

Transforming Children

An Interview with
Mama Sarah Obama, Mama Sarah Obama Foundation

EDITORS' NOTE *The Mama Sarah Obama Foundation is the realization of a long-held dream of Mama Sarah Obama. The foundation was established after years of hard work helping orphans and poverty-stricken families feed and educate their children. With the AIDS epidemic ravaging sub-Saharan Africa over the past three decades and leaving many children without parents, Mama Sarah turned her attention to addressing the educational and welfare needs of orphans in Kogelo village. Mama Sarah used her own resources and relentlessly worked with community leaders to meet the dire needs of these orphans. In 2009, the Mama Sarah Obama Foundation was formed.*



Mama Sarah Obama

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Mama Sarah Obama Foundation (msof.org) is a charitable nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the education and welfare of disenfranchised children in order to help them successfully achieve their goals and have a better future. This mission will be accomplished by providing early childhood education, offering primary and secondary education, and sponsoring the Mama Sarah Scholarship Fund for Higher Education. They envision a world where children are nurtured and supported physically, educationally, and emotionally to thrive and succeed in life. The purpose of Mama Sarah's Legacy Plan is to raise the initial \$250,000 for the \$12-million School Campus with a hospital for the community. Those wishing to support the legacy plan can do so via Twitter at @_msof and via facebook.com/MamaSarahObamaFoundation, and by donation via the website or by contacting the Encino office.*

What is your vision behind creating the Mama Sarah Obama Foundation?

It was a result of the lifestyle that I was seeing in my neighborhood in Kogelo where the children go to school, but most of them have been orphaned through AIDS that has killed both of their parents. That prompted me to call them into my homestead whenever I could just to feed them so they could continue their schooling. The true goal is to enact my Legacy Plan, which features a school campus and a hospital.

With all the need, what are your priority items?

The main priority is education and helping young women. This work did not come about just

with the advent of AIDS – this started long before that. When he was nine years old, I would take Barack Obama Sr. on my bike about nine kilometers to a primary school way off my homestead. I would do this every day so he could get an education that I was denied, which was very challenging. So the purpose behind the foundation started a very long time ago for me.

What type of education system are you hoping to build?

My main focus is to put in instructors and systems that will help children acquire education, but I'm seeking a world-class education that is comparable to any education system anywhere. This is the legacy that I would like to leave behind.

That is a significant goal and there are many challenges you have to face as you work to achieve it. What steps are you taking to put those structures in place?

My first step is that I have acquired a piece of land on which I would like to develop a primary school. I would like to start with an early childhood development center where we can start mentoring children and give them early learning opportunities. From there, they can scale up to secondary school and then go on to university. I have already personally supported a few children who have gone on to university.

Where will the funding come from?

I'm looking for support from foundations as well as individuals. Right now, in Kenya, the foundation is being well supported by a few corporate entities, which are key to helping us realize this dream, but we are in need of major funding for this project.

I'm always, however, looking for more help. I'm 94 years old now and living on borrowed time. In the short time I have left, I would like to see if this can be put together as my legacy and my dream. I'm asking all the well wishers to help me realize my legacy plan.

Is there support from the government of Kenya?

The support from the Kenyan government right now is good – part of our delegation even includes the wife of the Governor of Siaya County, Rosella Rasanga. There are many people who are helping us put together this effort.

But the support from the government might not be realized immediately. They have committed to help because part of what I'm doing deals with the responsibility of the education system of the government. But it has been agreed that we should work together as a private/government partnership that will

enhance and support the local government's efforts to realize their dream of providing a great education to these young people.

In addressing education in a place like Kenya, don't you also have to focus on health and family?

In most cases, these are all interlinked. Even as we look at an early childhood development center, there is a whole aspect of health that comes into play. So I'm also looking into the aspect of promoting and supporting health services for children and women.

I have already set up two classrooms for children. We are also focused on the aspect of sanitation and I have had help in that regard from higher resources.

In addition, I'd like to create a revolving fund that wouldn't cut into the foundation to help identify and support the needy children that will be coming through this foundation.

Part of what the foundation does is to maintain a broad focus on how to accomplish our objectives. So while our immediate goal is to establish an early childhood development center, we also want to develop a primary and secondary school. For those who do not go to university straight out, I'm thinking of building a vocational training center within the complex that will equip them with skills.

Is it challenging to find the teachers you need?

Yes, but the Minister of Education is taking steps to train teachers for early childhood education, so that is becoming available. The manpower is available, but finding the resources to maintain it is part of the challenge that we need to address.

How much does this project mean to you personally?

I'm very passionate about the importance of children acquiring quality education from their earliest days. I also want to challenge what I see, which is that there are very bright children who have the ability to become the best that they can be in life if they only have some opportunities made available to them.

Coupled with that, many of these children come from families that cannot afford to do anything; some don't even have shelter. So through my efforts, I want to offer some shelter for some families and help them acquire housing and food.

The First Lady of Kenya visited our foundation three months ago and supports us in making sure that our work keeps going.

I have been getting support locally and I'm very passionate about transforming children so they can realize their full potential and overcome their challenges. ●