



SHELTER ACADEMY OF LIGHT

Amazing Day! SAL Breaks Ground!

The day we have been waiting and praying for so many years finally arrived!

In autumn 2012 SAL founder, Grace Sakwa, shared with her dear friends Jennifer Baumeister, Lynn Feder, and Renee Werner her vision for bringing the gift of a safe and excellent education to the children of the Namisindwa district in Eastern Uganda. In the following 14 years, the women, their spouses and families, and a committed group of friends and supporters have prayed, raised money, created community programs and literacy interventions, sought out and acquired land. Finally, on November 20, 2025, Shelter Academy of Light broke ground and began construction of our very first building! We are praising God that not only has this long-awaited day arrived, we are on-track to complete the building which will serve as our first classrooms and an additional latrine building by Spring 2026. We anticipate welcoming our first class of Primary 1 students in February 2027.



George and Grace visited the building site with members of the Uganda team (pictured left and top right). George remained in Uganda for the fall and winter to help coordinate and oversee as the construction crew embarked on the project (seen in progress above, top left, and top right where the completed exterior awaits a roof). Once finished, it will initially be used as a Small Steps Reading Club (SSRC) resource center for sewing classes, menstrual-health outreach and education, reusable-pad making, library, and volunteer tutoring center.



2025 Small Steps Reading Club & Menstrual Health Initiatives



SAL's mission from day one has included community building and interventions that can have an immediate impact in the areas where we serve. One of the most critical has been the menstrual health initiative launched last year. Led by SAL social worker and program coordinator, Janet Mbabazi, and SAL Uganda board member, Beatrice Nabitiri, education and training sessions are being held in each of the SSRC communities, where participants are taught about menstrual health, engage in discussions, and learn to make reusable pads by hand and eventually by sewing machine. Organized through our partner schools, the sessions have expanded to include young mothers and other community members. For these families, the choice is often between providing food and other essentials for their families, and purchasing pads for daughters. Parents are not left with many options to address this need. Further, the stigma around discussing female health and the lack of access to proper hygiene causes young girls to be uninformed about their cycle and personal care and struggle with infection and other health conditions. It has become clear that this initiative will also be an essential tool for educating fathers, as well as creating an opportunity to discuss different topics, such as parenting, home management, savings, literacy, and other skills to empower girls and mothers.

65 % of girls and women in Uganda do not have proper access to menstrual health and hygiene products.

On average, girls miss approximately 18 % of the school year due to their cycle and lack of feminine hygiene products.

(Source: The Borgen Project)



Small Steps, Big Advances: SSRC Update

For those of you who have followed the SAL journey from the start, you may recall that the Small Steps Reading Clubs were established to address the urgent need of literacy and learning support in a region where very few children had passed the Primary Leaving Exam (PLE)--the national exam to qualify to go to high school--in 15 years. You may also recall that after the first year of 1 SSRC, 2 students qualified, demonstrating both the untapped potential in these incredible kids AND the remarkable strides that can be made with the simplest of support.

In the years since then, we could recount the many success--reading levels achieved, art projects created, sports and team-member skills developed, and so much more. But perhaps the most succinct testament to the incredible impact that SSRCs have had would be the 2024 PLE results. From just 3 of our 6 SSRC-participating schools a total of 171 students passed this important exam, many of them with marks of first and second grades (similar to receiving an A or B). We are overwhelmed by the incredible progress these children and communities have made!

But what those numbers cannot show is the joy of learning, the curiosity about the world, and the diligent commitment and intelligence of each of these unique and special kids. However, the amazing correspondence that has traveled back and forth across the globe between the students in the Namisindwa district and Thomas Middle schoolers here in Arlington Heights reveals that all. We have so enjoyed hearing from our SSRC students (and sending encouragement back), we thought we'd share a few of those letters here!



HELLO MY FRIEND!
By the name am Sarah
I am a female Ugandan with fourteen years and I am in
Primary six. What about you?

I live in a small sub county called Mgale, Namisindwa a district
as Uganda a country. Here in Uganda, I am schooling at Mgale
Primary school. We live near the border of Kenya and
Uganda near mountain Elgon. What about you in America

I love my country because the weather is cold and hot through
the year. Good physical features like mountains, Rivers, hills
and many others. We have best services like hospitals, schools
I love my school because teachers are responsible of us.
In my school, we have boarding and day section.

In my school, I like playing netball and speaking English.
What about you in America -
I encourage you to stay in school until you complete your
studies.
Please, reply.
BYE BYE MY FRIEND.

Dear my beloved friend,
I am Susan in primary four level
in my school
I am writing this letter to inform you that I love you so much
I am a Ugandan
In Uganda we enjoy peace
What about you in America?
In Uganda we have the biggest mountain and it neighbours our village
In Uganda we enjoy better life
What about in America!
Will you come and we enjoy this better life?
But if you come first tell me and I get ready for you.
If I see you I will be so happy my beloved friend.
I pray and to give you life
I wish you all the best
God said love your friend as
you love your self.
May God Bless you Amen.
By your loving friend
Susan,
Hi Good Bye Dear!

Uganda village
21st June 2025
P.O. Box 335
Mbale

HELLO MY FRIEND!
By the name am Sarah
I am a female Ugandan with fourteen years and I am in
Primary six. What about you?

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Please, reply.
BYE BYE MY FRIEND.

Fall Foodie Fest 2025!

SAL board & supporters want to express much gratitude for another fabulous Fall Foodie Fest in 2025! Hosted at Olive Mary Stitt Elementary, here are the highlights:

- 80+ tickets sold
- \$44,500 raised
- Live music by The Jacob Boba Trio
- Ugandan Marketplace & Silent Auction
- Custom Cupcakes by Colleen



Sakwa Family Visits Uganda

In June 2025 the Sakwas were able to travel to Bubutu together, to share in the on-the-ground ministry that has been so central to their own family life over the years. While there they met with the team that did clearing and leveling of the land ahead of construction, and also with the supervising engineer to discuss overall service, ensuring that the project is carried out in both cost effective way and to a high standard. They visited SSRC participating schools and encouraged the students. The whole family spent time with students preparing for their Primary School Leaving Exam, wishing them lots of luck and great success for all their hard work!



Please Pray with Us in 2026!

- for construction to continue safely, successfully, & on schedule
- for God to bring young, enthusiastic partners to SAL's endeavor
- for the expansion of our community resources, including menstrual health, SSRCs, library & more!

