

Meet Mama Jane from Rwanda

by Martha Vetter



Many of you may have recently heard of “Sister Jean,” the 98-year-old former nun who serves as the chaplain for the University of Loyola basketball team. During Loyola’s amazing run in the NCAA basketball tournament, Sister Jean was a fixture on the courtside, encouraging and praying for her team. She must have had a hotline to heaven. Loyola, a virtual unknown before March Madness, made it to the Final Four!

Most of you have probably not heard of “Mama Jane.” In Rwanda, a mother is given the name of one of her children. A mother often receives the name of her oldest child. For example, Ellen O’Dell would be named “Mama Lily.” But in a case like Jeff and Kristin Miller, who moved here from Beaufort when their two oldest were out of the nest, Kristin would be known as “Mama Corabet” or “Mama Josiah.”

Mama Jane has lived a long, hard life. And it just got a lot harder. Her daughter Jane recently died of AIDS. Jane left four young children. The two oldest are boys and the two youngest are girls. You can see them in the picture above. Here, they are with Godfrey Karema, the director of the Dufatanye Cooperative, the project with which I now serve.

Mama Jane has a desperate look with hollow cavities under her dark, forlorn eyes. Her frail hands and long fingers reveal a life filled with difficult work and few rewards. Her grandchildren, seated next to her, have never attended school and have never even worn shoes. They have little food and, in a recent storm, the outhouse that we had built for them caved in!

Godfrey and others at the Dufatanye Cooperative are trying to help Mama Jane. We have plans to rebuild their toilet. We have bought them two mattresses on which to sleep and uniforms for the boys so that they can attend school. Our cows are providing one liter of milk for them each day. We have planted bananas and sweet potatoes near their home and are providing a steady supply of rice, maize flour, and sugar. We have also dug and planted a “kitchen garden.” This garden is shaped like a multi-layer birthday cake. It’s placed near the home (unlike many larger gardens that are located some distance away). Mama Jane can easily access the vegetables that grow there.

One of the primary goals of relief and development work is to help families become sustainable. And I say “Amen” to that. But sometimes, families just need a way to climb back on their feet, with or without shoes! Mama Jane and her family are in this second category. When Jesus challenged his followers to help the poor, he didn’t judge them according to whether they could become sustainable. He simply challenged his disciples (and this includes us!) to give to the poor, to help the orphans, to treat the sick, and to visit the prisoners. May we obey our Lord and willingly follow his example.