



**BANANA
OF HOPE**
WIDOWS
SELF-HELP
GROUP
MBITA, KENYA
BANANAOFHOPE@YAHOO.COM

"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." -- Jeremiah 29:11 (NIV)



Hope for Widows Along the Shores of Lake Victoria

Mbita, Kenya, lies on a narrow peninsula reaching out into magnificent Lake Victoria, along the far western edge of the country. Lake Victoria, the headwaters of the White Nile, is the world's second largest freshwater lake. On a less glamorous note, Mbita is at the epicenter of the Kenyan AIDS pandemic, with approximately 65% of the adult population infected with HIV. As men die off, widows and orphans are left to fend for themselves. Many turn to prostituting themselves to HIV-infected fishermen in exchange for fish. But a group of widows, headed by Margaret Nyangi, has begun to turn the tide by developing a future for themselves through their love of basketry and the dried leaves of the local banana plant. Margaret tells their story:

Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help Group was formed from the widows' wing of Talanta Women Group, a group formed by women who specialized in craftsmanship for the economic empowerment of women. 'Talanta' is a Swahili word for talent.

A section of the membership of Talanta discovered that they had an important factor in common. This was the fact that they were widows. They developed a very strong bond of love among them that eventually resulted in the formation of the widows' wing in the group. As the membership of this wing widened and the level of activity rose, the impact of this bond was fully seen in the year 2000, when Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help Group was born within the Talanta Women Group. The Group got registered as an autonomous group — independent from Talanta — by the Kenyan Government in the same year.





A love of fine banana fibre basketry

Of all the skills learned at Talanta, one unique thing that the bond of love among these widows created was their common love for basketry. Thus, Banana of Hope, at its formation, specialized in basketry and derived its name from their main raw material, banana fibre. The banana plant was therefore seen as a means of the restoration of economic hope to the widows; hence the name Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help Group.

Reaching out to others in the community

After its registration, the group widened its scope of membership to include single mothers, divorced women, separated women and physically disabled women. Women under these circumstances in Mbita often suffer isolation, poverty, lack of land ownership and severe food insecurity. Hence, in the same year of its registration, the group decided to further widen the scope of its membership to include widowers and even men facing similar social problems.

Supporting the orphans

In spite of its dedication to hard work, this group has continued to suffer from financial inability to satisfactorily implement some of its objectives, mainly the orphan support objective. Given that all the wid-

ows function as foster parents and have thus the responsibility of looking after the children's welfare and education, the need for finances has a very strong impact on the activities of the group.

A source of income to fund an alternative future for people affected by HIV/AIDS

The group has engaged in a behavioral change campaign as a means of curbing the spread of HIV/AIDS and reducing the swelling number of widows in the district around Mbita. The group has done this mainly through the provision of an alternative

source of income (basketry and craftsmanship) to prevent widows from moving to the fish landing beaches of the District. These fish landing beaches have become a haven for widows and orphans in pursuit of fish business and prostitution as the only ready means of income after losing their breadwinners (husbands and fathers). This has in the past really fueled the spread of the scourge since the women and girls were forced into unsafe sex in exchange for fish; the fish would be sold with strings attached — i.e. No sex, no fish and thus no business.



Margaret Achieng' Nyangi: Chairperson of Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help Group



My name is **Margaret Achieng' Nyangi**, widow and a mother of six children. I am a born again Christian from a small village near Mbita.

I became a widow in 1998 when my husband died, leaving me with six children, who were all still in school. I did not know what to do or how to go about it all since I was also ailing off and on. In fact, when my husband died, many people thought I was the one who had passed away since my husband was not sick. I had already been taken for surgery three times following the discovery of some malignant growth in my appendix. I had also been taken for radiation therapy. Following this history of complicated ill health, I have been unable to do certain heavy duties like digging; but I thank God, who healed me.

The church stood with me and showed a lot of concern and love over my situation: They transported the body of my husband from the Lake, where he had died, to our home, where family members assisted in burying him.

After his burial, I returned to Mbita where my children were pursuing education. Life here turned out to be very bitter and harsh since things were never the same as they had been before the demise of my husband. We would go without food at

times and paying rent was a big nightmare. Friends would occasionally bring us food. As much as this helped, it was not enough since the children needed school fees as well. Many people incited the landlord to throw us out. In several instances, he came with a mindset to throw us out, but I kept lifting my plight to the Lord whom I serve and finally the landlord relented to let us stay on.

I continued seeking God's face in prayer until a time came when He opened an opportunity and a mind to start up a store for hand-crafts where I started weaving and selling baskets. I combined this with plaiting and braiding ladies' hair, which is another skill I had learned earlier in life.

Getting raw materials for basket weaving posed quite a problem since I needed money to be able to get this rolling, yet this was scarce and rare coming by. At times, I went to banana plantation farmers to request them to allow me to prune their bananas for banana fibre. This entailed working in very bushy farms along the lakeshore, infested with very dangerous snakes; but the hand of God covered me. I suffered not a single bite in spite of the fact that I met and even held several snakes in the course of duty! It was rare finding women who could dare going into such places; many people saw me for crazy. But I was never afraid since I knew the protection I was under: the blood of Jesus Christ.

“... I was never afraid since I knew the protection I was under: the blood of Jesus Christ.”

It is amidst these tough times that God brought to Mbita two of His servants — Don and Nancy Richards, the founders of the Kenya Islands base of Youth With a Mission (YWAM).

