

Cuso International's magazine on global volunteering

# CATALYST

FALL 2022

A photograph of two women standing in a garden. The woman on the left is older, with short brown hair, wearing a red and black checkered shirt and blue pants. The woman on the right is younger, with long dark hair, wearing a pink floral cardigan over a black top and blue jeans. She is holding a wooden-handled tool, possibly a hoe or shovel, and has her arm around the older woman's shoulder. The background shows a garden with various plants, including leafy greens in the foreground, and a wooden fence. The sky is blue with some clouds.

**Addressing  
the food crisis  
in Peru**



# trail BLAZER

Become a volunteer and make meaningful change in the fight toward gender equality. Help build inclusive societies for women and girls, improve economic opportunities, increase access to education, and enhance maternal and girls' health.

Volunteer with Cuso International:  
[cusointernational.org/placements](https://cusointernational.org/placements)

Photo: Yasmine (left), volunteer Manuela (middle), and Zenab (right), Cameroon.  
Photographer: Maya Services

Catalyst is published  
by Cuso International.

Cuso International is an international cooperation and development organization that works to create economic and social opportunities for marginalized groups. Together with our partners, we are focused on efforts to advance gender equality and social inclusion, improve economic resilience, and deliver progress on climate action. We believe that by sharing skills, we can build better futures. Founded in 1961, Cuso International works in Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Canada.

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We wish to thank the many volunteers, alumni, partners, and staff who contributed to this edition of Catalyst.

Please send your comments, ideas, and submissions to:  
[editor@cusointernational.org](mailto:editor@cusointernational.org)

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Skills to share.  
Futures to build. 🍁

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**On the cover:** Maura Ramos (left), Liz Polanco Ramos, participants in the Mujeres Unidas por la Seguridad Alimentaria y Ambiental (MUSA) project. **Photographer:** Marlon Flores

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## Message from the CEO

As always, you will find this issue of Catalyst filled with amazing personal stories from Cuso International participants, volunteers, alumni, and donors from all over the world. These stories are firsthand accounts of how our programs make a difference in the lives of people worldwide.

In this issue, you will read about the individuals involved in our work in Ethiopia to remove barriers to education for high school girls, sustainable farming projects in Jamaica that support women with disabilities, and how a partnership we initiated five years ago with remote Indigenous communities in the Northwest Territories continues to provide hands-on support for students.

Our partners and participants inspire us. This past year, Cuso International took the time to revisit our mission, vision, and goals, and how best we can give people living in poverty the opportunity to build better futures for themselves and their families. The result of this extensive and engaged process which involved many of you, is a new five-year strategic plan that will launch in early 2023. It is a roadmap for how we move forward with our partners to address the

root causes of inequality and improve the economic and social conditions of marginalized groups. It commits us to focus on three specific priorities: championing gender equality and social inclusion, improving economic resilience through sustainable solutions, and advancing climate action.

I am deeply grateful to the strategic planning working group, editorial team, staff, board, and partners for their hard work and dedication in this effort, and to the many members of the Cuso International community who contributed ideas, thoughts, and critiques throughout the planning process. During the next few months, I will be sharing the plan in detail with you. I invite you to join us on this journey.



A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "N. Moyer". The signature is fluid and cursive.

**Nicholas Moyer**  
Chief Executive Officer



Above: Queens for Peace, Cameroon. Photographer: Maya Services



Above: U-Girls 2 students, Benishangul Gumuz region, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Cuso International.

# Encouraging girls to pursue their dreams

**W** With her grades dropping, Adonayit, a Grade 12 science student at Bambasi Secondary School in the Benishangul Gumuz region of Ethiopia, admits she had little hope for her future.

The eldest child in her family, she lives with her parents and four siblings: two brothers and two sisters. Adonayit had suffered from low self-esteem and had problems applying

herself to her schoolwork. Since her parents spend much of their time at work, she says the housework was often her responsibility, giving her little time to focus on her studies.

“I didn’t have plans for my future,” says the 18 year old. “I used to be one of the students that disturbed the class and this affected my relationship with my teachers. I never expected to get good grades. I had no dreams for myself.”

When Adonayit began Grade 11, she joined Cuso International’s U-Girls 2 program, which provides young girls and women with resources, training, and a financial stipend so they can focus on their studies. Over the past year, 400 girls and women in the Benishangul Gumuz region have received support through U-Girls 2. The program works in partnership with the Benishangul Gumuz Regional Education Bureau and five secondary schools, along with the Institute of International Education.

**“ I can now express myself in public, and the way I see things is different.”**

— Adonayit Mulugeta, Ethiopia

The program also provides gender-sensitivity training to families and community leaders, including teachers, with the overarching goal of changing attitudes and promoting equity by dismantling existing roadblocks to higher education for women.

Through U-Girls 2, Adonayit has received educational materials such as notebooks, uniforms, and reference books—the tools she needs to commit to her education.

Private tutorials have also helped her to improve her grades, and she and other students had the opportunity to visit a local university, “to help us understand what life looks like there,” says Adonayit, who was immediately inspired.

Equally important, Adonayit attended leadership and life skills trainings, workshops on reproductive health, and English-language training, which have all made a profound impact on how she sees herself.

