

Margaret Butler puts girls on track to succeed

Komera supports education for girls in Rwanda, where few can afford secondary school.

By Kendra Nordin / Staff writer

When Margaret Butler, a former elite athlete from Canada, first started running through remote villages in Rwanda as a break from her job there, the children who saw her speed past would burst into tears.

"I was ... scaring a lot of children because I was so white they thought I was a ghost," Ms. Butler explains. Once they got used to the sight of a rapidly moving, tall, blond, freckled woman, the village boys took to falling in step with her.

"But rarely the little girls," Butler says. "It's not normal [in Rwanda] for little girls to participate in running."

It wasn't the only way girls were being left behind in Rwanda, she discovered.

When Butler arrived in Rwinkwavu, Rwanda, in 2007, she hadn't planned on starting a nonprofit called The Komera Project, which supports secondary education and provides life-skill mentoring and sport coaching for girls. With a background in international education, Butler was visiting schools on behalf of the Boston-based nonprofit group Partners In Health.

But gender disparity was evident almost immediately. In Rwanda the education statistics for girls and young women are grim: Less than 15 percent go to secondary school, and less than 5 percent of that group continue on to university. Secondary education, which costs about \$200 a year for day school, \$500 for boarding school, and \$3,000 for university, is out of reach for most families. If money is available, Rwandans educate sons first.

As Butler talked with students she realized something. "One day this girl said to me, 'I'm 14 years old, and I know I'm not going to secondary school, and I'm feeling unmotivated to work in the classroom,'"

Butler recalls. "I sat there and thought, you know what? I would feel exactly the same way.... I walked away from that conversation thinking I should – and can – do something."

Butler, Canada's 2002 steeplechase national champion, had come to see the sport as a metaphor for life: You encounter obstacles, but if you push through and finish, you feel a sense of accomplishment. Out of that wisdom came an idea: Host Rwanda's first fun run for girls.

To her surprise, 300 girls turned out to participate. As the girls took off from the

figure out how to keep her there.

The experience of a Komera student named Janivere crystallized why. As an orphan who earned her keep as a house girl with a foster family, getting to school on time and finishing homework was difficult. She needed to go to boarding school.

By 2010, Komera had expanded into a holistic program. Now all of its scholars are in boarding school, where they work with mentors, exercise daily, and attend leadership workshops during breaks.

"From the get-go, Margaret is about the effect we can have on one girl and how we can change her life – not on the large numbers but having an impact," says Komera board chair David Boehmer.

Seventy girls are in the program. Eighteen have already graduated. One has become a policewoman; another is a teacher; two are working at a local business; four are heading to university. The scholars also learn how to address local issues. One group has encouraged women farmers to learn how to weave baskets and bracelets so they aren't dependent only on their crops. The parents of Komera students themselves have started businesses growing mushrooms and raising goats.

"Margaret is really making a difference because she is empowering these women who also have visions for others," says Claudine Humure, who first met Butler in Rwanda as a student and has close ties with Komera. "So in a way she is changing the whole country."

Butler no longer scares rural children when she passes by. "When I go to Rwanda with Margaret and we walk through these villages," Mr. Boehmer says, "the girls run up to her and call her 'Mother.'"

■ Learn more at www.komera.org.



ADAM AMOROSO

SETTING THE PACE: Margaret Butler, executive director of Komera, runs with Komera scholars in Rwinkwavu, Rwanda.

starting line, cheers of "komera!" – meaning "be strong" – lifted above the crowd.

Inspired by the turnout, Butler reached out to friends and family asking for donations to fund girls' education. She raised \$2,000 – enough to support 10 girls for one year in day school.

But that was only the beginning. By 2009, she had established Komera, based in Boston, as a nonprofit scholarship fund.

Official runs called the Komera Global Run now happen every June in four US cities. But Butler soon realized it wasn't enough to put a girl in school; you have to

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