

VOICES FROM THE FRONTLINES

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Verelina in front of her home in Malawi

I recently returned from a trip to Malawi where I visited a number of impressive organizations, including Hope for the Elderly (HOFE), which works with grandmothers and the children in their care. It was during this visit that I met 96-year-old Verelina, a witty and youthful grandmother caring for her four orphaned grandchildren.

When their parents died of AIDS, Verelina took in her four grandchildren. Traditionally, women could rely on their children to support them in their old age. But in a country where AIDS has caused the average life expectancy to plummet to 43 years of age and three-quarters of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, grandmothers like Verelina have found themselves caring for young children with no social safety net and little outside support.

After her children died, Verelina fell into a deep depression. She was acutely aware of the hurdles she faced, trying to raise these young children, yet saw no way to provide for their basic needs: meals were scarce and the grass thatch roof on her small home was constantly leaking onto the mud floors and making their lives miserable. The floor was uneven, which meant that collecting water was a breeding ground for mosquitoes and a risk for malaria; the whole place was in shambles.

People like Verelina live with you for a long time.

That's when Hope for the Elderly (HOFE) stepped in. HOFE reaches 102 grandmothers in 12 villages. Through a group of 40 committed volunteers, they work to rebuild houses, cultivate gardens, bring water and deliver food packages, lead support

groups and visit the sick and frail in their homes. Not only is HOFE one of the few organizations in Malawi responding specifically to the issues grandmothers are facing in the context of HIV and AIDS, they have successfully mobilized communities to be part of the response.

HOFE volunteers rebuilt Verelina's house for her. They bring her food parcels and check in regularly. Verelina also joined a HOFE support group for grandmothers. Each week, the women gather under a tree or in someone's home to talk, share and even laugh. When you speak to the grandmothers who walk for miles to get there, rain or shine, you understand how important it is to be part of the group. For so many women, the groups are a reason to get up in the morning – they have become a kind of extended family.

Verelina was so proud to show me her home and to tell me about how well the children are doing in school. It was remarkable to see the transformation that had taken place in her life. In meeting with the other grannies, she has found a purpose – she is a support to other women, and she wants to be around to see her grandchildren finish school. "You know, I used to cry all the time and just wish that I would die," said Verelina. "I would ask myself, 'Why am I still alive?' And now I don't do that anymore, because I'm not alone looking after these children."

I think about Verelina often. To see how Hope for the Elderly has given a 96-year-old grandmother a renewed sense of purpose and belonging is a perfect example of what turning the tide is all about. People like Verelina live with you for a long time.