

(cool_aid)



◀ **HOPE AND HAPPINESS** (from far left) Barefoot pupils in an outreach school sing to welcome visitors; Hannah is swamped by children; soccer is enduringly popular; visiting an outreach school; Perpetua and her cow; school sports day in Mannyia (with the new kindergarten building behind).

OUT OF AFRICA

ADDING A CHARITY TOTE TO YOUR NEW CLOTHES AT THE CHECK-OUT CAN CHANGE A CHILD'S LIFE, SAYS **HANNAH JAMES**. GIVING BACK IS THE HEIGHT OF FASHION

There's no sensation comparable to stepping out of a 4WD and instantly being surrounded by a sea of smiling children whose hands gently pat your arms, your shirt, your hair. Prompted by their teacher, they clap rhythmically and chant, "You are welcome, vizz-tahs," in unison. I sink under the weight of their curiosity to a sitting position on the ground – a dangerous place to be, as those questing hands remove my camera and notebook from my bag and pass them around in delight. Their joy is infectious – I can't wipe the smile off my face.

I'm in Mannyia, Southern Uganda, to learn about the Cotton On Foundation's work here and witness first-hand the magic sustained investment, local knowledge and sheer hard work can conjure.

You might know Cotton On for its reliably cheap T-shirts and Lara Bingle's bikinis. But you might not know that an entire arm of the business – with its own targets and budgets – is dedicated to helping a community once dubbed "Mission Impossible" due to its impoverished circumstances. Those tote bags, bracelets and bottles of water at the check-out? This village (and its surrounding area) is where the money from those sales goes. And out here, it goes far – the village's maternity centre, which has saved hundreds of lives since it was built in 2012, cost just \$100,000 to construct.

Not long ago, Mannyia looked very different from the bustling village it is today. The area was all but abandoned in the '70s, as locals fled from Idi Amin's reign of terror. Floods followed, then drought. Add the fact that Uganda was among the countries hardest hit by the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the result was devastating poverty. But life for its beleaguered people changed forever when Nigel Austin, Cotton On's Australian founder, baptised his son at a church in Belmont, Victoria. The priest asked him for a donation, and Austin asked where his money would go. Told it was headed for Mannyia, Belmont's sister parish in Uganda, he decided to visit and see it for himself. Seven years later, the Cotton On Foundation (COF) he established has invested \$15 million in the area.

It's a model other fashion businesses have pioneered – US brand Toms donates a pair of shoes to a child in a developing country for every pair sold. And the collaboration between Bono's [RED] initiative and brands including Apple, Beats and Belvedere Vodka means up to 50 per cent of profits from certain products go to fight HIV/AIDS.

It might seem easy to dismiss the COF as a token nod to charity by a guilt-tripped multi-millionaire. But at Cotton On, social responsibility is baked into the brand – for example, a program sponsoring children through school is open only to employees. Even the teenagers at the check-outs are trained to request you purchase a charity item. "We're about creating a culture," explains Tim Diamond, the COF's general manager. He lives out that culture: one Christmas he brought his whole family to Mannyia, where his sons, then aged seven, five and four, attended the local school for weeks.

The COF's activities in Mannyia cover a vast range, from constructing school buildings, wells and dams to operating a microfinance scheme. It runs medical outreach programs and women's crafts groups, and has even established a coffee plantation, but it's education that's the focus of its most ambitious target yet. The aim is to provide 20,000 educational places by 2020 – "that's permanent, sustainable positions," says Diamond – that cover everything from spots in kindergarten to adult literacy programs.

"We're really addressing [the question of] what does that kid need as soon as they wake up? What do they need access to, to be a successful person?" explains Diamond. "They need clean water, they need to be healthy, they need to get to school and have great teachers. And as they progress, they need a local economy that's growing, with jobs and opportunities; that's where our all-encompassing project really shines. So when we say 20,000 educational places, it's not just four walls and a desk – we've got to make an impact in the community."

