

Paying it forward: Nina Chung left a good job to help children in Kenya

BY TONY LOFARO, OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 22, 2013



Nina Chung gave up her marketing/communications business in 2004 to work with Volunteer Services Overseas (Canada) in Kenya, where she now runs social and educational programs for "my kids there."

Photograph by: JULIE OLIVER, OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ottawa's Nina Chung enjoyed success in her marketing company but gave it all up to help Kenyan children as a way of giving back.

"I felt this calling in myself for some time. I didn't know what it meant or how I was going to do it, but I have really found my place now," says Chung, who joined Volunteer Services Overseas (Canada) in Kenya in 2004.

Now nine years later, Chung devotes nine months a year in Kenya helping schoolchildren as well as a grandmother raise her abandoned grandchildren. She returns home for three months to stay with her mother, Christina, at her Ottawa apartment.

"It's become a vocation for me," says Chung, 49, who for the first five years funded the projects herself, with some assistance from friends and family, but now has enlisted other funding partners.

"It's using all my skills and all the things that I have learned over the years in a way that feels incredibly meaningful. It gives me more satisfaction," says Chung, a devout Catholic who attends Holy Cross Church on Walkley Road.

She returns to Malindi on the Indian Ocean coast of Kenya at the end of July to resume her charitable work.

Chung founded Elimu ("education" in Swahili), a registered Canadian charity that has helped finance a sewing project for young girls and assisted building of a nursery school that now has three classrooms and serves 80 children. The charity has raised about \$75,000 in the past three years.

"I've focused on the sewing program because I found it to be the most effective. We sponsor girls to do a two-year program and give them a sewing machine when they graduate.

"In that way, they can go back to their village and start working," says Chung, who moved to Canada at age seven from Guyana. She attended Brookfield High School and has a bachelor of arts in anthropology from the University of Western Ontario.

She says 20 girls have already gone through the sewing program and seven more are enrolled this year.

Chung is also working with the Upendo Nursery School in the rural village of Sabaki to help build more nursery schools. She helps with fundraising for the school, adding it takes about \$6,000 to build one classroom. Global Childcare Services in Ottawa is a funding partner in the nursery school project.

"This rural village is mostly mud huts, with no running water or electricity. The people there cannot come up with that kind of money."

Chung is behind a program to help sponsor family homes called Nyumbani Kwetu, which brings families together under one roof. She is also working with a grandmother who is taking care of 14 children aided by a house mother.

"The children are all related to this grandmother. Three kids are orphans who were at a children's home that was closed and were sent to us. The rest of the kids are from parents who have abandoned them and are now with the grandmother," she says.

Children are often abandoned by their parents in the small villages, she says, leaving grandparents to care for them. She says adding a house mother to a sponsored family home helps with the raising of the children.

She says Malindi is a popular spot for tourists and one of the tawdry byproducts is a surge in sex tourism. Tourists prey on children and adults in the village, lavishing them with fancy gifts during their time vacationing there.

"The goal at Elimu is to break the chain of negative influences and poor choices, which is the consequences of poverty.

"I'm doing what I can with the help of others to make a dent.

"I think I've given the children hope for a different future," she says.