

# **F**IRST STEP INITIATIVE

*S*MALL GIFTS. *B*IG CHANGES.

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## First Quarter Newsletter 2017

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### Recently Funded

#### Carrots Project

Five women supporting a total of 33 dependents buy and sell fresh carrots. A grant from FSI enabled a six-fold increase in their business volume. A wonderful reminder of what happens when we reach across to each other.



#### Chicken Coop Project

A group of five women with 16 dependents, seen here with FSI staff member Nancy, are chicken farmers. Some of their chickens are sold to restaurants. They are using their FSI grant to build a bigger, better chicken coop and increase the number of chickens they are raising, thereby increasing the profitability of their operation.



#### Hens Project

This collective of three women supports 20 dependents. They have an existing business of buying and selling live hens. The FSI grant supplemented the women's investment of their own capital to enable a five-fold expansion of their volume and profits.



#### Beef Sales Project

The grant recipients are a collective of three women supporting 23 dependents. Part of the group is pictured here. These women started a new business selling beef. Their previous experience was doing laundry although one member has sold beef. Their grant allowed them to procure a business location and to purchase a freezer, a generator and an initial supply of beef. Their great hope is that with their improved financial situation, they are able to send their children to school.



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### Sewing Trade School Update

In January the secondclass of four women began their training at the sewing trade school. This 12 week program runs through the end of March. Brief biographies of the four students are below.

1. **Rachel** is 23 years old, married and the mother of two young children (a boy 2.5 years old and a girl seven months old). Her husband is supportive of her involvement at the workshop. She hopes that this training will help her attend to the needs of her home.
2. **Betty** is 38 years old, divorced and has no children. She would like to apply her new sewing skills to make and sell clothes at the local market and in her neighborhood.
3. **Rachel** is 40 years old, married and the mother of seven children (ages 18, 16, 11, 9, 7, 5 and 2). Her husband is supportive of her taking this training. She has no formal training in sewing but has done crafts and sewing at home. She, too, hopes to sew clothing to sell in the local market.
4. **Marvel** is 21 years old and single. Her mother has died and her father is unemployed. She is one of nine children. She wants to learn how to sew to meet the needs of her siblings and to make clothing for resale.

We are starting to see results from our first graduating class at the sewing school. They are currently selling baby dresses in the local market. While volumes are low, they are increasing month over month and the profit margins are good. The political instability in the DRC and the collapse of their currency has complicated their efforts immensely. Mireille, our sewing instructor, provides on-going support to the graduates.



### **Janet Bokwa House - Location of our Sewing Trade School**

Janet Bokwa House opened in the summer of 2016. It is a long-term residence for girls owned and operated by Kimbilio, our sewing trade school partner. Janet Bokwa House provides a home for street girls whose circumstances make reintegration with their families unlikely.

The home has the capacity to house ten girls. It currently houses eight girls and a baby, the child of one of the girls who became pregnant during her time on the streets. The building has three bedrooms, each of which sleeps two or four girls in bunkbeds, shower and toilet rooms, a living room, and the sewing workshop which is accessed through a separate entrance. Cooking is done in front of the house using a charcoal fueled brazier in the traditional Congolese way.

The sewing workshop started serving the resident girls when the Janet Bokwa House opened. It has two hand sewing machines, a treadle sewing machine, three electric machines and two overlockers. It holds a range of smaller equipment (scissors, threads etc.) and a locked storage room, as security is extremely important in the Congo.

Now, the sewing workshop serves two audiences. It continues to serve the resident girls, and in partnership with FSI, serves as a sewing trade school for women from the community. For the girls, sewing could provide a means for support after leaving the House. For the women, the new sewing and business skills offer an additional resource for augmenting their families' incomes and living standards.

Kimbilio is a Congo Children Trust project which works in association with the Anglican Church in the DR Congo. More information about Kimbilio can be found [here](#). More information about Congo Children Trust can be found [here](#).

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### Political Uncertainty in DRC

Political uncertainty continues in DRC. An agreement reached in December to hold elections in 2017 is unraveling following the death of Etienne Tshisekedi, the 84-year-old opposition leader. Tshisekedi died in early February while in Brussels for medical treatment. The DRC's budget minister now says that the country cannot afford to hold the elections as the treasury is empty. This crisis in the transition of power developed in December when Joseph Kabila, president since 2001, refused to step down upon completion of his second term. International pressure and pressure from the Catholic Church forced the December agreement.

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### FSI Website Goes Bilingual

The FSI website is now available in French and English, extending the website's effectiveness, particularly inside DRC as French is their official language. Many thanks to volunteers Ruth Caldwell, a retired Luther College professor of French and long-time friend of FSI, and Peter Sohn, our resident webmaster, for making this happen. A tremendous expansion of our outreach!

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### Recent Events

Over 50 people attended our ***Congolese Dinner***, Friday, February 3 at Unity Unitarian Church in St. Paul. This was an opportunity to learn more about the DRC and hear directly from Board member Violette Mpagazihe about the trip she and Board member Becky Jasper made to Lubumbashi last summer. While there, they reviewed our projects, met many women from the collectives that have received funding, and strengthened our connection with our DRC staff.

The program began with a presentation from Lubumbashi-born, long-time USA resident Albert Nyembwe. Mr. Nyembwe spoke to the group about the daily realities of life for most Congolese. There are a few very wealthy people and many extremely poor people. Government investment in social services is extremely limited and there is a near absence of a giving-community in the DRC. Consequently, basic infrastructure (schools, roads, banking regulation, medical care) is practically non-existent. He eloquently emphasized the importance of outside aid. The dollars we invest in the DRC are critically important to the women we are assisting and their families.

***Afro Deli*** provided the food. Yum! This socially responsible restaurant weaves together business with community and African, Mediterranean and American cultures. All dishes are made fresh and prepared Halal. As their web-site states, they "hope to reach causes far and wide and truly walk the talk of community reinvestment." Try either their St Paul or Minneapolis location! You'll be glad you did.

On March 8, we sponsored a **viewing of *The Man Who Mends Women***, in partnership with the Film Society of Minneapolis St Paul's St Anthony Main Theatre. This documentary tells the story of Dr. Denis Mukwege, a Congolese physician who has spent nearly 20

years treating women who are victims of sexual violence. One consequence of the 1994 Rwandan genocide has been continuing conflict in the north east of the DRC, due to citizens fleeing those atrocities and guerillas eluding capture who crossed the border into the DRC.

Rape and brutality have become regular elements of a continuing guerilla war, with devastating consequences for the local population. Dr. Mukwege has received international recognition for his work, including the 2014 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

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### Mining in the DRC

The DRC's mineral wealth provides many of the rare resources needed to build today's digital equipment. A recent [news release from Sky News](#) highlighted the children who work in this labor-intensive industry. The work of FSI in bolstering household income, keeping families together and children in school is one way to combat such exploitation.

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### Mother's Day - May 14th

This year, express your love for your mother by supporting mothers in the DRC. Donate \$20 or more and we will send your mother a card with your personalized message and FSI's DRC women working pin. The lives of most DRC women and young girls are physically demanding. Many develop great skill carrying large and heavy loads on their neck, shoulders, and head. FSI produced this pin in acknowledgment. Click [HERE](#) to make a donation and to provide your mother's name and address.



**\*\*\*Respond by May 5 so your card, message and pin can arrive by Mother's Day.\*\*\***

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Make lasting change.  
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