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PROFILE SISTER ANGÉLIQUE NAMAIIKA

The winner of this year's Nansen Refugee Award is Sister Angélique Namaika. Sister Angélique takes young people whose lives have been devastated by kidnap, violence and serial rape. She gives them the tools they need to reforge their sense of self, and build a future for themselves and their families.

TEXT: Hillary Heuler **PHOTO:** Anne Ackermann

Back to Life

Beaming from beneath her pink turban, her 1000-watt smile lighting up the room, Sister Angélique Namaika watches a small group of women as they gather around sewing machines and burst into song. They are traumatised women, having lived through unimaginable horrors at the hands of the brutal Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), which has terrorised this part of central Africa for years. But thanks to the tender care and unflagging courage of Sister Angélique, winner of the 2013 UNHCR Nansen Refugee Award, they and hundreds like them are rediscovering what it means to live and to stand on their own two feet.

Here in Province Orientale, in the north-eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), nothing can be taken for granted. Children from surrounding villages are regularly kidnapped from their classrooms, and marched into a nightmarish life in the forest as child soldiers or sex slaves. Some are forced to murder their own parents, or kill other children who try to escape. Homes are burned, women are raped and villagers are savagely mutilated by a Ugandan rebel faction that has been ravaging the region for decades.

BROKEN SOULS

In 2009 and 2010, such atrocities occurred on a daily basis. Hundreds of thousands of terrified civilians streamed into larger towns like Dungu, leaving everything behind in their desperate search for nights unpunctuated by gunfire and rebel attacks. Some girls came alone, having recently escaped captivity and traumatised by the rape, murder and brutality that had shattered their families and ripped apart their young lives. Dungu had become a town of broken souls, struggling to survive and somehow forget the horrors of the past.

Sister Angélique, a 46-year-old Catholic nun with a powerful social conscience, first arrived in Dungu in 2003 on a mission to help vulnerable women. She created Maman Bongissa, an organisation to train women in basic income-generating activities they could use to improve their lives.

But by 2008 the flood of newly arrived internally displaced per-

sons (IDPs) had become overwhelming. Moved by the raw need she saw in their eyes, Sister Angélique began to devote herself entirely to them.

"The need of IDP women was so huge," she recalls. "They had lived through terrible things in the bush. They needed to be approached by the community, and by someone who would give themselves entirely to them so that they could talk about everything they had lived through. That can be a kind of treatment for them, to help them come out of their isolation and their trauma."

Angélique Namaika

1967: Born in Lege, DRC

1997-2000: Studied African Spirituality at the Union Supérieure Majeure in Kinshasa

2000: Took her vows as a Catholic nun

2003: Arrived in Dungu and created Maman Bongissa

2007: Became the director of Dynamic Women for Peace

2009: Spent four months as an IDP due to an LRA attack on Dungu

2012: Renamed her association the Centre for Reinsertion and Development Support

2012: Travelled to the United States, Switzerland, the Central African Republic and Uganda as advocate for IDP protection and peace in the DRC

DIGNITY AND LABOUR

As she refocused her work, Sister Angélique found that displaced women needed more than just counselling. Without land or income, they struggled to feed themselves and their families, often resorting to unreliable and poorly paid day labour just to keep starvation at bay. What they needed, she found, was the same sort of professional training she had been providing to vulnerable women for years.

Maman Bongissa became Dynamic Women for Peace, helping women support their families by offering training, micro-credit and health care for their children. It was later renamed the Centre for Reinsertion and Development Support (CRAD) so as not to exclude men. Since 2003 the organisation has provided support to around 2,000 people, most of them displaced women and girls.

It wasn't easy at the beginning to convince the women to come for training. But word of the nun's generosity spread fast, and soon she found that hundreds of women were seeking her out. "When new people arrived, they would be told, 'Go find the sister, she'll take care of you,'" she says.

LITERACY AND RIGHTS

Since then, Sister Angélique's work has expanded to include an ever-growing number of activities, including sewing, community gardening, cooking, baking and pastry making. She also runs lit-



SMALL STEPS. By teaching the women practical skills, and listening to their stories, sister Angélique slowly helps them to rebuild their self-esteem.

eracy classes and discussions on women's rights, and has turned her three-room mud house into an orphanage for babies and small children. She shares her own bed with three orphaned infants. Yet Sister Angélique still finds time for individual counselling for displaced women and their husbands, lending a compassionate ear to their stories while gently pushing them to improve their lives.

It's a punishing daily routine. Sister Angélique typically gets up three times a night to feed the orphaned babies, then walks to church to attend the morning mass at 6:30am. She spends her day moving from project to project in Dungu, where she has become a familiar figure on the blue bicycle she rides along the dirt roads and muddy footpaths criss-crossing the IDP camps.

She never allows herself a moment's rest. "Even when I'm sick, I have to get well quickly so I can go back to the women," she laughs. But the nun's own needs, she claims, are nothing compared to those of the women she works with.

FROM BREAD TO BICYCLES

"There are a lot of things that women here don't have," she explains. "First, they are afraid. They have difficulty speaking in front of other women, and even more difficulty speaking in front of men. They have wonderful ideas, but they don't know how to express them. They drop out of school when they are children – many get pushed into early marriages, or suffer sexual abuse and get pregnant early."

Sister Angélique is adamant that the way to empower these women is through professional training, and literacy. "So many women have told me, 'The money I make from baking bread has helped me pay for my child's medical expenses, and now he is better.' Or, 'The money from bread helped me buy a bed for my house, or a bicycle.' It's so important that they get training," she says. "Because if these women are relying on hand-outs and have no way to earn money, the minute the hand-outs stop they will find themselves in the same poverty as before."

