

HELPING GIRLS

Reclaim Their Power

HOW LOTTE DAVIS IS EMPOWERING GIRLS
IN EAST AFRICA >>>>

BY TASLIM JAFFER

WOMEN TO WATCH

Lotte Davis's life mission is to help East African girls reclaim their power by fighting alongside them for gender equality through education. Born and raised in South Africa in the 1950s, her observations of social injustice planted the seed for a future in change-making. That seed took root in AG Hair, a professional hair care company co-founded with her husband. Fifteen years after its launch, AG Hair funded the first schools Davis would build.

Faced with an empty nest after raising two girls, Davis's inner voice announced that it was time to kick her philanthropic aspirations into high gear again. So in 2013, she founded One Girl Can Society, a non-governmental organization (NGO) dedicated to building schools and educating girls. To date, One Girl Can has overseen the construction of 104 schools, and secured scholarships for 600 young women. Davis's passion is palpable as she opens up to *Unearth Women* about power, mentorship and giving back.



As a young girl growing up in South Africa during one of the most socially criminal constructs in human history, apartheid played a role in shaping what you stand for today. Can you tell us what it was like to be in South Africa in that era, and what impact it's had on your journey?

I was only nine years old when we left South Africa, but old enough to discern discrimination, inequality, and unfairness. These attitudes stood out for me most of all. Other memories that are still clear to me include the gun my mother carried everywhere

in her bag to protect us, my parents' frequent visits to the jail where our nanny was routinely detained for being out before or after curfew, my nanny being stabbed, and the "white" and "colored only" signs everywhere in town. None of these were as poignant, though, as the derogatory treatment towards people of color that I witnessed almost every day.

The theme for this issue is power. Where does 'power' fit into educating girls?

Power is education and education is power. The two are intrinsically woven and define all of the best aspects of power: confidence, the ability to effect positive change, having a voice and being heard, the ability to make decisions for oneself and the people you care most for, etc. I believe it all starts with education.

What is the connection between AG Hair and your initiatives with One Girl Can?

AG's employees and salon customers were very interested and wanted to be involved with what I had started doing in Africa from the beginning. After my first trip back from Kenya,



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sales and marketing suggested we create a customized promotional package featuring African school girls on the box, and donate all the profits from this best-selling shampoo and conditioner duo to build our first school. This later expanded into a year-round program called Every Bottle Counts, by which a percentage of each bottle sold is donated.

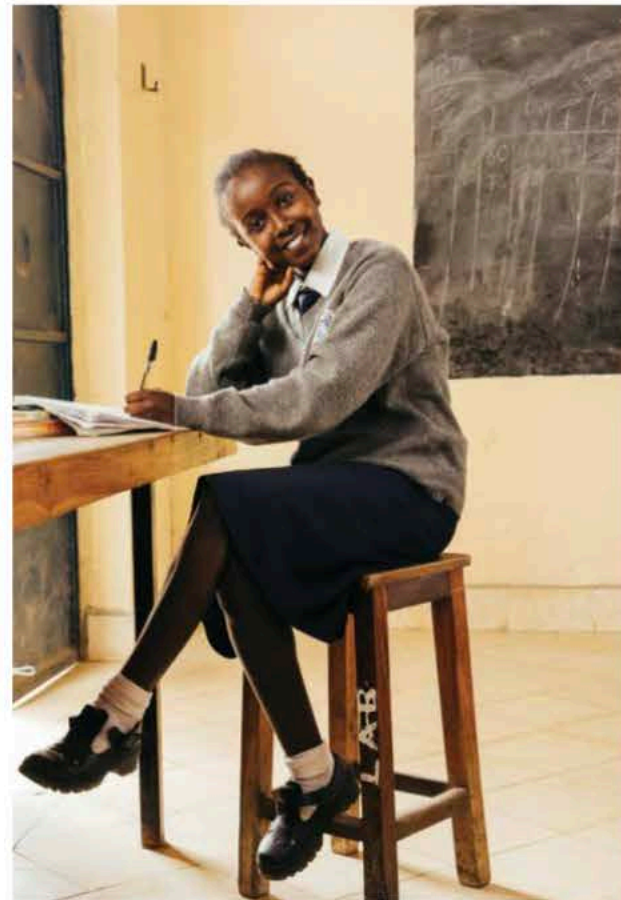
Today, all of AG's distributors, their sales teams, as well as many of our suppliers contribute to One Girl Can through a variety of programs. Thirty percent of One Girl Can's revenues come from AG Hair, its employees, and business partners. AG pays all of the administration costs so that all other donations go directly to our projects in Africa.