As a result of this new attitude and mindset, Adonayit has a stronger, more respectful relationship with her teachers. No longer a disruptive student, she is eager to learn, determined to succeed, and speaks up for herself.

The program has also had a positive impact on her family. Adonayit’s father participated in training through U-Girls 2 and, wanting to support her ambitions, he no longer asks her to do the bulk of the housework, insisting his sons now do their share of the chores.

“My self-confidence has improved,” says Adonayit. “I can now express myself in public, and the way I see things is different. I’m motivated to pursue my dreams and achieve them.” ■



Above: Adonayit Mulugeta, 18, is a 12<sup>th</sup> grade social science student at Bambasi Secondary School, Ethiopia. Photo courtesy of Cuso International.

# Growing healthier communities

**W**hether growing vegetables or growing healthier communities, the right conditions are needed for success. Beyone Buckley found those right conditions through the Women's Empowerment through Sustainable Farming Project in her home community of Portmore, Jamaica.

"As someone with an intellectual disability, it is hard for me to get a job," says Beyone. More than anything, Beyone has always dreamt of living an independent life where she could successfully support herself.

Life hasn't always been easy for the 20-year-old. As a child, she was subjected to abuse and neglect because of her intellectual disability and was separated from her parents at a young age to live with her grandmother.

"My parents left me with my grandmother because they couldn't take care of me," she says, adding they would visit her from time to time. As Beyone got older, she realized how difficult it would be to find employment.

When she was introduced to the Women's Empowerment through Sustainable Farming Project, a program that provides women with disabilities the skills to grow their own food through sustainable farming methods, Beyone decided to enroll.

She is one of 30 participants in the program led by Cuso International and several local partners, including Abilities Foundation, Women's Centre Foundation of Jamaica, Child Protection and Family Services Agency, South Camp Juvenile Correctional and Remand Centre, and Dress for Success to provide life-skills training for at-risk women aged 15 to 29.

The program enables greater food security for the participants and their families by training them in backyard farming methods and sustainable hydroponic farming. This year, the program has been expanded so that the participants

are receiving the supplies they need, including equipment and seedlings, to establish their own garden at home. Beyone has already successfully grown bell peppers using the skills and supplies she received.

"When they have projects and someone like me can be a part of it, it makes me feel good and makes me feel like there is something for me to do," says Beyone. "I did not know about food security and backyard farming before, and I had to depend on others to provide food for me. Now, I have a new skill and can plant at home and help my grandmother."

Once the vegetables are grown, they can be enjoyed or sold to support the participant and her family members. As part of the program, Beyone had the opportunity to learn how to sell vegetables at a local farmer's market, including how to harvest, price, weigh, and package the produce.

Misunderstandings about persons with intellectual disabilities have made both Beyone's home life and her interactions in the community more difficult. Thanks to the Women's Empowerment through Sustainable Farming Project, Beyone has learned new skills and gained self-confidence and a greater sense of self-worth.

"The program made me feel better about myself because I feel good knowing how to grow my own food," says Beyone. "I was also able to apply and pay for my government ID with the stipend I received. I never had an ID before, and now I can open a bank account for myself. That makes me feel very happy!"



**Above:** Beyone Buckley, Abilities Foundation participant, Jamaica.  
**Photographer:** Tameka Hector-Boyd



# Supporting students' education and success

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**I**n the quiet hamlet of Paulatuk, Northwest Territories, Patrick Woodcock has become used to, and enjoys, the wind and cold, and the dark, long days of winter. Grizzly bears circle the small community in the summer, and wolves appear in the winter. Overlooking Darnley Bay in the Beaufort Sea, he can often see spotted seals on his walk to school.

Patrick has spent the past 20 months in Paulatuk, volunteering for Cuso International as an in-class support person at Angik School, where he works with two students in Grade 10 and 11, helping them to meet their educational goals—and create new ones. About 70 students attend Angik School, with six teachers instructing students from kindergarten to Grade 12.

“I am like a second teacher for them and, at the same time, I am also a third student. We do all the assignments together and I evaluate what’s needed to complete the work,” says Patrick, who is originally from Oakville, Ontario, and has worked as an English teacher in more than 20 countries and volunteered in many of them. “I can see the holes in their education and I try to fill these gaps.”

Part of the Northern Distance Learning program, Patrick’s work in the Inuit community focuses on supporting secondary students and preparing them for post-secondary education. His volunteer

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**Right:** Students Kassius (top) and Jeremy (bottom), Paulatuk, Northwest Territories.  
**Photographer:** Patrick Woodcock



position is part of Cuso’s Canadian Program, which has sent more than 50 volunteers to communities in the Northwest Territories since 2016.

Providing consistent support within a flexible arrangement is important, says Patrick, who often spends all day with the two boys, working through assignments and taking breaks to play basketball and, on weekends, watch a movie. He also connects with their families and encourages participation in their children’s education. His own outreach with the families and town mayor has built trust and respect and, in turn, further supports the students’ education and success.

“I push them in their studies, and I think the impact has been immense. When I arrived here, these boys were at the bottom of the class, they hadn’t completed any assignments or tests. They are now at the top of all their classes,” he says.