They identified my products as of good quality and they developed a lot of interest in my work. They would buy my products from time to time and even introduced many of their friends and visitors

from the United States of America to my workshop. Time and again they would buy my products for use at their base and even carry some back home with them to the USA. They even went a mile ahead and sponsored one of my children's schooling by paying his school fees.

In 1999, a team of missionaries visited Kenya Islands Base of YWAM and saw some of my products at the base. They developed a lot of interest in the products and requested to be introduced to the artisan who made them. I was called to the base to meet them and I met a very happy and friendly team led by Carolyn Giles. They bought my products and took them home with them but promised to communicate back with me.

Little did I know that they were interested in creating some market for my products in the U.S. These missionaries kept our communication line alive and in a short while, Carolyn Giles wrote saying that she had found an organization that was interested in knowing whether I could produce in bulk. I answered in the affirmative but I was not very sure of the quantity they would order and whether I could really meet their needs.

My missionary friends advised me to form a group if I could and train its members on the same skills I had so as to be able to do bulk and timely production. This, they said, would help me meet deadlines.

In the year 2000, we formed Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help

Group that specialized in making baskets and other products woven from banana fibre. I announced the formation of the new group in Christian churches, asking widows and orphans to join us in the group so that they could train and earn themselves a source of income from their skills. The response was very good. In two months' time, Banana of Hope was born and registered with twenty-five members.

Our missionary friends sent in some money in support of our move to assist us in getting some raw materials for the training and to pay some subsistence for the widows, who would stay out of their homes the whole day in pursuit of training in spite of the responsibility they had back there of taking care of these families as sole bread winners.

Thanks to financial assistance and encouragement from Eugene Seals and Carolyn Giles, the tough training period was passed smoothly. We currently have a strong self-help group consisting of born-again Christians. We have lively fellowship in the group as we begin our work sessions in prayer and end every working day in prayer too. It is wonderful that the group has turned out to be a source of spiritual inspiration; many widows and orphans join the group knowing nothing about being a Christian but turn into born-again saints of the Lord upon joining.

The group has also been a point for behavioral change since the ladies now have an alternative to the old tradition of taking to the beaches in search of fish as the only

business they can find for an easy source of livelihood. The fish business has been an agent in the spread of HIV/AIDS, however, since fish is often sold to the widows and orphans at the fish landing beaches with strings attached: No sex, no fish. The group has thus participated a lot in ensuring that they are not exposed to the dangers of getting infected by the deadly virus at the beaches.

Since we currently only have one external outlet for our products, the group is faced with fears of collapse since the income from the craftsmanship has fallen following low sales. It is our humble prayer that God will touch the hearts of many to like these high-quality products. We have always prayed blessings upon these products that God may bless all those who purchase them and their households at large.

Through this work, God has blessed me with a piece of land within Mbita, which I trust to use to build my own home through God's provision.

I cannot forget to thank God for bringing into my life other people like John and Judi Patterson, who have stood with me in prayer and from time to time even moral and financial support. This is a family that has visited the group on several occasions and once even hosted a party for the group at a three star hotel! May God continue to abundantly bless them.



I currently also have two children who are ready to enroll in college and I trust God to provide for their fees. This I do because the word of God tells me that He does not start a thing without bringing it to accomplishment.

May God bless all of you who read this story. For you who are sister widows, be encouraged in the knowledge that God knew you before you were born and thus before you were widowed. Never give up! God does mighty things and He is the husband to all widows. He will never forsake you!

Margaret Achieng Nyangi
c/o Banana of Hope; P.O. Box 30 ;
Mbita, Suba District, KENYA
bananaofhope@yahoo.com

Banana of Hope Widows Self-Help Group
2008 Wholesale Price List

NOTE: PRICES ARE POINT-OF-SALE IN MBITA, KENYA AND DO NOT INCLUDE SHIPPING TO THE U.S.

Item	Item	Wholesale	Depth"	Width"	Length*	Other*
1	<i>Three Piece Round Fruit Service Container</i>	USD 8.	3"	—	—	9.5" (diameter)
2	<i>Three Piece Oval Fruit Service Container</i>	USD 13.	4"	10.5"		16" (diameter)
3	<i>Three Piece Oval Service Tray</i>	USD 12.	2"	8.5"	14"	—
4	<i>Three Piece Round Service Tray</i>	USD 12.	3"	—	—	11.5" (diameter)
5	<i>Six Hemmed Table Mats</i>	USD 13.	—	—	—	8" (diameter)
6	<i>Six Piece Oval Service Container</i>	USD 25.	6.5"	—	—	14.5" (diameter)
7	<i>Bread Basket</i>	USD 11.	2"	6.5"	13"	15.5" (handle)
8	<i>Six Piece Round Service Container</i>	USD 25.	7"	—	—	13" (diameter)
9	<i>Shopping Basket</i>	USD 14.	7"	10"	14"	18" (handle)
10	<i>Magazine Tote Basket</i>	USD 11.	—	14"	15"	18" (handle)
11	<i>Rose Handle Basket</i>	USD 9.	5.5"	5.5"	14"	10" (handle)
12	<i>Hemmed Oval Service Tray</i>	USD 9.	2"	7"	12"	—
13	<i>Lidded Flower Pot</i>	USD 9.	7"	—	—	7"
14	<i>Flower Pot</i>	USD 8.	7"	—	—	5.5"

*dimensions of largest piece in set,

