REALITIES OF POVERTY
the resiliency of elders
Everyone craves connection

The elders in the Unbound sponsorship program remind us that the need for human interaction and the support of a caring community are things we never outgrow.

Learning from our elders

As the only major U.S.-based sponsorship organization to work with elders in the developing world, Unbound is seeking to learn from these often underappreciated survivors. They’ve already taught us much.

Being an example of courage

Sponsored elder Erastus in Kenya has lived through more struggle and heartache than anyone should in a single lifetime. But instead of becoming bitter, he has come to more deeply appreciate his blessings.

Reflection from the Unbound community

At a time when she needed it most, Unbound Kansas City staff member Janelle Stamm found an unexpected source of spiritual support in her sponsored elder.

Unbound is an international nonprofit founded by lay Catholics grounded in the Gospel call to put the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable first.

We build relationships of mutual respect and support that bridge cultural, religious and economic divides. We invite all people of goodwill to join us.
At Unbound we focus on relationships. In partnership with the families we serve, we build communities of trust, accountability, mutual learning and respect. When combined with financial support, the bonds of love formed between sponsors and sponsored friends and their families become pivotal to the success, improved health and happiness of those we serve. We believe the relationship thrives in part by its reciprocal nature. Both parties, sponsored friends and sponsors, blossom and benefit because of it.
While this connection is important for children and youth in their growth, it’s especially critical for elders as they cope with the social isolation that often comes with aging. And the problem of isolation is likely to grow as the world’s population gets older.

According to the 2015 U.N. “World Population Aging” report, “Virtually every country in the world is experiencing growth in the number and proportion of older persons in their population. Population aging — the increasing share of older persons in the population — is poised to become one of the most significant social transformations of the 21st century.”

In this issue of Living Unbound, we explore our distinctive and trailblazing approach to serving this aging demographic. Members of the Unbound community also share with us some of the blessings and challenges they’ve experienced along the way.

In Nairobi, sponsored elder Erastus demonstrates his determination in searching for a community of peace and acceptance. Unbound staff member Janelle Stamm recounts how she bonded with her late sponsored elder, Lucinda in Guatemala. Each account reveals real hopes and real hurdles. They confirm that the elderly have much to teach and much more to do. Improved quality of life and increased social interactions help them share their hard-earned gifts with others. We also take a look in this issue at steps we’ve taken to disrupt elder isolation, as well as introduce readers to how we’re seeking to measure our results.

Unbound strives to offer quality and necessary services for elders. Human connection remains an important aspect, one that requires the participation of sponsors, staff members, communities of sponsored individuals and their families, and countless others. ✩
Paulina in Nairobi, Kenya, is hard at work processing grain. Program benefits helped her improve her roof with iron sheets, so now she’s able to store her grains in her home after the harvest.
Salvación has been fiercely independent from a young age. When other girls her age were being forced into arranged marriages, Salvación left home to avoid marrying someone she didn’t know. Now at the age of 84, Salvación remains independent. It isn’t easy being on her own, but her neighbors check in on her and she has the help of Stephanie in Louisiana, who has been her Unbound sponsor for 16 years.
At 67, Fanjo is no stranger to hard work, from being in the Malagasy army to working in a textile factory, and finally working as a rickshaw driver. He and his wife had nine children, five of whom are still living. “I worked so hard because I love my children so much,” Fanjo said. “I wanted my children to have all they need. I wanted them to have a bright future.”
Jayamma isn’t sure exactly how old she is or how long she and Amos have been married, though she knows they’ve been together for more than 30 years. She remembers that Amos was very handsome when she met him. Both lost their parents at a young age, and Jayamma lost the full use of her legs from childhood polio. Amos used to carry Jayamma on his back but now that they’re older, they use a tricycle to get around.
William took to heart his grandfather’s advice to live in harmony with and respect others. He said he’s always loved being among people and being a peacemaker. These traits likely helped when he was elected a village elder. At 62, William lives with his wife, five children and a grandchild. His children are educated, but jobs in their fields are hard to find. To help them provide for the family, William taught them farming, and together they make a living from the land.
In her community, 101-year-old Elisa is known as “mamita” because she’s delivered so many babies. “Even the mayor calls me ‘mamita’ because I delivered him, too,” Elisa said. She never attended school but became a midwife at the age of 14. Elisa learned the trade, which has been in the family for generations, from her mother. She hopes the skill continues with descendants like granddaughter Luz (middle), with whom she lives, and her daughter Maria (left).
Genaro lives in El Salvador with her daughter Paula and granddaughter Rocio, who is also sponsored through Unbound. Genaro is originally from Honduras, where she and her husband Regino met and adopted Paula.
Under the best of circumstances, living to a ripe old age requires resilience. For those who grow old in the economically developing world, it also requires no small amount of courage.

The 2015 U.N. “World Population Aging” report said that the percentage of the population that is elderly is growing in nearly every nation on Earth. Like most major social developments, that increase will likely have the greatest impact on those living in poverty. Unbound has been ahead of the curve in learning how to respond to that reality.

