that Wallenstein Feed and Supply offered this option, 42 farmers took part. Including matching grants from the Canadian International Development Agency, the 174 acres they planted generated more than half a million dollars.

It’s raising awareness as well as money. Driedger has spoken at Wallenstein banquets, telling sales representatives, other company staff and customers about how sand dams, one of the projects supported through CFGB funds, are making a difference in communities in Kenya and Mozambique.

“For MCC,” says Driedger, “it’s a wonderful example of how businesses can leverage their role and their market reach to reach a lot more people than we would ever be able to.”

**GET INVOLVED**

How can you involve your co-workers, friends or family in the work of MCC? Learn more at mcc.org/getinvolved or contact an MCC Resource Generation representative at your nearest MCC office (see page 2).

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**Connecting peoples coordinator**

Name: Adriana Koehn

Hometown: Greeley, Colo. (Greeley Mennonite Church)

Assignment: I plan and coordinate group visits to Guatemala and El Salvador, such as MCC Work and Learn Teams, Learning Tours and other exchanges. In addition to visitors from Canada and the U.S., we also have exchanges with other Central and South American countries. (Koehn is pictured with Marta Cobo Corio in Acul, Guatemala, an area she often visits with groups.)

Typical day: When groups are here, I travel with them, connecting them to the local communities and partners we work with and facilitating all aspects of their visit. I keep busy and play a lot of different roles: translator, mother, nurse, coach, tour guide, time keeper, money keeper, you name it! In between groups, I work out of the MCC office in Guatemala City, making plans and answering lots of questions for future visits.

**Joys:** So many! I love being able to continually learn and be challenged alongside the groups and to be part of their process of learning and changing. I enjoy helping visitors start to see the world from a different perspective and to explore how they can make changes in their lives at home. Traveling brings me joy, and my job allows for a lot of that! Plus, I get to visit other MCC workers in their placements, seeing the team in action and connecting to the great work they are doing.

**Challenges:** Maintaining my energy level, particularly during the busy periods. Keeping the information and experiences, which I have gone through many times, new and dynamic for each group can be difficult. Also, the violence and crime that is a reality in Central America is a constant challenge.

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“**I have met so many great people, local and otherwise, and really enjoy facilitating and being a part of new relationships.”**

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MCC has service workers in Africa, Asia, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and the Middle East, as well as in Canada and the United States.

Go to mcc.org/serve for service opportunities.

MCC workers are expected to exhibit a commitment to Christian faith, active church membership and biblical peacemaking.
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And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God . . . (Luke 2:13 NRSV)

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