

No Longer a Prostitute

A Rwandan woman experiences new creation.

By Andrew Needham

Her eyes suggest something deep: the wisdom of hard experience, and the peace of someone who's found the way beyond it.

Every woman in Kimisagara is ready for a new hairdo today. That's the story at Mary Josee's Salon anyway, on a crowded street in this lower-income neighborhood of Kigali, Rwanda.

The single small room, with its sawdust-colored concrete walls and weathered pink wooden furniture, is full. Laughter bounces off the walls as neighbors catch up. Several women mill about on the street and peer through the open storefront to keep tabs on the seats inside. A handful of men and children are there too for the good company.

As three stylists busy themselves with clients' hair, Mary Josee herself waves to a woman, then ushers her to one of the four pink stations. *Muharo bite! Umuryango wabo umeze gute?* ("Hi, friend! How are your people?")

With her easy manner and winning smile, she soon has the client talking.

"I'm social to everyone," Mary Josee says. "I have a calling of love."

Mary Josee is a youthful 50. A tasteful white button-down blouse and permed hair complement a winning smile and a graciousness that make one wonder what good news she knows that you haven't heard yet.

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One-way, no exit

Twenty-three years ago in 1994, extremists from Rwanda's majority Hutu tribe slaughtered more than 800,000 minority Tutsis and other rivals in just 100 days. Neighbors, friends, and strangers committed and suffered unspeakable—and twistedly efficient—violence.

Through a deliberate process of reconciliation and the determination of the survivors to move forward—especially women, who made up 70% of the population after the genocide—Rwanda recovered dramatically from the catastrophe. Today it's one of Africa's success stories.

On the underside of that success hide numerous individual stories of brokenness. Mary Josee, then just 27 and mother to a newborn daughter, lost

her husband in the genocide. There was no money, no job, and no network to keep them afloat. Worn down by the cries of her hungry daughter and her own stomach's constant complaints, she took the only way out she could find: prostitution.

She moved from her hometown to Kigali, the capital. For the next four years Mary Josee traded her body for survival.

Mary Josee had another child during this period, fathered by a client. Moreover, she contracted HIV. Over 50% of sex workers in Rwanda are HIV-positive. If HIV progresses to AIDS and they don't receive treatment, life expectancy is less than three years.

Sick, tired, overwhelmed by life, she once again found herself trapped. "I was losing my senses," she recalls. "I thought a person just lives on her own and then dies."

Redemption

One day in 1998, Mary Josee waited for business at a regular spot. Two other women stood nearby. A man approached, a clergyman judging by his collar, and he gathered the three women. "What do you need?" he asked.

They conversed briefly, then the man, Bishop Theophile Rugubira, handed them each \$5. In return he secured two commitments: they would pay it back without interest, and they would look into starting businesses so they could leave prostitution.

Five dollars wasn't much, but it gave Mary Josee a bit of breathing room. She couldn't contain her surprise when Theophile showed up again a short time later with another offer: \$50 to each woman to start businesses. The conditions: follow Jesus, be accountable to one another, and pay back the loan in weekly installments over four months, with no interest. They agreed.

The simplest way to get into business for oneself in Kigali was in the produce markets. Mary Josee began rising early to visit growers and wholesalers in the outskirts of the city. She purchased tomatoes and other vegetables, hauled them into town, and sold them on the street near her home.

Theophile gathered the women weekly to discuss business and money management, talk about Jesus,



Friends of Jesus Choir, all former prostitutes, give an impromptu street concert. Mary Josee (back row center) started the choir.

and pray. Eventually Mary Josee stepped into the role of group leader. Every week she led discussion, collected payments, and deposited the money.

The women were surviving financially, and it wasn't just about business. They felt free. They began telling other women on the street. Soon more women were leaving prostitution with the help of loans from Theophile's ministry. Mary Josee took them under her wing.

Some sold produce, others mended and laundered clothes. They weren't getting rich, but they were liberated and feeding their families.

Early in her produce business, Mary Josee started wondering how she could take this to the next level. After every four months of repayment a woman was eligible for a new loan. Most eventually invested the new capital in a market stall, a step up from selling on the street.

Mary Josee took a bolder step: she and a few other women pooled their funds and started a salon. The space was small, the furnishings and equipment basic, but it represented an incredible transformation. Mary Josee, a former prostitute, was not just a street seller hawking other people's goods—she was a businesswoman with her own shop, providing her own unique services.

Mary Josee remarried in 2003. Her husband adopted her two children as his own, and they since had two more themselves.

Looking forward

"I pray that when I die [my children] will be provided for. I don't want to leave them in the kind of life I was found in," Mary Josee says. Her prayers are echoed by many of the women.

School costs increase as children advance.

Uniforms, books, materials, and fees, even for public schools—these can strain the finances of a small business. Yet the women rejoice that their children are in school, on their way to something better than what they themselves experienced.

Theophile's loan program, Africa Hope Initiative, now serves over 100 women. Fifty-two are former prostitutes, now called the Butterfly Group for their transformation from their former lives. The others are poor women who had no other means of support, perhaps saved from entering the sex trade themselves.

Only two women have defaulted on their loans—Mary Josee's first companions, who died of AIDS. Even more telling of the success of the program is the size of the waiting list: 300 women wait in line for funds, brought in by Mary Josee and the others.

It seems almost to miss the point to spend so many words talking about Mary Josee's past, considering where she is now. She's not that person anymore. She's redeemed by Christ from her slavery. Her joy and generous love for others is a reality born out of suffering, a present remarkable because of its past, but not bound by it.

"I can't be called a prostitute...suffering from AIDS. I find myself in the family of Jesus, a daughter of God."

There's a terrible dichotomy for a sex worker like Mary Josee: she makes her living with her body, giving herself to strangers, but in everyday life no one will touch her or associate with her, as if her loss of dignity is contagious.

Nobody would touch Mary Josee before. Now the neighborhood's respectable ladies can't find a seat in her salon.

Designate your gift 575AHI to provide capital for new loans and help with school fees and supplies.

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