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Spotlight On:
Love One International's Work in Uganda

*Hannah Cannon*¹

I. INTRODUCTION

There are around twenty-one million children in the country of Uganda, making up about forty-six percent of the country's total population. This large population of children combined with the poverty, lack of food, and lack of medical support that is prevalent in the country has led to a disproportionately high mortality rate of children under the age of five in Uganda: around forty-one deaths for every 1,000 births. Love One International works to change this. Love One is a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that is based in Nashville, Tennessee and Gulu, Uganda. Residents of the remote villages of Uganda often find it difficult to get access to medical care. Knowing firsthand the difference that quality medical care, love, and support can make in children's lives, Love One International works to transport critically ill children in Uganda to hospitals where they can receive the medical care they need, provide a rehabilitation center where vulnerable children can recover from their illnesses and gain the strength they need to live long and healthy lives.

II. HISTORY OF LOVE ONE INTERNATIONAL

Love One International was founded in 2012 by Suzanne Mayernick. Mayernick is a Nashville native who spent years traveling to Uganda for service trips and eventually made life-long connections with members of the community there. In 2009, Mayernick and her husband adopted a child, Josie Love, from Uganda. Their daughter was three years old at the time, and suffering from malaria, tuberculosis, and was HIV positive. As she was going through the process of caring for a child with life-threatening illnesses, Mayernick realized how important it is to have access to nearby, reliable medical care. Josie Love soon became a strong and vibrant child after just a few months of receiving the critical support she needed. After seeing this transformation and what good medical care and rehabilitation could do for her child, Mayernick became committed to nurturing and caring for other sick children in Uganda.

Mayernick quickly recognized the difficulties the children and families in these villages face in obtaining access to life-saving medical care. Motivated by her Christian faith and a desire to serve Jesus, Mayernick knew she had to help solve this problem, so she tapped into the international connections she had made over the years, partnered with them and members in her own community, and soon started providing medical care to sick children in Uganda.

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III. MISSION AND PHILOSOPHY

Love One International believes that “no child should die from treatable conditions.” Because remote regions of Uganda do not have emergency services or easy access to medical care, many children are not able to get the care and support they need. The goal of the Love One community is to have parents know that medical treatment is available to their children – “no matter how sick their child and how hopeless the situation may seem.”

To achieve this, Love One partners with liaisons throughout the smaller communities in Uganda to locate children in remote villages who are in need of emergency, life-saving medical attention. As explained in more detail below, after these children are brought to their attention, the staff at Love One transports them to a local hospital to get the medical care they need, provides them with the love and resources necessary to fully rehabilitate, and helps them to transition to life back in their community. Once the children return home, Love One continues to provide them and their families with resources and connections necessary to sustain health and wellness and ensure the children do not become sick again.

IV. WHY THIS WORK IS NECESSARY

Love One’s work is extremely important in these remote villages simply because of how easily children in these areas can get sick, how quickly minor illnesses turn life-threatening, and the difficulty so many children face in obtaining adequate medical care.

A. Diseases Affecting Ugandan Youth

There are many reasons children in parts of Uganda face varying health problems, but it is largely due to a combination of a lack of infrastructure, poverty, unhealthy living conditions, and a lack of hygiene.

One of the major health issues children in certain areas of Uganda face is malnutrition. In the Northeast region of the country specifically, the climate is often too dry to produce an adequate amount of food, making food shortages a regular occurrence. Without easy access to food, malnourishment in children becomes all too common, causing their immunity to become very weak and turning even the smallest colds into debilitating and deadly diseases.

Another common disease that gravely affects Ugandan children in remote villages is cholera. In the remote villages, many households use contaminated and dirty water. Cholera is usually spread through the consumption of dirty water, particularly in these small villages, but because access to clean water is so difficult (due to poverty, a lack of infrastructure, and other limitations), the children usually have no alternatives, and suffer severe medical conditions as a result.

As if this were not enough, children in Uganda also frequently suffer from pneumonia, malaria, diarrhea, HIV and AIDS. Approximately 98,000 children between the ages of newborn to fourteen are currently struggling with HIV in Uganda (a

disproportionate number of which are females). What is so troubling about this is that many of these diseases are extremely treatable – if only the children were able to access the medical care and resources they needed.

B. Inadequacies of the Healthcare System in Uganda

The government healthcare system in the country is overwhelmed and underfunded. As it exists today, the government-provided healthcare system is decentralized and hierarchical. There are four different levels of facilities where members of the community can get treatment – as the levels increase, the services offered and adequacy of care increase, but accessibility decreases (due to a smaller number of higher-level treatment facilities). The main form of medical contact in remote villages is solely through Village Health Teams (VHT), which is comprised of volunteers whose role is to advise patients and refer them to higher-level healthcare centers. However, there are many villages that do not even have this access – either because the VHT does not exist in that particular village, or the members of the VHT do not have the basic drugs necessary to treat the common illnesses and diseases these children suffer from. Services at the government healthcare centers are supposed to be free, but often times a fee will still be charged or healthcare workers will extort money from desperate patients. Overall, there are simply not enough doctors, supplies, medicine, or locations of the government-funded healthcare facilities.