**“When I arrived here, these boys hadn’t completed any assignments or tests. They are now at the top of their classes.”**

— Patrick Woodcock, Northwest Territories

With Patrick’s support, the two boys have applied to several programs that bolster youth education, including the Northern Youth in Service program, which provides training and resources to develop and deliver a project that benefits participants’ communities. Together, they are also working on a social studies project to connect with elders and interview them about the community’s beluga whale harvest. The teenage boys have also applied and been accepted to the Northern Youth Abroad program—an opportunity to foster leadership skills, cross-cultural awareness, and global citizenship through volunteering and travelling abroad.

“I think these results show that this program is important,” says Patrick. “The volunteers from Cuso International provide stability and positivity. This work is opening up a myriad of opportunities for my students.” ■



# Harvesting hope, as well as crops

Donatila is heartened by the growth she's seeing in Tanzania—growth in crops, growth in agricultural and business skills, and growth in the social and economic wellbeing of women and youth.



Above: Beatrice Mshanga, Kizimba Business Model participant, Tanzania.  
Photographer: Pevil Albert

Born in Tanzania, Donatila is a recent university graduate of horticulture and currently an intern in the Cuso International-supported Kizimba Business Model (KBM) project that's operating in Tanzania's Morogoro region.

Facilitated by the Sokoine University Graduate Entrepreneurs Cooperative (SUGECO), the project promotes opportunities for self-employment in agriculture and agribusiness for women and youth.

With assistance from local government, academic, and private sector partners, Donatila is learning how to manage specially created plots of land to farm crops with strong market demand, such as mango, soya beans, and chili peppers.

More than 1,000 hectares have been designated to the project and the KBM team has been evaluating the Loleza variety of Habanero chili as a prototype, with promising results.

Donatila is seeing firsthand the tremendous impact this program is having on women and youth, who make up most of the labour force in the region's agricultural sector.

"Despite their high numbers, women are often exploited and receive a poor share of profits from the sale of crops and have limited access to markets," she explains. "They are also rarely given a chance to participate in the management of livestock or the ownership of land."

Meanwhile, they are expected to take full care of their children and husbands—cooking, washing clothes, mending clothes, cleaning their homes, and other household chores, and possibly running small vending businesses to contribute to the household income.

Under these demanding conditions, women and girls support one another by working together, with mothers teaching their daughters about their wide range of future responsibilities and duties.

This patriarchal control ultimately creates economic hardship and limited access to education and resources, and frequently leads to gender-based violence.



Above: Donatila, Kizimba Business Model participant, Tanzania. Photographer: Pevil Albert

## “Through the Kizimba Business Model I see hope for the future.”

— Donatila, Tanzania

However, as Donatila has seen, the KBM is making a tangible impact by giving women and youth entrepreneurial skills and generating improved social and economic wellbeing for thousands in Tanzania through education and skills sharing.

In fact, the KBM is so far reaching, it's poised to create employment opportunities for more than 6,000 women and youth in the agribusiness sector.

Donatila is directly involved with the production of Habanero chilies. She's thrilled to see the harvests from the KBM

prototypes sold to women traders who then sell it to local markets at a profit. “Through this program, their lives have been positively impacted because they earn money for their families,” she says.

Inspired by this success, Donatila intends to use the skills she's learned about horticultural production to train women and youth in surrounding regions, bettering the wellbeing of even more families.

But that's just part of what she has learned.

“There are Cuso volunteers working in different disciplines, including information and communication technology, agribusiness management, finance, and agricultural engineering, who have helped me build my skills to the extent that I can now share my skills and knowledge with other people in the community,” she says.

Motivated by her involvement with Cuso and the KBM, and confident in her newfound skills, Donatila imagines creating her own agricultural business that will further bolster women and youth. ■

# SPOTLIGHT

#IamCuso



## Dr. Maria Johnson Sallah

📍 Tanzania, 2022

#IamCuso because I enjoy reaching out to the community, meeting their needs, and sharing my knowledge and experience. I long to see girls who have been affected by gender-based violence overcome their past and achieve their dreams through the skills that I share.

My favourite part of volunteering has been seeing someone with new hope, a new belief in themselves, and new focus on their future—when a person starts living their life once again. Cuso International has given me this opportunity on an almost a daily basis.”

Dr. Mariah Sallah has been volunteering as a biology teacher with the AGAPE Knowledge Open School (AKOS) program and is supporting the girls’ health through counselling.

“I am most proud of the comprehensive video learning tools that have been developed. They will continue to have an impact on the students even when I am no longer with them.”

## Thi Kim Quy Nguyen

📍 Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories, 2021–2022

#IamCuso because Cuso’s mission of empowering marginalised groups through education fits with my interest, knowledge, and skills. My favourite part of volunteering involves seeing how students learn to develop a growth mindset and a greater love of learning and exploration through my working with them.