A CALLING

Sister Angélique was born in 1967 and grew up in Lege, around 500km from Dungu. She was a sickly child, loved and sheltered by her parents and siblings. But when she was nine years old she saw a German nun distributing medicine to the poor, and was struck by the woman's selfless generosity.

"I saw her there counting out the pills herself and asking people about their symptoms. And I said to myself, 'that sister is all alone, and she works so hard. I should become a nun too so I can help her.'" Sister Angélique nurtured her dream until the age of 25, when she went into training as a novice. She went on to study African spirituality for three years in Kinshasa, and finally took her vows in 2000.

She points to her profound faith as the engine that keeps her going. "The Lord identifies with those who suffer, so when I meet a suffering person I realise that it is God appearing before me asking for help. Even if I have to get up in the middle of the night for the sake of a smile or a small promise that might help someone, I have to do it," she says. "I trust in God, and it's He who gives me the courage and strength to keep on working."

DISPLACED

But Sister Angélique also knows, on a very personal level, what it means to be uprooted. In 2009, at the height of the LRA violence, attacks on Dungu itself forced the nun out of her house and into a crowded IDP encampment across the river.

"We were living practically in the open, with more than 30 people in one tent," she recalls. "When it rained, even if it was the middle of the night, you had to hold down the tarp to keep it from flying away with the wind. During the day you couldn't stay inside, because it was so hot that you'd sweat as though someone had poured water over your head. Even finding food was difficult, because there were so many of us there."

Sister Angélique lived for four months as an IDP, an experience



WARM WELCOME. Sister Angélique arrives in a village in North Kivu on her trademark sit-up-and-beg bicycle.

she says has helped her to understand and empathise with the women in a way she could not have done before.

"It wasn't easy for me. When I was in their place, if I had had no one to help me I don't know what would have become of me. This is why I really have to do everything I can for these women," she says.

FUNDING

Still, she faces more than her fair share of challenges. Although Maman Bongissa and CRAD have partnered from time to time with international organisations, such support comes and goes, and Sister Angélique struggles to keep her projects as self-sufficient as possible. Profits from selling bread, pastries and garden produce are used to buy fresh materials, and whatever is left over goes to the women themselves. Sister Angélique's own baking generates money to feed the orphans. But it isn't always enough.

"We have a lot of difficulties when it comes to funding. Sometimes I find that I really don't have any money left, so I write letters asking for help. Then I go from door to door," she says. "But since you can never force anyone to give for what you think is important, I work at making bread every day so we'll always have some money."

"LIKE MY OWN CHILDREN"

It is this compassionate and unflagging commitment to help that has forged such a strong bond between Sister Angélique and the women in her care. Many call her "mama," and they come from far and wide to lay their problems, fears and painful memories at her feet. "Things like rape are still taboo here. Many women who have been raped are ashamed to admit it," she explains. "But with me they will talk about it. I think this idea of 'mama' helps, because with your mother you don't hide anything."

It's a relationship that she takes very seriously, she says. "I always treat them like my own children, because I know that what

Nansen Refugee Award

First given in 1954, the UNHCR's Nansen Refugee Award goes to an individual, group, or organisation for outstanding work on behalf of the forcibly displaced.

The award consists of a commemorative medal and a US\$100,000 monetary prize to support a refugee project of the laureate's choice.

Norwegian Nobel peace prize laureate Fridtjof Nansen (1861-1930) was a polar explorer, scientist and humanitarian. Nansen became the League of Nations' first High Commissioner for Refugees. From 1920 to 1930, he directed the League's first major humanitarian operation, organising the return of 450 000 prisoners of war.

The partners of the Nansen Refugee Award ceremony are UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee Council, the Swiss Federal Council, the Government of Norway, the IKEA Foundation, the State Council of the Republic and canton of Geneva, and the Administrative Council of the City of Geneva.

The award is presented in Geneva each autumn. This year's award will be presented on the 30th of September at the Bâtiment des Forces Motrices.

they've lived through is really beyond the imagination of anyone who has not lived through it themselves."

In 2012 Sister Angélique travelled to New York and Washington DC to bear witness to what is happening in the DRC, and to plead for help for its people. While there, she spoke in front of the UN Security Council and the US Congress. And, she says, she had already seen things getting better. The LRA are not as active as they used to be, schools are being renovated and security in Dungu has improved. New buildings are going up in town, and the wounds are starting to heal.

CHILD SOLDIERS

Sister Angélique hopes that such changes will one day bring peace and prosperity to her tortured country, and for the families torn apart by war. Even, she says, for the LRA soldiers themselves.

"Those fighting in the bush are human beings as well. They are Ugandan children who were kidnapped like our children were kidnapped, who grew up in the bush and became the men that we now call the LRA," she says. "Our hope is that this story ends, because the women of Uganda are suffering just like the women of Congo. It's all our children who have suffered, and who continue to suffer."

The entire community is deeply scarred by years of terror. Sister Angélique is convinced that its survival depends on the health and happiness of its women.

"It's incredible to imagine what these women have lived through, what atrocities they have suffered. They need to be brought together, to be loved, to be able to forget a little bit what they have lived through. Otherwise we will have a lot of broken women, a lot of traumatised women. And if a woman is traumatised, the whole society is traumatised, because it's the women who give birth and the women who raise the whole community."

"If I manage to help only one woman to rediscover life," she says with a smile, "I will consider that I have succeeded." ■