That impact is tangible in Mannyia. When we visit the primary school, the principal, Florence, makes a heartfelt speech to the COF

employees I'm accompanying: "The children eat three times a day because you provide; they look smart because you provide uniforms; they learn because you buy textbooks. We are so grateful. We love you so much."

Looking at those thriving schools, with children shouting and laughing as they practise for an upcoming sports day and workers applying paint to the new kindergarten building, it's hard to imagine what the village was once like. When we visit the school in Kyalulungira village, the picture becomes clearer.

"How are you?" asks one teacher of the students lined up neatly in the bare schoolyard to welcome us.

"We are good, better, best, oh yes!" they chorus. Their energy and enthusiasm is in stark contrast to the tumbledown

"EVERY TIME VISITORS COME, THEY HAVE MORE HOPE"

corrugated iron walls and dirt floors that comprise the classrooms, which are furnished only with blackboards. Until recently, there were no bathrooms or fresh water. There are 10 teachers for the 415 pupils. And still, children walk up to eight kilometres, each way, every day, to learn here.

Nabunga, however, is where it gets real. Our 4WD groans up the steep dirt track that leads to the village, which consists of a string of mud-brick houses ending at the school. It's a cold day and, as we get out, it begins to rain. The children wait for us in their classrooms, whose walls are more ragged holes than bricks. Rain gusts in under the gaps in the roof. Several children, underdressed for the weather, are getting wet as they sit uncomplainingly at their desks. There is none of the staring and giggling and hand-holding I've come to expect, and they have to be coaxed to show us their dog-eared exercise books. That night over dinner, Father Emmanuel, one of Mannyia's parish priests, explains their lacklustre demeanour: "In Kyalulungira, they are happy; they smile and sing for you. It is because they have hope. In Nabunga, they are not so happy – they have less hope. But every time visitors come, they have more. Thank you for giving them hope."

If education is a primary focus of the COF, sustainable agriculture is crucial, too. "We empower the community to sustain themselves," explains Mpagi, the COF's agriculture coordinator. "Then they can pay school fees, and that money will make the schools sustainable. If they can pay medical bills, the health centre will be sustainable."

It's a virtuous circle. When the COF gave Spesioza Nalongo,

a 52-year-old mother of seven and grandmother of four, some fruit and vegetable seedlings two years ago, she didn't just gain a garden, she gained the ability to feed her family and earn a steady income, too. Her husband is disabled and can't work, so she gardens alone from 8am 'til 6pm, growing carrots, capsicums, eggplant, avocado and papaya and earning 50,000 shillings (\$20) a month, which is just enough to buy the essentials: first, more seeds; then soap; salt; flour; clothes. "She is proud of herself," Mpagi translates for me, "because she's a step ahead."

Spesioza's friend Perpetua Nanteza is another Women in Sustainability program member. A wiry, energetic grandmother, she's dressed in her shimmering blue best for our visit and welcomes us into her house, which she built using a loan from the COF's microfinance scheme. Back in 2011, she was given chickens and a piglet and has now traded up to a cow, which is pregnant (she's planning to give the calf to Spesioza). We see the coffee seedlings she's carefully nurturing under a black plastic tarp, and her garden of cassava, maize and bananas. I learn the Lugandan word for thank you, *webale*, because she repeats it over and over. Before the COF helped her, she says, she was in hardship, barely surviving. She couldn't afford to send her children to school. But now all four of her grandchildren attend school, and "She is stress-free," translates Mpagi. "She has happiness."

Happiness, hope – and a tote bag. Not a bad return for your \$2 at the check-out. 📌

To help the Cotton On Foundation develop 20,000 educational places in southern Uganda by 2020, purchase any charity product in Cotton On, Cotton On KIDS, Cotton On Body, Rubi or Tybo, or at cottonon.com/cottonon-foundation.

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◀ **A LITTLE GOES A LONG WAY** Cotton On Foundation items include bracelets, bottled water and totes, all \$2 each.

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