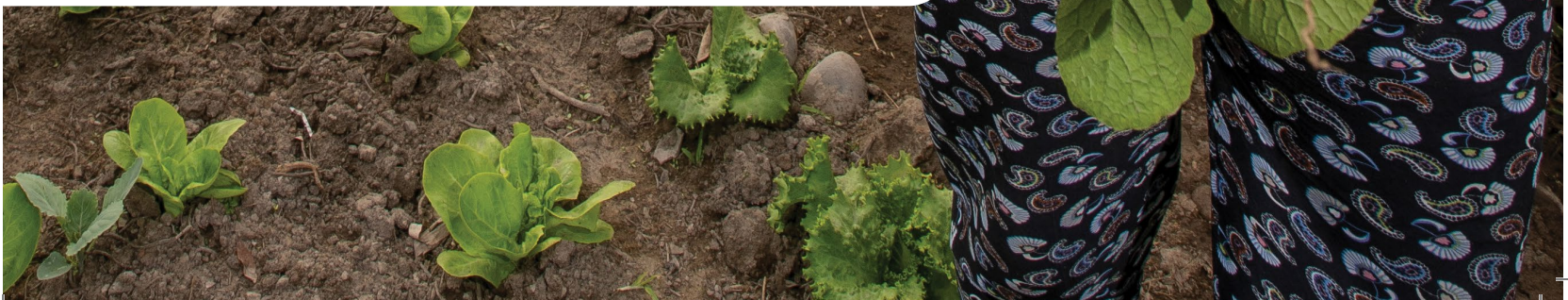
Kim is an education assistant at Deninu School, Fort Resolution, Northwest Territories. ■





# Addressing the food crisis in Peru

The Mujeres Unidas por la Seguridad Alimentaria y Ambiental (MUSA) project is addressing the escalating food crisis in Lima, Peru and creating networks of women leaders.





“ I hope in the future my children will have more opportunities.”

— Luzmila Huarag, Peru

**B**efore the COVID-19 pandemic hit, Luzmila Huarag held her life and the lives of her children in a fine balance. A single mother to three children in the San Juan de Lurigancho district of Lima, Peru, she was running a small business selling tamales and looking forward to resuming her studies to become a teacher. Life was not easy, but she was managing.

The pandemic, however, changed everything. During lockdown, she and millions of others in Peru were left without an income and no way to provide for their families. Globally, the number of people without adequate nutrition surged during the pandemic, but the situation was especially dire in Peru, with poverty rates rising exponentially.

“All of the doors that had been open before were closed to me. I became very desperate. It felt like everything was lost,” says Luzmila, 43.

It was at this low point that women in her neighbourhood and other communities across Lima began organizing communal meals to ensure that families received at least one decent meal a day.

“Eight women do the cooking. We cook every day for 100 people, feeding 40 families,” Luzmila says of her own neighbourhood. “We also feed elderly people and others who cannot do their own cooking. I have no other income. With the community kitchen I can be sure that my family will be fed.”

The common pots have expanded across Lima, providing a unique social protection network against the escalating hunger crisis. To date, more than 2,500 community kitchens have fed nearly 250,000 families, and a Common Pot Network and Food Security Board was established by local government, community kitchen leaders, and civil society organizations to coordinate the effort.



Previous page: Vicente Enríquez Rado, MUSA participant.

Above: Maura Ramos (top left), Liz Polanco Ramos (top right), and L. Eramilda Oyarce Ruiz (bottom), MUSA participants, Lima, Peru.

Photographer: Marlon Flores



Above: Griselda Congachi and Luzmila Huaraj, participants in the MUSA Community Pots program, Lima, Peru. Photographer: Julia Stomal

To ensure that this initiative continues and supports the needs of the urban poor in Lima, Cuso International developed the *Mujeres Unidas por la Seguridad Alimentaria y Ambiental (MUSA)/Women United for Food and Environmental Security* project, which began in January 2022. The project links women farmers with women's networks to share knowledge, advocate for food security, and support women's participation in decision-making.

"This project creates a groundswell of mutual support and enables knowledge exchange among women and communities," says Pilar García, Cuso International Country Representative, Peru. "Women living in poverty will learn how to exercise their rights, use their expertise to be effective participants in decision-making, and rethink current approaches to accessing nutritious food."

MUSA incorporates environmental components, such as agro-ecological innovations for greater production and entrepreneurship. This includes efficient water collection and reuse, diversified food production and processing, and improved access to local resources such as seeds, compost,

environmentally safe pest control, and technical assistance, as well as engagement with supportive organizations and volunteers to ensure sustainability of the project.

As part of the common pots, Luzmila and other women in her neighbourhood run a community garden, using the harvested vegetables in the meals they cook throughout the week. Produce from the garden is also distributed to families in the community to use in their own meal preparation.

Luzmila is also able to send her children to extracurricular activities such as karate and soccer through connections made with the community kitchens and Cuso International partner organization CENCA (El Instituto de Desarrollo Urbano). CENCA provided space for local children to access their online classes during lockdowns as well.

"I hope in the future my children will have more opportunities, so they can attend university and become professionals," says Luzmila. "I also hope I can resume my studies. I wish that all the women in my community could have access to more training opportunities, so they can follow their dreams." ■



Above: TechWomen Factory program participants, Cameroon.  
Photographer: Ginette Sindeu

# Bridging Cameroon's IT gender divide

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Nadege Emélé Bouche knew starting a technology business wouldn't be easy. As a Cameroonian woman, she's experienced firsthand how women and girls aren't given equal opportunities to seize jobs in the technology industry and are paid significantly lower wages compared to their male counterparts.

In Cameroon women make up only 18 percent of the IT sector with 60 percent paid lower than men, and only 3 percent in executive positions.

Despite the odds, Nadege chose to launch her own digital communications company. Her business, Rising Tech-Communications, focuses on audio and video editing of short educational films and billboard graphic design.

