Former Orphan Provides Safe-Haven for Street Kids  
by Kem Knapp Sawyer

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The boy is crouched over in the back of a van. Drops of blood from the cut on his head stain his shirt—he’d been hit with a bottle when he got into a fight. Stanislas Lukumba, a tall, good-looking, fortyish nurse, checks for shards of glass as the driver shines his cell phone on the wound.

For the last eight years, Stanislas has made nightly runs in the van, a mobile clinic that operates in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo. He stops in neighborhoods where street kids hang out, and those in need come inside the van for help.

Kapeta Benda Benda accompanies him, but his mission is different. When the van stops, Kape, as he likes to be called, gets out and talks to the street children he meets. He asks them how they spent their day, what they had to eat, what their problems are. If they want to talk, he listens.

Tonight Grace Lambila, an intern, is with him. She meets Fundi, a 13-year-old boy who tells her he was born and raised in Lubumbashi. A year ago his mother took him and his sister to Kinshasa where she planned to join the children’s father, but they discovered he had taken another wife. Fundi’s mother returned to Lubumbashi, leaving the children with their father, but after being mistreated, Fundi’s sister went to their uncle and he ran away to live on the streets. Fundi hopes his uncle will raise enough money to send them back to their mother. He likes school, especially math, history and science, and is eager to return to his eighth grade class.

Kape and Grace let these kids know they will take them to a shelter if they want to go. The shelter is run by ORPER (Oeuvre de Reclassement et de Protection des Enfants de la Rue), an organization that provides aid, and sometimes a home, to street children. But it usually takes several encounters with Kape and Grace before any of the street kids trust them enough to let down their defenses.

As a boy, Kape was abandoned by his parents, and lived on the streets until he was taken in by ORPER when he was 10. Founded in 1981 by a Catholic priest, ORPER runs “open” centers where children are free to come and go, and “closed” centers where they are watched more closely.
Kape brings boys to an open center on Popokabaka Avenue in the Kasa-Vubu neighborhood, headed by Annette Wanzio who has worked with street children for 20 years, 12 of them at this center. The boys, ages 6 to 18, have a place to shower, to eat, to sleep, and to learn.

Many of the children who come to the center have been accused of witchcraft; when fathers take second wives, they often don’t have enough money to feed all the children, and the second wife must make a choice—so she will sometimes make false accusations to get rid of her new stepchildren. In addition, Annette says, these children are used to living from lie to lie. She aims to create a climate of trust, to get to know them, to teach reading, to organize games. If they go back to live on the streets she tells them they are always welcome to come back, especially if they get sick.

“In Africa,” Annette says, “children belong to everyone—an uncle, an aunt. A child is a jewel.” She and others at ORPER work hard to place children with their extended families, which can sometimes take years or fail entirely; of every 100 children who come through the center, only 40 return to their families. “Sometimes families say, ‘Well, they’re doing well, so why should they return to us?’” she adds.

At the center children are given a decent meal, one they cook themselves under supervision. They can play rugby; sing in a chorus; study reading, writing, and arithmetic. Christian Matondo takes remedial classes during the day and works in a parking lot at Place Victoire at night. He makes around $3 a day, enough to buy extra food. Ariel Irelle, 13, also goes to Place Victoire to beg. On most days he makes around $1.50. Other children at ORPER earn money by reselling plastic bags they found in the trash, or work as prostitutes. Some drink alcohol or dissolve Valium in Primus beer, shake it, drink it, follow with cannabis, and repeat the sequence. They do this, Annette explains, so that they can forget.

“We have a problem here,” she adds. “The more we’ve done, the more we have to do. In 2006, there were 13,500 street kids in Kinshasa. Now, according to Unicef estimates, there are more than 20,000.”

Sister Stella Ekka was born near Calcutta and has worked for 17 years at a girls’ closed center, Home Maman Souzanne, also in the Kasa-Vubu neighborhood. She supervises 23 girls, ages 6 to 15. “I’m not worn out,” she said. “It makes me sad to see children on the road. I must do something.”

A few of the girls at the center suffered from physical or sexual abuse and had run away from home. Some were abandoned by parents too poor to support them. Still others had been accused of witchcraft after falling ill.

At night the girls sleep in two rooms under the watchful eye of a night guard. Sister Stella says they desperately need mosquito nets. The girls have few possessions—a change of clothes, a school uniform. They share 30 books, some crayons, a doll, and a game of Scrabble. One room has a TV.

Sister Stella takes great pride in the girl who got a job in a bank, the one who married a doctor, and a young woman who went to another country. “That makes me happy. That
encourages me,” she said.

Another girl who is now at the center also gives Sister Stella reason to hope—a girl who barely said a word when she first arrived.

T. lives at the center and goes to the afternoon session at the Lycée Kasa-Vubu where she studies French. She is in tenth grade but is unsure of her age. She came to the center on her own four years ago after some other girls on the street told her about it. When she lived with her mother she was accused of witchcraft and often beaten, sometimes for no reason and once for breaking a porcelain plate while doing the dishes. In the evening her mother would leave her and her brother alone, giving them both medicine to make them sleep so that she could work as a prostitute. After T. came to the center her mother died of AIDS. Her brother now also lives in a closed center. They do not know who their father is.

At Home Maman Souzanne, T. helps prepare the food for the girls and she goes to the market to buy vegetables and fish. She washes clothes and takes care of the young ones. “I want to be a TV journalist,” she says, “so I can report on my country’s living conditions.”