While there are some privately funded facilities in Uganda, the majority are for-profit. It is estimated that there are around 2,000 for-profit private healthcare facilities that do have the capabilities and resources to provide adequate care, however the vast majority are located in Kampala and the Central region of Uganda, with little to none in rural areas and the rest of the country. Even if a child is lucky enough to be able to get to one of these private for-profit facilities, a significant number of Ugandans are not able to afford the services offered, and therefore still do not have access to the care they need.

The inadequacies of the government healthcare system, and the high cost and sparse locations of the private systems, leads to a vicious cycle of children in desperate need of medical care who are consistently unable to receive the treatment they need.

V. HOW LOVE ONE WORKS

Love One has a comprehensive process for connecting with Ugandan children and providing each child with the care they need. It involves four steps: assessment, rehabilitation, resettlement, and follow-up.

A. Assessment

The first step in Love One's process of providing life-saving medical care to critically ill children is locating the children that need their help. New cases are usually reported to Love One staff on the ground in Uganda by government officials or community liaisons in the different villages nearby. Most of the children referred to and

treated by Love One are in such critical condition that they would likely die without immediate medical attention and treatment.

B. Rehabilitation

After the Love One team connects with a child, they go directly to the child and transport them to a local hospital where they can get the medical care they need. After that, the Love One team takes the child to the Love One Center where they are given the time, attention, and care to fully recover and regain their strength. At the rehabilitation center, the children are given balanced diets based on individualized nutrition plans, and long-term plans to care for the child are made.

Love One's end goal is always to get the children they work with settled back into their communities with their families. While the children are at the Center receiving care, the Love One team also works with their families to empower them with the resources and knowledge they need to care for their children once they return home. The Love One team educates families on the various needs their specific child will have after they return home – including everything from nutritional tips, to sanitation and hygiene habits. The team also teaches the child's parents a skill or trade (if they do not have one already) to put them in a better position to find a job and be able to provide their child with the necessary resources to sustain their health.

C. Resettlement

When the child is ready to return home to their community, the staff at Love One makes a comprehensive plan to ensure the children have a successful transition home. For children who belong to loving families that simply lack the funds and resources to adequately care for their children, the Love One team works to find jobs for the parents in their community based on their unique skill set. This allows the parents to work to provide for their family and continue to give their child the necessary support. Children who have been abandoned, have lost their family, or are unable to return home are resettled on a case-by-case basis. The Love One team works with each of these children individually to find loving and supportive foster families in the community.

D. Follow-up

Even after the child has successfully returned home or resettled in their community, the Love One team continues to check in on them. The staff in Uganda follows up with each child once every month to monitor their health and see how the child and their family are adjusting. After the child returns home, Love One continues to provide the family with ongoing nutritional education, as well as spiritual programs. This continued support and life-long connection ensures that the children remain happy and healthy even after leaving the Love One Center.

VI. HOW LOVE ONE MEETS THEIR GOALS

Love One International runs entirely from donated funds. To make this possible, Love One conducts numerous large-scale fundraising initiatives throughout the United States. These fundraising initiatives take different forms, including everything from partnering with Amazon Smile and different retail companies to give a percentage of sales to Love One, to selling their own merchandise with 100% of the proceeds going directly to the children they serve. Love One International also has a robust ambassador's program, where each year a select number of applicants are accepted to fundraise and increase awareness of the needs of children in Uganda.

In order to provide the necessary medical care on the ground in Uganda, Love One has partnered with OneWorld Health. OneWorld Health is another 501(c)3 nonprofit organization that focuses on filling the gaps left by government healthcare efforts in developing countries. OneWorld Health builds healthcare facilities in these areas and provides a full scope of medical services to members of the community. Because they are a nonprofit, OneWorld Health is able to provide more adequate healthcare services than the government-funded facilities and remain affordable for members of the community (unlike the private for-profit facilities). Children are also able to access the OneWorld Health facilities through the transportation and connections provided by Love One.

Love One uses its partnerships and the money raised to fund the Love One Center and an on-site staff. The staff does everything from working with community liaisons to identify critically ill children, to transporting those children to the local hospital and then to the Love One Center where they provide rehabilitative care and train their families on how to sustain the child's health in the long run.

VII. CONCLUSION

Love One International works every day to care for and give hope to part of the world's most vulnerable population. Children in remote Ugandan villages are affected by circumstances beyond their control, and Love One works to provide these children with the resources and care they need to live long and healthy lives. There are 231 remote villages in the district of Gulu, and so far, Love One has been able to serve four of them. Each year they are able to help more and more children – increasing from serving fifty-six children in 2018, to 116 in 2020. If Love One continues this trajectory, there is no telling how many lives the Love One team will be able to touch for the better.

While a lot of work still needs to be done to address the systemic problems facing the children in these areas, the work that Love One International does to provide these children and families with hope for the future is certainly a step in the right direction, and life-changing for so many individuals.

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