"We provide companies with visibility and communication services," she says.

Not long after starting her business, Nadege had challenges accessing needed financial resources and was forced to use outdated equipment.

It was at this point she saw an ad for TechWomen Factory, a project supported by Cuso International in partnership with the Cameroon Youth School Tech Incubator (CAYSTI). TechWomen Factory was looking for people like her, working or studying in the IT sector.





“ When I saw the poster for TechWomen Factory, I knew it was what I needed to do.”

— Nadege Emélé Bouche, Cameroon

Established in 2021, TechWomen Factory is aimed at assisting women 18–35 years old, including individuals with disabilities and in low-income situations, and offers training in coding, data science, numeric art, and cybersecurity. Additionally, it provides participants with funding, scholarships, and grants to help launch their businesses.

Since enrolling in the program, Nadege has been able to further develop her video editing skills and expand her digital business. The experience of being trained and working with other women has inspired her to open a branch of her business that exclusively offers single mothers, young women, and girls the opportunity to study graphic design. ■



Top: TechWomen Factory participants. **Photographer:** Ginette Sindeu

Bottom: Nadege Emélé Bouche, founder of Rising Tech-Communications Cameroon. **Photographer:** Marta Marelli



# Advocating for the LGBTQ2I community

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From a young age, Scaly Kepna struggled with his sexuality. Growing up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) was difficult. Although the central African country has made progress toward accepting some LGBTQ2I rights, homophobia and intolerance towards the queer community still run rampant.

“From the time I was a teenager I knew I was attracted to men, but I didn’t necessarily think I was gay,” he says. As a child, Scaly became aware of the cultural pressures for men to behave and act a certain way. Sexual orientations outside heteronormativity and non-binary identity are not explicitly

criminalized in the DRC, but they are also not protected.

This made it more difficult for Scaly to accept himself growing up, especially being raised in a household that did not approve of homosexuality.

“I thought over time I would be attracted to women, but that never happened,” he says.

At the age of 25 and after struggling for many years, Scaly was in a place where he was ready to accept his sexual orientation.

It was at this time that he established Jeunialissime, an advocacy group that raises awareness about the social

inclusion of vulnerable people such as the LGBTQ2I community. For Scaly, the organization is a way to provide vulnerable Congolese youth with support and guidance, something he always felt he lacked growing up.

Today, Jeunialissime is a partner in the Cuso International-led program Talents Pluriels, which aims to provide safe, inclusive, equitable economic growth for vulnerable youth, particularly young women and LGBTQ2I youth in the cities of Bukavu, Kinshasa, and Lubumbashi in the DRC. In addition, the program assists participating businesses to integrate safe, inclusive, and gender-responsive human resource policies.

Eventually, Scaly hopes to expand his association to the point where he can provide housing for LGBTQ2I youth who are rejected by their families.

“ I dream of an inclusive DCR where all vulnerable people feel free to decide their futures.”

— Scaly Kepna, Democratic Republic of the Congo

It’s common in the DRC for families to reject a child based on their sexual orientation, Scaly explains.

“When a family discovers their child is part of the LGBTQ2I community, that child will likely not have access to an education, or a decent job,” he says.

Now 35, Scaly is engaged and hopes to one day have children, but knows he will likely have to leave the DRC.

“I dream of an inclusive DRC where all vulnerable people feel free to decide their futures,” he says.

**Left:** Scaly Kepna, founder of Talents Pluriels partner organization Jeunialissime. **Right:** Talents Pluriels participants, Kinshasa, DRC.

Photos courtesy of Cuso International.



# Cuso International ALUMNI PHOTO CONTEST

## Celebrate your volunteer experience!

We're looking for photos that capture your experience as a Cuso International volunteer.

We want to experience the essence of your time abroad, the country through your eyes, and the impact it had on your life. Whatever makes you remember that special time and place that defined your volunteer experience and quite possibly your life.



Submit your photos to [alumni@cusointernational.org](mailto:alumni@cusointernational.org) today!

The earlier you submit, the greater chance of being included in our online photo gallery.  
Select photos will be included in the spring 2023 issue of *Catalyst* magazine.

# ALUMNOTES

SHARE + CONNECT

## Editor's Note

Please note that your Spring issue of *Catalyst* will be published online only, and we want to make sure you receive your digital copy. Call 1-888-434-2876 x 295 or message us at [alumni@cusointernational.org](mailto:alumni@cusointernational.org) to update your contact information.

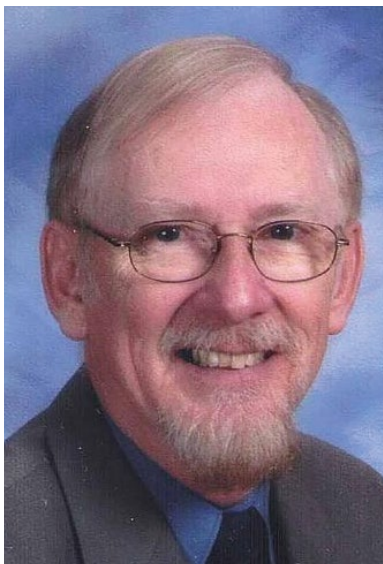
## Donald Houston (below)

📍 Kenya, 1967–1969

My wife Cheryl and I were Cuso volunteers in Kenya between 1967 and 1969.

