

THE ADVOCATE

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Immunization through education *** Local doctor's foundation works to eradicate HIV and AIDS in Uganda

Advocate - Baton Rouge, La.

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Dr. Robert Muhumuza has a vision for Uganda - to eradicate HIV and AIDS from the population by "immunizing" children through intensive education.

"We must start with the children," Muhumuza said. "HIV is a behavioral illness" in its spread predominantly through sexual contact. "If we can establish behavior patterns in early childhood, we hope to eradicate this disease in a generation."

Now working as a gastroenterologist at Earl K. Long Hospital and in private practice in Gonzales, Muhumuza sends much of what he earns home to his native Uganda to support the initiatives of the Savannah Sunrise Foundation, which he founded and presides over.

Muhumuza and two of his partners, the Rev. Obed Rubaiza and Leonard Francis Rwego, are stepping up their fundraising efforts with a dinner at the Holiday Inn in Gonzales on Oct. 15. (See box.) Their current goal is to raise \$406,500 to support an early intervention clinic to treat and counsel patients and to extend the foundation's education initiative through mentorship training and school programs.

The clinic is currently treating about 200 patients a month and the school programs are reaching some 16,000 children each month.

"I think he's a genius," said Dr. William Cassidy, who works with Muhumuza at LSU Health Sciences Center at EKL. "He's come up with a new model," combining a shrewd business plan with health care, ministry and education to attack HIV in a comprehensive manner.

Cassidy and his wife, Dr. Laura Cassidy, worked in a mission hospital in Africa years ago and believe in Muhumuza's mission so much that they have become investors in his hospital in Uganda.

Some 24.5 million people, representing more than 65 percent of the world's HIV-infected patients, are concentrated in sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNAIDS. In Uganda, an estimated 1 million people, or nearly 7 percent of the population, are infected.

That's down from more than 20 percent of the population that was HIV positive 25 years ago. However, there are still clusters of the disease, primarily in poor, urban areas, where HIV incidence is still that high, Muhumuza said.

Many of the people who suffered from AIDS early on have died, he said. An aggressive social policy known as ABC (abstinence, behavior control and condom use) also had an impact on the spread of the disease. However, the decline seems to have leveled off as resistant clusters persist.

"ABC is not enough" to penetrate the clusters, he said. In lieu of an actual AIDS vaccine, what is most needed is increased prevention, and the most effective way to do that is to start with education in early childhood.

"We must focus on the children if we are to save a generation," Rubaiza said. "We will go into the kindergartens, the primary schools and the churches to reach them. We want to increase their understanding (of the disease and how it is transmitted). We also want to reduce peer pressure, improve their decision-making skills and help them set goals - in other words, change the culture. The children will then become a bridge to the broader community, ambassadors to their older siblings and parents to spread the word."

In addition to educating children, SAS is working to train individuals with HIV to become mentors in their community, encouraging others at risk to be tested for the virus. Those found to be positive can then seek treatment and counseling where they will learn how to stop the spread of the disease.

"There are many people living in denial because of taboos and the stigma attached to HIV," Rubaiza said. "They know that their partner died of the disease, but they want to keep it a secret, and they don't get tested. They may spread the disease to others. We want to change that through our mentors who tell them, 'It's OK. Come in and get tested early because there is good treatment available.' We want to break the silence."

SAS is raising funds specifically to purchase the clinic building it is now operating, purchase land and build a training facility for its mentorship program, and launch a radio program to send its message over the airwaves.

In time, they also hope to lobby for legislation to mandate HIV testing for children at birth and ages 5 and 10.

"We plan to continue to monitor and evaluate the program to determine how successful it is, and, hopefully, we could share the concept with others," Muhumuza said, pointing to his own back yard in this country. The Baton Rouge metropolitan area is the second highest in the nation in the rate of new AIDS cases, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"We want to kick this thing into higher gear," he said. "Our only obstacle now is money. That's why we're having this fundraising dinner and asking for donations."

FUNDRAISING DINNER WHAT: Savannah Sunrise Foundation fundraising dinner to fight HIV in Uganda
WHEN: 5 p.m., Oct. 15. **WHERE:** Holiday Inn-Gonzales, 1500 Hwy. 30 in Gonzales (next to St. Elizabeth Hospital). **COST:** \$50 donation requested. **INFORMATION:** Call (504) 287- 9630 or visit the Web site: <http://www.sasfoundationafrica.org>.

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