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Philadelphians pitch in to aid Uganda school

By Carolyn Davis
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Abitimo Rebecca Odongkara has a dream for her school in northern Uganda. On a recent afternoon, in her quietly dignified voice, she tried to explain that vision to students at Philadelphia's High School of the Future.

"Right now, in your lives, you have plenty," the 75-year-old Odongkara said as some students fidgeted with laptop computers.

"But what kind of life are you leading? Is it a caring one? What are you learning? You have to choose - what, of all you have, is good for you *and* for your neighbor."

The students listened and offered to help her cause by helping to raise money to support the school in Africa.

Odongkara has that effect on people - which is why Philadelphia-area residents have been rallying to support her school, the Upper Nile Institute for Appropriate Technology (UNIFAT).

Today, a nonprofit group, Friends of UNIFAT, will hold a fund-raiser called "Abitimo's Dream" at the High School of the Future in West Philadelphia. The event will include videos and a silent auction of photos of the school in Uganda. Odongkara, who is in the United States for a visit, will speak.

Money raised will go toward operating expenses, academic supplies, improving the partly completed school building, and, perhaps, toward Odongkara's fondest dream - expanding UNIFAT's current kindergarten-through-seventh-grade structure to go through high school.

It all fits into her mission: to feed young minds and souls so they pick peace over war, compassion over killing, progress over destruction.

"It's a dream about healing hurts that have continued on for generations," said Chuck Esser, head of the Friends of UNIFAT. "It's a dream about peace for a nation, seen through the eyes of children."

Odongkara, her husband, and her children survived the chronic violence of their homeland and fled the regime of the vicious dictator Idi Amin. The Odongkaras ended up resettling in Germantown in the early 1970s. Several of her children, now grown, live in this region.



BILLY YATES

Children at a camp in northern Uganda for those displaced by armed conflict. Abitimo Rebecca Odongkara's school is aimed at educating and giving hope to such a young people.



BILLY YATES

A displaced child in northern Uganda. This photo and the one above it will be sold today to raise money for the school.

She returned to Uganda after Amin was ousted. A newer war, one that recently subsided between the government of President Yoweri Museveni and the rebel Lord's Resistance Army, further fueled Odongkara's desire to reach children.

Odongkara started her school under a tree with 10 students, then slowly expanded it in the town of Gulu amid the fighting, in which rebels kidnapped children to serve as soldiers and torturers. Girls were forced to be concubines. Some of the victims were Odongkara's students.

Esser, director of a nonprofit family center, Philadelphia Community School, has known Odongkara since soon after she arrived in Philadelphia. They met in an early-childhood education class and have counseled each other through difficult times.

"I love Abitimo," said Esser, of Philadelphia. He described her as someone who makes

"everything and everyone you come in contact with go well."

Michael and Jill Zimmer of Downingtown have gotten to know Odongkara in the last few years. They serve on the board of Friends of UNIFAT. Through his Cincinnati alma mater, Archbishop Moeller High School, Michael Zimmer has recruited students there, in Kentucky, and in Illinois to support UNIFAT.

"I would say it's filled a void that I didn't realize I had - this desire to do something extra with my life in addition to going to work every day," Jill Zimmer said.

Donna Donato, coordinator of the gifted and talented program at Eastern Regional High School in Voorhees, has engaged her students in helping as well - they've raised about \$4,000 for a well and windows for UNIFAT. "I think they can identify with the desire for education," Donato said.

Charlie Baltimore, dean of students at the High School of the Future, has his own connection to northern Uganda.

Baltimore, formerly a gym teacher, read about the war there and decided to visit northern Uganda last summer to volunteer for a group that organizes athletic leagues for children displaced by fighting.

He went to Gulu, where he met Odongkara and toured the school. A big chunk of his heart remains there.

Hosting the fund-raiser, Baltimore said, is a perfect fit for the School of the Future. It goes toward one of the school's goals, Baltimore said, of establishing a global classroom "to bring the world in through our doors."

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The fund-raiser for UNIFAT will be from 4 to 8 p.m. today at the Philadelphia School of the Future, 4021 Parkside Ave. For more information, call Jill Zimmer at 610-656-6947.