I am about to publish my second book, this one called, *A Boomer in Kenya: Coming of Age in the 1960s*, which followed my 2020 publication of *A Boomer in Lachine: Growing Up in the 1950s*.

Hoping to reach some of the volunteers we were friends with back in those days.



## Dr. Mary Anne Chambers (right)

📍 Cuso International Board of Directors, 2014–2017

Dr. Mary Anne Chambers, longtime champion of education and former Cuso International Board member, has been named as the University of Guelph's next chancellor.

After immigrating to Canada from Jamaica in 1976, Chambers held progressive roles with Scotiabank and eventually served as senior vice-president. She took early retirement in 2002.

She was elected to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario as a Liberal in 2003 and appointed Minister of Training, Colleges, and Universities, and then Minister of Children and Youth Services.

As minister, she announced the largest multi-year investment in post-secondary education in four decades and introduced major improvements to student assistance policies and funding.

Among her honours, she was named to the Order of Ontario and has received the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee and Diamond Jubilee medals, the Prime Minister of Jamaica's Medal of Appreciation, a University of the West Indies Vice-Chancellor's Award, and a YWCA Toronto Woman of Distinction Award.

Chambers is currently a governor of Canada's International Development Research Centre, a senior fellow at York University's Glendon School of Public and International Affairs, and is the special advisor for the City of Markham's anti-Black racism strategy.



## David Smith

📍 Mozambique, 1984–1986

I was an agricultural technician. My placement was changed even before I arrived in Mozambique, as the Mozambican Civil War was rapidly ravaging the country and affecting rural areas. I arrived and persevered through five different placements in two years. I have stories to tell about that period. Subsequently, I made development my career. I worked in many countries in Africa and in Asia for a variety of international NGOs.

I have a unique experience of a time of change and flux in the world. Africa still struggles with many of the same issues we confronted back in 1984. I would like to elaborate on some of my experiences in different forms, as I have written some stories about them and I would like to reconnect with others who were with Cuso and SUCO during that period and afterwards. I can be reached at [elidave2003@yahoo.com](mailto:elidave2003@yahoo.com).

# ALUMNOTES

## Cuso International attends Manyatta Network event (below)

On July 22, the Manyatta Network hosted its first in-person event since the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 100 African and Caribbean diaspora from various professions attended.

Cuso International alumni Abisola Olaniyi (Nigeria, 2017-2018) and Imaeyen Okon (Ethiopia, 2018-2019) spoke about the volunteer journey and Tina Sweeney, Sr. Officer, Outreach and Partnerships, shared updates on current programs underway.

Manyatta is a not-for-profit organization committed to creating professional networking opportunities for the African diaspora. They champion positive change by highlighting social entrepreneurs and organizations that are making an impact in communities across Canada. Manyatta Network

has 8,000+ subscribers in three cities: Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa, and holds virtual and live networking events throughout the year. Cuso International, in partnership with Manyatta Network, support our organizational public-engagement goals.

### Thomas Symington

📍 Sierra Leone, 1975–1976

I was interested in seeing Martha Nixon's photo and reading about her Cuso posting in the Spring 2022 Catalyst.

Martha's family spent a summer holiday in my parents' home in Calgary. They were visiting with the Francis family (Dr. Jim, wife Marg, children Peggy, Pam, and Bobby), who lived next door, and my family was away. My parents lent them our home. Her parents, Bob and Marguerite, her sister Cheryl, and

a younger brother (not sure of his name) stayed there. I recall that Martha asked my father to write a reference letter for her application to Cuso International. That was a long time ago and the first time I'd heard about Cuso International. I was posted to Sierra Leone in 1975. Both of those houses (brand new in 1955) have now been "knocked down" and replaced, but the memories endure.

### Peter Bursztyn

📍 Kenya, 1968–1972

My Cuso International years were almost a lifetime ago. Strolling Queens University campus, I stopped at a Cuso International sign and entered. Emerging into spring sunshine hours later, I realized that I had signed on the dotted line at age 24. I would fly to Nairobi, Kenya for two years in June. A crash course in Swahili and East African culture began in a month! I started teaching physiology to the first class of medical students at the University of East Africa's Nairobi campus. I also made two good friends early on: a Scot, who persuaded me to buy and share an old Land Rover with his family, and the curator of Kenya's National Museum, who began to include me on her frequent safaris to Kenya's dusty corners.

Although I had gone to Kenya to teach, Africa's people had much to teach me—valuable life lessons, which continue to serve me well half a century on. It took a few months to learn how to present a technical subject to students whose English-language skills could be weak. (English was a third or fourth language for many, just learned in



**Above:** Tina Sweeney, Sr. Officer, Outreach and Partnerships and Patricia Perez-Coutts, Board Chair, Cuso International along with Reg Quilas and Angela Itchon, Centennial College, international development students. Photo courtesy of Cuso International.



high school!) I was asked to extend, ultimately staying four years.

On weekend trips to Kenya’s dusty hinterlands, I learned how people made a living in harsh environments. Once, tasked with collecting plants for the Nairobi Arboretum, I was assisted by two young lads whose claim to fame was the ability to speak Swahili. We spent four days picking plants in the area.