In the mid-1980s, Unbound became the first major U.S.-based nonprofit organization to offer sponsors the opportunity to provide monthly financial support for elderly persons living in poverty. Today, it remains the only major sponsorship organization to include seniors among those they support.

“Our elder program is something unique in the sponsorship world,” Becky Findley, international evaluations manager, said. “The goals for working with elders are different than working with other sponsored members in that your long-term goal isn’t sustainability. It’s more in access to needed services and a dignified life.”

Since December 2017, Unbound’s international programs staff in Kansas City has been working closely with local staff at program sites throughout the world to develop an elder survey tool. As of this writing, data is being collected at 25 program sites in 14 countries throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia. The results will be analyzed at Unbound’s headquarters in Kansas City throughout the summer, with the goal of publishing them in the fall of this year.

The survey covers a broad range of concerns of elders in the developing world with a particular focus on the impact of loneliness and isolation on their health and well-being, according to Unbound Evaluation Specialist Nimisha Poudyal.

“The goals for working with elders are ... more in access to needed services and a dignified life.” — Becky Findley, international evaluations manager
“We know elders we work with around the world struggle with isolation,” she said. “They struggle with abandonment by family members, deaths of spouses, this feeling of loneliness. We also know they struggle with accessing the health services they need, as well as nutrition.

“So those are three key factors that we know we want to have a change in around the world, and so that’s how we decided to measure them. We want to see changes in those areas because that’s what our program is targeting.”

Dr. Linda Redford, director of the Geriatric Education Center at the Landon Center on Aging of the University of Kansas Medical Center, said the struggle with loneliness is not just a problem in the developing world, but a challenge in the U.S. as well, and not just for elders. But she also observed that seniors often possess a key asset for dealing with it.

“I think sometimes that those who survive to a very old age have a special resilience. Most have lost family and friends, lived through tumultuous times, experienced physical decline and lost their ability to do many activities they once enjoyed, but they have learned to cope with adversity and developed a perspective on life events that seems to protect their health and psyche. Call it ‘survival of the fittest’ or a learned strategy for dealing with adversity, it seems to be a characteristic more common among the very old in our society.”

The ability to cope is a strong characteristic of many of the seniors in the Unbound sponsorship program. Most have seen more than their share of hardship. In addition to the challenges of poverty, they’ve often lived through ethnic violence, corrupt political regimes, religious oppression, forced marriage, natural disasters, the loss of spouses and children, and assaults of various kinds. Yet most bear it with amazing serenity.

Unbound recognizes that sponsored elders are more than resilient. They are also a resource for their families and communities — one that’s frequently undervalued by contemporary society. According to the U.N.’s “World Population Aging” report, “Societies benefit from the wisdom and experience of older persons and from their contributions to the labor force, as well as from their volunteerism, philanthropy and civic engagement.”

The Unbound staff hopes that the current evaluation will confirm what they believe is beneficial and distinctive about the elder program, which has its own virtues apart from the sponsorship of children.

“With elders, all you are looking for is that relationship, and making them as comfortable as possible,” Poudyal said. “And actually no expectations form, so it’s a very beautiful relationship.”

Part of that beauty is the bonding that often happens between sponsor and elder, a more mature relationship than one could expect with a child. No matter how often she’s observed it, Findley still finds it moving.

“So many times I’ve met elders, and they pull out pictures of their sponsors. They pull out letters and talk about the lives of their sponsors and their sponsor’s children and grandchildren, and how it snowed in Minnesota. And here I am in rural Uganda learning about it.”

Findley and her colleagues know they have more to learn from sponsored elders. They’re eager for the lessons to commence. ☛
Ruperto works with a bicycle wheel outside of the welding shop he operates with his brother-in-law in Legazpi, Philippines. He has worked as a welder since 1966, and the business has been running for 18 years and counting.

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— U.N.’s “World Population Aging” report
He lost everything in the post-election violence in Kenya more than a decade ago. Yet 72-year-old Erastus keeps moving forward.

In his community outside Nairobi, Erastus works casual jobs and farms a small piece of land — growing fruits and vegetables and raising chickens. With his winsome smile and refrain of “I’m flexible,” a personal motto of sorts, it’s hard to conceive of all he’s been through.
Erastus holds vegetables from the small piece of land he farms near Nairobi, Kenya. Erastus’ mother would tell him, “When you are hardworking, you will always get something to do and make a living.”
The U.N. projected that by 2050, 80 percent of the world's senior population will live in less developed regions.
Erastus’ wife was killed in ethnic violence that erupted after the disputed December 2007 presidential election. She’d gone out to collect charcoal and didn’t make it back. More than 1,100 people were killed in the violence with another 650,000 displaced, Human Rights Watch reported.

When the violence started, Erastus and others sought refuge at a police station. He later fled the area with a friend who hired a car to get them to safety. With his wife gone and his adult children scattered, Erastus was alone, with only a thousand Kenyan shillings (less than $10 in today’s money) in his pocket.

“I was left with nothing,” he said. “They burned everything in my farm, even my goats. I lost everything. My three children abandoned me. They say that no one wants to be around a poor person. Only God sticks with you, the God that has made you [the Unbound community] love me.”

