Social work professor Fred Ssewamala finds creative ways to help his fellow Ugandans

By Ginger Otis

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He further notes that AIDS orphans “are among the highest risk children in Ugandan society. We know that once they get through the child ailment, money in the bank. It gives them a feeling of control and empowerment and on some level alleviates some of their anxiety about the future.”"SUUBI—which means ‘hope’ in Luganda, one of many indigenous languages spoken in Uganda—encourages families to set aside educational funds for orphaned children by promising to double whatever amount has been accumulated by the time the child arrives at secondary school (around eighth grade). But there are some caveats. The money must be held in a separate savings account that the program helps them to open at an early age and the child must be a signatory on the account so that relatives can’t withdraw the money independently.

With the $20,000 in seed money he received last summer, Ssewamala was able to sign up 101 families for his pilot program. All of them received school books and information on the importance of finishing high school and saving money; but 51 families funnelled their savings to a school meal program, also got bank accounts and the promise of double matching funds. They were allowed to save a maximum of $10 per month.

When the project ran its course, Ssewamala saw results beyond even his best expectations. "I believed that Ugandans would do well with saving, because in our culture, if you have a bit of extra money, we buy a cow or a goat—we invest in an asset we feel will later sell if something goes wrong. So the concept was there," he says. "But I wanted to get people used to the idea of banks, and what I saw was that the families quickly started to think of money not saved as money lost, because they knew that at the end of the project, I would give them double whatever they’d kept."

An added unforeseen benefit was the way that orphaned children were inspired by the promise of a continuing education, began writing letters to long-lost relatives and friends asking for contributions to their bank accounts. In a small way, Ssewamala believes, that is helping to restore faith in the family networks that have cracked under the strain of the epidemic.

Commenting on Ssewamala’s pioneering research, GS&W dean Jeanette Takamura says that she was particularly interested in bringing him to the school of social work “because his work has enormous applicability to communities in developing nations all over the world, and to at-risk populations right here in the United States.”

She adds that the Ugandan will “play an important role in helping the social work school develop its mission for the 21st century.”

Ssewamala for his part says he looks forward to helping GS&W become more focused on international issues, says in line with President Bollinger’s goal of internationalizing the University and GS&W’s agenda to help achieve.

Noting that his ambitions extend beyond the boundaries of Uganda, he says that although he’d like to be running bigger and more ambitious projects—helping others in Uganda, he says that one day he’d extend beyond the boundaries of the country. “But the University and GS&W’s mission for the 21st century."

Ssewamala knows that all of his friends will have one thing in common. I aim to go home in poverty, so that people can look and see beyond the numbers and theories. Poverty persists because of institutional failures, not individual failures."