

A cough saved her life; Christians can rescue other Ebola orphans

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JUI, Sierra Leone—Aminata, an orphaned survivor of the Ebola pandemic that ravaged West Africa two years ago, would have been buried alive if she had not coughed.

Today, U.S. Christians can rescue Ebola orphans such as Aminata from the crushing ravages of poverty.

Aminata, age 14, is one of 60 children nurtured at the Interim Care Center for Ebola orphans and survivors at Hope Center in Jui, Sierra Leone. Restore Hope, a global church network and transformation ministry involving several Texas Baptist churches and partners, has been caring for orphan children and survivors throughout the epidemic.

A story of Ebola

Aminata recently met Cindy Wiles, executive director of Restore Hope. Wiles recorded Aminata's story, which has been edited for length and clarity:

 Aminata, age 14, is one of 60 children nurtured at the Interim Care Center for Ebola orphans and survivors at Hope Center in Jui, Sierra Leone. (Photo courtesy of Restore Hope)“Before Ebola came to Sierra Leone, I lived with my mother, father and sister in Rogbangba. I loved attending school.

“My older sister, who was 14, came home sick, and all of our family was

exposed. Everyone was afraid. My father got the Ebola next. My sister and my father died quickly.

“My mother was frightened. Everyone was afraid to be taken to the Ebola treatment center, because those who go never come back. And so we ran away from the village, so no one could find us and send us to the Ebola center.

“But it was too late. The Ebola had gotten my mother, and she died. My grandparents got it from her, and they died. Everyone in my family died.

“I was alone and I was so sad and scared. I had nowhere to go. The only thing I could think to do was go back to my village. I was going from house to house begging for food. But everyone was afraid of me and yelled at me and drove me away.

“An old man felt sorry for me, and he took me into his house. He was not related to me, but I called him my stepfather. But I had not escaped the virus. I soon became very sick with fever and terrible pain in my stomach. Then came the vomiting and the blood. I became sicker and sicker. I became so sick, I could not even move. The emergency men came to take me to the Ebola treatment center.

Almost buried alive

“By the time they got to me, they thought I was dead. So, they prepared to bury me. They sprayed my body, face and head with bleach. I was unable to respond. They put me in a body bag and zipped it up. They were taking me to bury me in the Ebola grave with the other dead. But the bleach made me cough, and they heard me.

“So, they unzipped the bag and transported me to the Ebola treatment center. I was placed in a room with 20 other Ebola patients. The room was full of sickness and bleach. I was helpless, waiting to die.

“Every person in the room died. All 20 of them. I was No. 21. The pain in my stomach was unbearable. I was so weak and frightened. I still have very bad dreams, and it makes me cry and scream in the night. I still cannot see well out of my right eye.

“After three months, my body began to feel better, except I still had the bad pain in my stomach. I was very weak and thin, so they kept me there two more months.

“When they thought I was strong enough, they took me back to my village. I began looking for other members of my family, like my uncle. But none survived. They were all dead.

Home, but alone

“Our family house was empty. No one would come near it. The people feared me. If I came near their house asking for food, they yelled at me, threatened me and drove me away. No one would talk to me. They ran from me. Even the old man drove me away.

“I ran back to the house where my family had lived and locked myself in. I cried and cried. I was all alone, and no one could care for me because they were afraid of me.

“A man who worked for child welfare found me. He, too, was an Ebola survivor. He wanted to help me. He put me in his car and drove me to the child welfare office. They told him to take me straight to the Interim Care Center at Hope Center.

“Again, I was so scared. I began to cry. I did not know what ICC was. I thought it might be like other orphanages where children are taken so that they can be sold as slaves. So, when we got to Hope Center, I refused to get out of the car, because I was sure things were only going to get worse. I screamed and cried, holding on to the car.

“But when I saw the other children all together, I wanted to be with them. They were not afraid of me, because many of them also are survivors of Ebola. At ICC, I get school. The matrons and caregivers take good care of me. They encourage me and feed me good food. The pain in my stomach has gotten better, but it still hurts some, and my body has grown strong and healthy again. We play. We sing. We study. We are happy together.

“I still sometimes wake up crying in the night and scream out in my sleep. But the caregivers and the matrons are here for me. Now I feel safe. Now I am happy.

“I know someone will care about me”

“They say I will have to go back to my village. The old man has tried to help me. He took me to a doctor about my eyes, but he does not have the money to pay for treatment.

“I am not sure what is going to happen to me when I leave the ICC. But Mama Cindy Wiles and Daddy Wiles are going to sponsor me. So, I know someone will care about me.

“I would like to grow up to be the president of Sierra Leone, because if I was president, children in this nation would not have to suffer. I would help those who are suffering, because I have been through death, and I know how it feels to suffer.”

And now, a brother

As Aminata told her story, a boy named Abdul listened. Wiles and her husband, Dennis, sponsor Abdul, and she told Aminata they would sponsor her, too.

“She began to cry, and she laid her head on my chest and held me close,” Wiles recounted. “I said, ‘Aminata, since Abdul is my African son, and you

are my African daughter, you now have a brother.’ Both of them jumped up and grabbed each other, held each other and sobbed.”

Later, Wiles asked Abdul what he was thinking. “Her story reminds me of what happened to my own mother and father when they were put into a hut with 50 other people and burned alive,” he said. “I am very happy to have a new sister.”

An opportunity to rescue a child

“Scores of Ebola victims and orphans need American sponsors,” Wiles reported. “In a culture of superstition and animism, the stigma and fear affiliated with the placement of these particular children is very challenging. Working with child welfare services and a partner Christian organization, Restore Hope and their local partner prepare the recipient family to receive the child and continue in intensive integration counsel for six months after placement.

“With sponsorship in place, the child can continue to receive Christian nurture, intervention and support until they graduate from senior high school through the extensive programs of Restore Hope.”

Pastors of nearby churches serve as on-site coordinators for the program and provide oversight for all sponsored children,” Wiles said.

“These pastors and their program assistants become highly involved in the life of each family—even if that family is of Muslim or animistic faith,” she said. “Almost all of the children in the sponsorship program have come to faith in Christ. Many of their family members have as well.”

Restore Hope serves more than 325 orphans sponsored in Sierra Leone through its programs.

“It is our goal to send each of these children into a home placement with

sponsorship,” Wiles said.

Through sponsorships provided by American believers, Restore Hope can ensure the orphans receive food, school supplies, tuition, uniforms, hygiene and basic health care and Christian nurture. And the cost is just \$1.23 per day, Wiles said, adding sponsorship is only \$37 per month.

The program also allows sponsors to correspond with their sponsored child several times per year and to bless the child through holiday and youth camp programs that provide discipleship opportunities. Restore Hope’s holistic community programs seek to help the Sierra Leonean families through other interventions that enhance their capacity for financial stability, provide skills training and engage them in caregiver cooperatives.

“It takes very little financial investment to make a world of difference in the life of a child,” Wiles noted. “For less than the cost of a small soda at a U.S. drive-through restaurant, these kids can receive a hope and a future.”

For more information on the Orphan Sponsorship Program, contact Restore Hope at <http://www.restorehopeday.org/contact-us/> or by phone at (817) 276-6494.