The local Unbound office serving Erastus works with approximately 640 children and their families and 60 elders. Families participate in the program through 20 mothers groups, each with about 30 members. Elders take part through two groups. The small groups give members a central voice in shaping the program and making benefit decisions.

The groups meet monthly to discuss program business and oversee activities such as correspondence with sponsors. One of the offshoots of the small groups is the sense of community that forms. That’s critical for elders like Erastus who don’t have family around.

Sponsorship funds for most of the elders where Erastus lives are deposited in individual bank accounts. For those who aren’t able to do their own banking, benefits are distributed through the office. Elders create budgets for sponsorship funds and most, including Erastus, prioritize food and housing needs.

“There is nothing as bad as hunger,” Erastus said. “I would get so hungry. I would look at people pay for a meal of 100 (Kenyan shillings, about $1) and wonder how they would afford that. I would see meat and wonder who would eat that.”

According to a 2015 U.N. report entitled “World Population Aging,” two-thirds of the world’s older people live in developing regions, and their numbers are growing more rapidly than in other areas. The U.N. projected that by 2050, 80 percent of the world’s senior population — an estimated 1.7 billion people ages 60 and older — will live in less developed regions of the world.

While elders represent about 10 percent of Unbound’s 310,000 sponsored members worldwide, they are key participants in the program, bringing much more than their need. They offer their example of courage and resiliency in overcoming a lifetime of trials, they share their wisdom born of vast experience and they are witnesses to history.

Erastus grew up during the “fight for freedom” when the British colonial government ruled Kenya. He started school in 1955.
One of the many joys Erastus experiences is the time he spends in his home, reading letters from his sponsors Doug and Susie in Oklahoma.
“When I went to school it was during the Mau Mau (grassroots resistance) struggle,” he said. “On the Aberdare Mountains, airplanes would come to fight the Mau Mau. It was not an easy time, many people died. The rule was strict and tough. We had guards who would steal things from people. They would burn homes and steal cattle from the people. Women would bring food in calabashes (gourds) to the Mau Mau fighters in the forest.”

Kenya eventually gained independence from Britain in 1963, and it was around that time that Erastus left his school days behind. Despite a love for education, he was only able to study to the seventh grade because his family lacked money. In 1966, he joined the National Youth Service where he worked in road construction. He was a farmer throughout his life.

Erastus has been sponsored by Doug and Susie in Oklahoma since 2015. He recalled the day he learned someone had chosen to sponsor him.

“I asked if I could go to the office immediately,” he said. “I was scared that this opportunity might get withdrawn. The staff told me to go the following day. I did not sleep a wink waiting for morning to come.”

Erastus delights in the letters his receives from his sponsors and proudly shows them to visitors. He likes being able to write to them, too. Being a sponsored elder, he said, has brought him joy.

“I am so happy, I feel like it’s not really me living this life,” he said. “I now have food. When you are hungry and wear a suit ... only your bones show. When you are full you have flexibility because you are full from the inside.” 🌟
A few years ago, I was diagnosed with cancer. I was beyond scared and prayed that God would be with me for whatever was ahead.

Soon afterward, in the spirit of dedicating my cancer journey for a higher purpose, I decided to sponsor an elder through Unbound. I chose an 84-year-old woman named Lucinda from Guatemala. What drew me to Lucinda was that her Unbound profile said she had remained strong in her faith through illness. When I read about her, I thought we were in similar situations because I, too, was relying on my faith to navigate my way through having cancer.

Though we were both sick, the health care options available to us were vastly different. I had access to excellent health care choices and she had only medicine to relieve pain. But she had spiritual wealth and shared it by visiting others who were sick. Her practice of offering compassion had a profound impact on me. It gave me hope for whatever was ahead for me.

Soon after my treatment, I was back to doing everything I did before like running and yoga. Yet, I felt different. I felt more joyful about everything. Faced with my own mortality, I learned how God is present in our lives and how to recognize his presence through my relationships with others.

Lucinda and I exchanged many letters before she passed away. Although she could not write herself, her sentiments were shared by a social worker named Ingrid. With Ingrid’s help, Lucinda and I shared our favorite colors and flowers.

I was humbled when I read in a letter, “Mrs. Lucinda thanks you for the help you give her every month, since she is able to receive vegetables that are very useful so she can eat very well.” And I was again humbled when, in another letter, Ingrid wrote, “Mrs. Lucinda .... always asks God to bless you in all your daily activities.”

After corresponding for more than a year, I finally shared with Lucinda how much she influenced me. I’ll never know her reaction because she passed away shortly afterward.

In her honor, I participated in a triathlon as an Unbound Trailblazer, raising funds for the Unbound Health Fund. After the event, I wrote a card to Lucinda’s family. I shared with them how she greatly influenced me, and that I was honored to know her, even though it was for a short while. ♦
We have a lot to share with you.

Sponsor an elder at unbound.org/elder or call (800) 875-6564.

Although she’s losing her eyesight, widowed mother of six Maria from Guatemala shares that the secret to a long life is to walk and work outdoors.