MEMORY PROJECT

Transcript of BBC Report on the Memory Project - Uganda

ORLA GUERIN is a foreign correspondent with the BBC. She travelled to Uganda to meet the women of NACWOLA who were the pioneers of Memory Book work in Africa. Below is a transcript of her talk which was broadcast on the BBC in the UK and on the World Service in 2000. The work and the people she describes are 100% true. Very similar work continues to this day, but now under the leadership of a new organisation called National Co-allition of Women with HIV/Aids in Uganda - NACOA. (NACOA.Uganda@gmail.com) NACOA members work out of the same old buildingß, up a dusty side road in Kampala. ***This is what Orla said on the radio:***

If you want to say goodbye now what would you say?

If you had to gather up all the fragments of your life and tell your story to those you are leaving behind where would you begin?

How would you find words to tell your children you're dying and what advice would you leave behind?

Up a dirt road in Kampala past rows of wooden huts, coated in squalor, there is a small house where dying women are writing of their lives.

The house is small but welcoming. So many little feet have played in the garden that the grass has been rubbed away. Inside the bare front room a framed photo of Princess Anne hangs over a long table. She visited in 1998. Here at the table, women work on their Memory Books. These are home made scrap books with photographs pasted in and pencil drawings of family trees with tribes and clans. They contain happiness and pain of a whole life time; tracing the story of the mother, from her own birth right up to the birth of her children and on to present day. The women tell their sons and daughters about their first steps, their first words, their first days at school. They will leave behind a separate book for each of their children.

Irene Nakku-Namagembe has four books to write for her daughter and three sons. She's working hard to finish them in time. "The books will be their treasure I will leave them," she told me. "The children can see me crying as I write some parts but through the books I can tell them things I find hard to say." In her Memory Book, Irene is telling her children about their father's death from Aids. "The children say you're going to die just like daddy," Irene told me, "But in the book I am able to explain that I'm not going to die today."

The Memory Books are an act of love and bravery. The women explain how they were infected. How sick they sometime feel and how much time they may have left. Those who cannot read or write are being helped by their own children. One woman died after she had written just a few pages. Her son is trying to finish her story.

"My son, Ezra, loves football" Irene told me. "And his brother Ediga likes music. So I am telling them to keep up those interests when I am gone. Although they must study, too. For my girl I am saying I don't want you to have to get married even if you can't stay at school. If we live long enough we can tell our children in person what we want for them, if not at least it's in the book."

Rebecca Nakabazzi is just 24 years old but she has already finished the Memory Book she is leaving for her 9 year old son, Julius Logolube. This attractive, slender, young woman with carefully braided hair and tiny star shaped gold earrings seem to me to be well but when she sat by my side and began to show me her book I could see that her life was slipping away. "That's me," she said, pointing to a broad shouldered girl with a round face and full cheeks. I could see no trace of this girl in the slight figure beside me.

"Julius, I was in labour all night," she writes, "and you weighed 4.3 kilos when you arrived. As a baby you were fat but you sat up early. You like porridge with no milk, and you never cried before

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going to school. You wanted to go. You always liked to play alone. And you liked keeping rabbits and going out on your bicycle. My favourite memory is of the time someone brought some food and you kept a piece for me. And then there was the time when you stayed with me for days after my brother died."

A lively, confident boy smiles out from the photographs in Rebecca's book. Julius looks like a happy child. but the family snap shots of picnics and parties include many loved ones who are already dead. His father, Patrick, his young cousin, Brenda, his aunt, Betty, all have been taken by Aids.

The book includes detailed instructions on how to reach his grandmother's house. "I don't know which relative will take him after my death," Rebecca told me. "So I want to make sure he can always find his way back to my mother's place." "You might meet with problems," she writes to Julius, "but I want you to bear with them. If you get the chance to stay on in school I want you to be active in your school work. I want you to go to University and to get married when you grow up." But Julius may not live long enough to fulfill these dreams. In the book Rebecca tells him, very gently, that he too was tested for HIV when he was just 4 and he also has the disease.

Simple as they are the books cost more to put together than many of these women can afford. But they all want to write one. "It is the last thing we can do for our children," Irene says.

A retired British social worker, Carol Lindsay-Smith, from Suffolk, got the project going. She's still a regular visitor to the house in Kampala. "It helps the women so much to know their children are prepared," she says. "And the children get to know their mother is not just someone who is dying, but someone who has led a life."