Rural blacksmiths were particularly fascinating. Using simple tools, they crafted agricultural implements, machetes, and spear tips. One pair of blacksmiths demonstrated iron smelting from charcoal and locally sourced ore. Their technique dated back 3,000 years to Meroë, Sudan, 1,000 kilometres to the north. Among the tools they made were small, precise tweezers for removing thorns. They also fashioned handsome jewelry of iron, copper, or aluminum, and could even make car parts if needed.

I found rural Africans courteous and generous. They expected the same of me. I hope I did not disappoint.

**Graham R. Prokopetz** (above)

📍 Togo, 1987–1989

Graham Prokopetz, a Red Seal Plumber and Field Operations Supervisor with Botting and Associates in Calgary, has been awarded the 2022 Darryl Cruickshank Red Seal Industry Award.

The award recognizes an individual from the industry who has made an outstanding contribution to the promotion or development of apprenticeship training in Canada. Graham was selected based on his extensive work and volunteer history, and his inspirational leadership to the next generation of skilled tradespersons.

Graham’s impact on the skilled trades is global—he spent years providing training on the installation and maintenance of water supply and sanitation projects for Cuso International and UNICEF throughout Africa, the South Pacific, and Central America. In 2021, Graham was inducted to the Alberta Trades Hall of Fame, a program that recognizes and honours skilled trades professionals and educators who have made

exceptional contributions to advancing the skilled trades and to supporting the success of others.

**Marilyn Skubovius** (below)

📍 Uganda, 1970–1972

Marilyn Skubovius has been named Morden’s 2021 Citizen of Distinction.

The Morden Area Foundation award recognizes and honours citizens who have a strong commitment to making the city and area a better place to live, visit, and play through their long-term commitment to service and excellence in leadership.

Skubovius, a long-time business owner and community advocate, says she is honoured by the award, and grateful for the many kind words sent her way.

“Well, you just want to make things better. I was thinking when I first got involved and you know, you thought you had some abilities to discuss and talk and ideas. You want to make a better community. Sometimes, when I help people, I can see potential, and I give them ideas, and give them a little courage to keep going.”



# LIVES LIVED

## REMEMBERING OUR VOLUNTEERS



**Annie Demirjian** (above)

📍 Nigeria, 1979–1981

After a long and courageous battle with cancer, Annie passed away in her 68<sup>th</sup> year. Annie emigrated from Syria in her teenage years. She settled in Toronto, went to Glendon College of York University for her undergraduate degree and Université du Québec à Montréal for her graduate degree, earning a master's in economics for international project management.

Annie was a kind, generous, adventurous, and restless soul who loved her family, friends, and community, both in Canada and internationally. She will be deeply missed by her sisters, brothers, partner, and adopted family, as well as friends that she made throughout her international career with the United Nations. Whether working with Cuso International, the Federal Government of Canada, or the United Nations, she brought high energy, devotion, and compassion to any project she was involved with.

For all those who were blessed to know and love this courageous and beautiful soul, Diane will continue to be a shining light and our biggest source of inspiration.

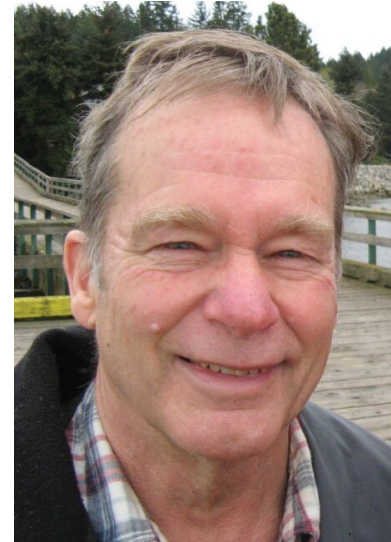
**Diane Gasner** (below)

📍 Colombia, 1975–1978

Diane passed away peacefully on the morning of April 29, 2022, at the age of 81. Diane started working as a Physical Therapist in 1963, working in multiple Toronto hospitals.

Diane was an avid canoeist and loved white water, skiing, and prided herself as being a risk taker. She enjoyed travel and with Stan visited more than 40 countries on four continents.

Diane will be fondly remembered for her infectious laugh, killer smile, and her willingness to help.



**David McGregor Thomson** (above)

📍 Bolivia, 1968

David Thomson died on July 24, 2021 in Sechelt, British Columbia.

David is remembered for his big heart, loud and contagious laugh, enthusiastic hug, and ready smile. He had a great zest for life. After teaching in Bolivia, where he gained lifelong friends and a love of the language, culture, and music, David taught high school math and science for 30 years in Ottawa. He enjoyed spending time outdoors, completing many marathons and often cycling or running to work. He loved music, and performed in several choirs in Ottawa and on the Sunshine Coast.

After retiring, David moved to Sechelt to care for his parents. He loved being a part of the close-knit community, volunteering at the food bank, immersing himself in numerous



activities and groups, and participating in church life at St. John's United Church. He also enjoyed visiting family and friends in Ottawa. David's kind and gentle nature will be very much missed.

### **Ian Thornley Smith** (below)

📍 Tanzania, 1972–1974

Ian passed away peacefully at home, surrounded by his devoted family and dearest friends on June 6, 2022, after a brief illness.