What is your measure of success for each girl in the program? How do you know she has graduated from a girl who 'can' to a girl who 'has'?

One Girl Can has organically evolved into a very holistic model. Our mission is to impact gender equality by ensuring every girl in our program earns an income. We do this by providing an array of support for One Girl that starts by building a dynamic infrastructure at her school through science labs, dormitories, libraries, classrooms, and beyond to ensure she has the grades to compete nationally. We support the brightest girls with a scholarship so that she need never miss a day of school.

We begin mentoring her from her first year in high school to envision the life she wants to live, and we then coach her through structured workshops to teach her how to set and





achieve goals and plan for a career best suited to her skills and preferences. If she performs well, she will earn a university scholarship, and we continue coaching her through an annual leadership conference in Nairobi to teach her how to get a job in her chosen industry when she graduates. Once she begins working and earning a livable income, she pays forward five percent of her salary into a scholarship fund for four years so that more girls will get the

same opportunity she benefited from. We don't let go of her until she's financially independent, and we know that this is the only way we can truly measure gender equality.

You mention mentorship in your work with girls and women. In your experience, why is mentorship important for a successful outcome? Mentorship is arguably one of the most important aspects of our program. We work in rural areas and

in slums where extreme poverty is the norm. These girls' mothers are mostly illiterate, and their teachers are unsophisticated. They have no role models to show them the way forward. Our workshops are built on North American standards and are hugely effective; we can literally see the difference in both the attitude and performance of these girls from one year to the next.

Confidence is probably the biggest outcome of mentoring and goal-set-

ting. With each goal they achieve, they set new ones, and achieve these too. As they see their lives moving forward in increments, they begin to understand that anything is possible, as long as they set goals and act on them. All of our students are obliged to mentor at least one other girl in their village or church using the same tools and techniques we used to teach them, and this further reinforces the magnitude of our program.

Your schools are primarily in Kenya and Uganda. Why these two countries?

High unemployment and corruption are common in pretty much every African country. Kenya and Uganda, however, are emerging countries and should have more industry, more technology, and more jobs to offer in the long run. They are also less volatile than many other African countries. I chose them because I knew we'd need to build from a position of strength.

We are currently researching potential third and fourth countries where we'll be able to get the most success in.

You had been away from the African continent for 45 years before you went back. Did you have any concerns or fears you had to overcome to get on that first flight? What, if anything, surprised you?

Fears? Many. What did I know about building schools for girls in Kenya and Uganda? It was so far away and





so unfamiliar. How would I raise the money? What if I failed?

What surprised me? The minute I saw the school we would help rebuild, I knew this was exactly what I had been wanting to do since I was in my teens. I didn't have a second's hesitation, and I knew instinctively I would be doing this for the rest of my life.

What is your advice to women who feel a longing to give back?

Do whatever you can to help women globally achieve their civil right to earn an equal income, to realize their potential in whatever field they have skill and talent, and to live a life free of abuse and injustice. Use what-

ever you can; financial resources if you have them, your network, your skills, your free time. Be a part of the change that the world is screaming out for—there are too few women leaders on the front lines. This isn't about charity; this is about change and playing a role in it. It feels good, and it is extremely rewarding.

How can women around the globe support One Girl Can?

Help support a girl to get a university education. In just five years, we have provided university scholarships to 212 young women who graduated from our high schools with a B- or better grade. In 10 years, we will have

built an army of bright, educated young women, earning a living, educating her own children, helping her parents and siblings to live a life free of poverty, and leading the way for more girls to follow in her footsteps. This is one area where we have the greatest need.

What is your vision for One Girl Can over the next five years?

I'm currently starting to work on a training program to teach social enterprise skills, initially to university girls so that they can create a small business model while they are trying to get into the job market. Soon, we will bring this program into our high schools to teach these workshops to graduating classes, so that girls who don't earn university scholarships can learn how to sustain themselves, build a business, and choose not to go back to their villages and begin a family right out of school.

Within the next three years, we hope to bring One Girl Can to a new country in Africa every year. The potential is there for our holistic model to work in any underdeveloped country where girls are not given equal opportunities, and we hope to expand our reach beyond Africa in the future. •

This interview has been condensed and edited.

Taslim Jaffer is a freelance writer and writing instructor with a special interest in culture and society. Her work can be found in CBC Parents, YMC.ca, Huffington Post Canada and other publications. She was born in Kenya and raised in Canada where she lives with her husband and three children. Find her on Twitter and Instagram @taslimjaffer.