Ian was born on June 23, 1951, in Hamilton, Ontario. The family moved to Montreal and Ian grew up in Pierrefonds, Quebec. He graduated from the University of New Brunswick and spent two years overseas with Cuso International teaching high school in Moshi, Tanzania.

Climbing Kilimanjaro, sailing the famed Bermuda Race, and swimming in Antarctica were some highlights of Ian's international travels. He was an avid golfer, a passionate hockey fan—and player—and was famous for his spicy Super Bowl chili. Together,



Ian and Sharlyn "Charlie" created a magical home at Chateau Fentiman, their house in Old Ottawa South by the Rideau River, where they lived happily for decades and graciously entertained guests. A tender-hearted family man, a loyal friend and generous host, Ian will be sorely missed and forever remembered. May he rest in peace.



### **Rita Stern** (above)

📍 Nigeria, 1969–1971

Rita died peacefully on the morning of January 2, 2022 in Vancouver after a long illness.

Rita attended Concordia University, in Montreal, Quebec in the 1970s, where she studied psychology and sociology. It was here that her interest in women's health and her desire to focus on political and social change in support of the burgeoning women's health movement took root. She went on to work as a national coordinator of the federal government's Non Medical Use of Drugs program. A career highlight was the two years she spent

with Cuso International in Biafra, Nigeria. Her experience with Cuso International reinforced her desire to ensure women had more power in decision-making related to health care issues.

Rita would be the first to say she'd had a good life. She is survived by many friends in Canada and the US. If you wish to make a donation in Rita's name, please consider one of the following: Sheway, a program of the Vancouver Native Health Society Downtown Eastside Women's Centre (Vancouver) or Cuso International.

### **William James Smith** (below)

📍 Zambia, 1974–1976

James died peacefully in hospital at the age of 79 on Tuesday, April 12, 2022.

As a music teacher for the Ottawa Carleton School Board, Jim inspired a love of music in so many students. This passion for music continued into his retirement where he played with bands including the Mellow Tones, Grey Jazz, and the Christ Church Bells Corners Band. ■





# FLASHBACK

Who do you recognize? Help us dust off this memory by sharing your stories or identifying those in the photo. Please email us at [editor@cusointernational.org](mailto:editor@cusointernational.org). Submissions will be shared via the next edition of *Catalyst*.

## Did you recognize anyone in this photo?

We asked our readers to send in their best guesses. Here's part of what we received.



“ Hi Folks, David Beer, starting with the Canadian Voluntary Commonwealth Service (CVCS), in 1961, on the University of Toronto campus. Going on with Cuso till 2000 in Mandela's free South Africa. I was in that big Flashback group photo of the ECSA group in the summer of 1966 in front City Hall in Montreal.”

— David Beer | Jamaica, 1963–1964; Zambia, 1964

# A Decades-Long Tradition of Giving

When Darlene and Mark Johnson began their lives together as a young couple, one of their first acts was to reflect on the values they held in common, and to take purposeful steps to put their values into action. This included beginning a tradition of giving. More than 46 years later, Mark and Darlene continue to support Cuso International through their charitable donations.

“We had student debt and all the other financial pressures that a young couple faces,” says Mark of their early years together. “We didn’t come from wealth, but we decided right away that everything we made wasn’t going to be just for us. A portion of our income would be for charities.”

Darlene and Mark were drawn to Cuso International partly because Darlene had worked as a Cuso International volunteer teacher in Zambia from 1973 to 1975. She knew full well the type of organization she was supporting, and she loved its philosophy. The couple began by donating annually as part of their charitable giving and eventually became monthly donors. As Darlene puts it, “Monthly giving works better for us because it fits the principle that we’re always giving a proportion of our income.” Darlene and Mark even included Cuso International as a beneficiary in their Will the day they drew it up with their lawyer in the early 1980s. “Your Will is the last place to really say that someone or some organization is meaningful to you,” says Mark.

The couple are particularly drawn to Cuso International’s model of sending volunteers abroad and to Canada’s North to support vital, life-giving projects. They say they always read the reports Cuso International sends them, and that they inspire confidence in the work of the organization. Darlene adds that, as a volunteer, she was impressed with Cuso International’s follow-up and openness to feedback.



“It’s an organization that’s always seeking to better itself,” she says. “That’s another one of the reasons why we’ve felt good about giving to Cuso International and continued to do so for all these years.”

Mark adds that many of their friends have been Cuso International volunteers. “They’re invariably great human beings,” he says. “Why wouldn’t we support people whose philosophy corresponds with our own and with what we believe in?”

Darlene and Mark say that Cuso International’s track record and trustworthiness give them the assurance they need that their donations will be used in the best possible ways to enrich the lives of people around the world.

“That’s why we’ve given throughout our life,” they say. “We don’t look for recognition or a program to be named after us. We just want our funds to be used in the ways that Cuso International thinks would be best.” ■

To learn more about how you too can continue to play an integral role in Cuso International’s mission by leaving a gift in your Will, please contact Danielle Semple, Associate Director, Major Gifts and Legacy Giving.

Phone (toll free): +1.888.434.2876 x 205 Email: [danielle.semple@cusointernational.org](mailto:danielle.semple@cusointernational.org)

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