

WEEKEND READER

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JEAN'S STORY

Saving mothers
a world away

BY DENISE DAVY

It's 6:30 a.m. and Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese and her husband, Thomas Froese, are driving along a narrow potholed road with their three young children.

They live about an hour outside Kampala, capital of Uganda, and make the treacherous drive twice daily so their children can attend an international school.

In this east African country, one of the poorest in the world, road accidents are as common as power failures and dirty drinking water.

All part of daily life.

"There are bad drivers, bad vehicles and bad roads," says Froese. "You realize every time you head out that it's a possibility that one of you may not return."

Chamberlain Froese lives in Uganda with her family eight months of the year, running a program called Save The Mothers International that works to prevent maternal deaths.

The university-based master's program is designed to change attitudes by educating community leaders on the perils of maternal deaths.

This morning, they arrive safely. Chamberlain Froese heads to the university for a full day of teaching. She is an obstetrician-gynecologist and could be delivering babies. But while working in impoverished countries she realized she was only saving one woman at a time.

Through her university program, she hopes to change attitudes and, in turn, change the system.

No easy chore in a country that's so

complacent about maternal deaths there's a saying, "It was her day to die."

But that's why she's here. She chose Uganda because it's where she was needed most.

On average, 17 women die every day during childbirth in Uganda. In contrast, Canada, which has the same population, sees an average of 10 deaths annually during childbirth.

Keeping the program running requires that she return to Hamilton every May and work here for four months as an obstetrician-gynecologist at St. Joseph's Hospital.

When she's not at St. Joe's, she runs a packed speaking schedule. Washington last week. Ottawa the week before. Toronto. Burlington before that.

She's gearing up to speak at the G8 Summit on June 24.

The money she earns during these four months, plus donations from speaking and tuition fees from students, fund the program.

Some say it may be taking a toll.

"I worry about the enormous pressures she's under," says her father, Gerald Chamberlain, who lives in North York.

"She works like a dog when she comes home and just keeps going and going. I worry she may crash and burn. But you can't tell her what to do."

Chamberlain Froese downplays the hardships.

"I like to be happy where I am," she says, smiling.

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PHOTOS BY CATHIE COWARD, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Hamilton's Jean Chamberlain Froese lives in Uganda with her family eight months of the year, running a program to help prevent mothers dying in childbirth. Hers is a hectic life, and she cherishes her time with husband Thomas Froese and children Jonathan, Elizabeth and Hannah.

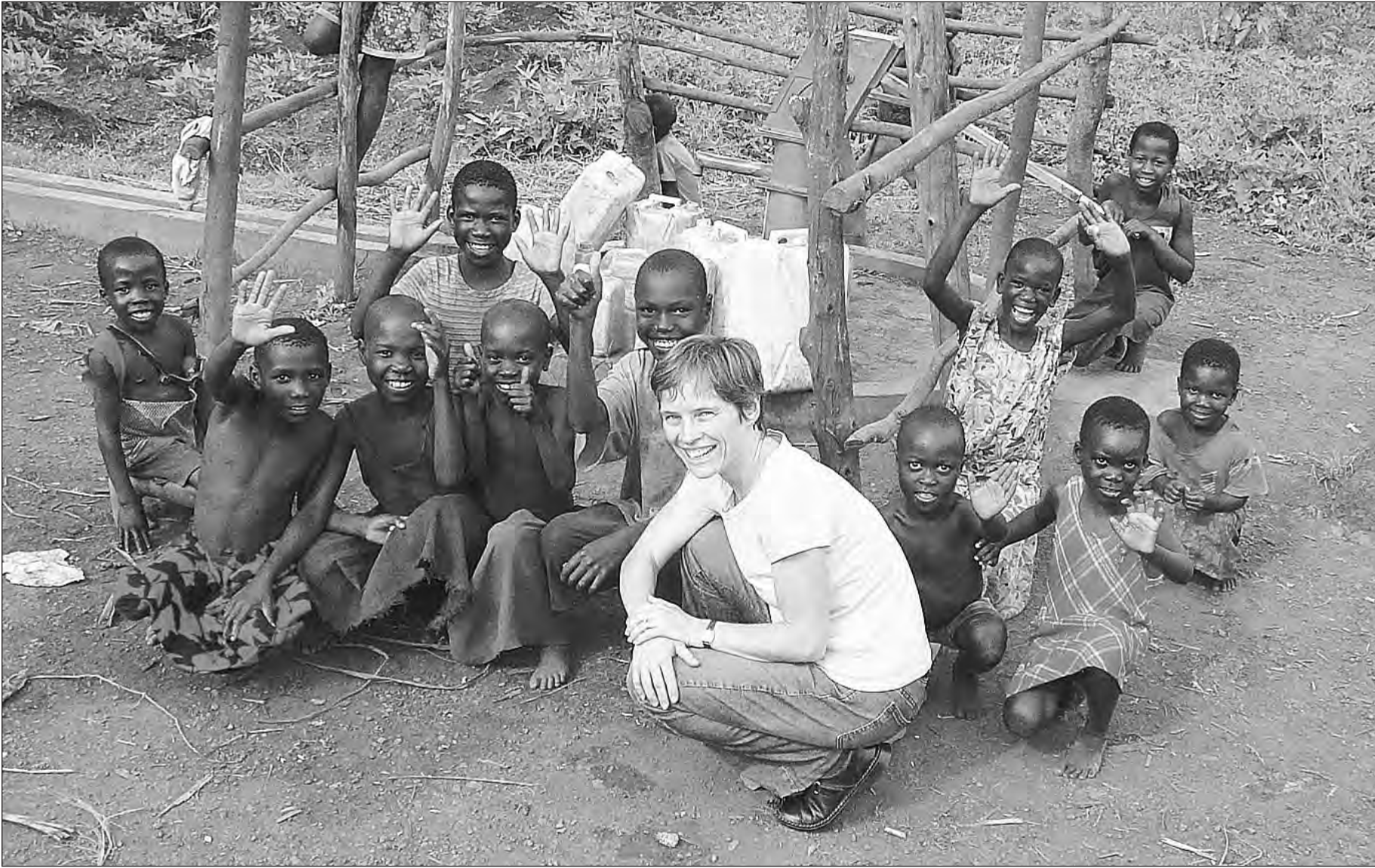
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PHOTOS SPECIAL TO THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR
Jean Chamberlain Froese and kids in Uganda. Her work in Africa showed her that women weren't dying by accident in childbirth, but rather were victims of complacency.

Fighting for women's health

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Indeed, she says it has given her a greater appreciation of life here.

"I was in Tim Hortons when the power went out and there were all these people running around," she says.

"I thought about Uganda where the power goes out all the time. We often run out of water. It's just part of living there."

Chamberlain Froese's office at St. Joseph's Hospital is decorated with Ugandan art and newspaper clippings of stories on Save The Mothers.

In the past five years, her work has earned her a superstar reputation on the international humanitarian stage.

At 5-foot-2, with pixelike features and short cropped hair, she seems an unlikely activist to be battling a problem of such scope. Then she greets you with a fighter's handshake and a husky voice, then apologizes for her cold.

There are so many obstacles for women in Uganda, she says: inadequate medical facilities, lack of transportation to hospitals and shortage of medical staff. The lucky ones are the women who make it to the hospital in less than four hours. That's how long it takes a woman to bleed to death after a delivery.

The average woman in Uganda gives birth to seven children. "When a woman's value is measured by how many children she has, how do you promote family planning?" she says.

Chamberlain Froese was 24 when she witnessed her first maternal death. It was 1991 and she was doing her medical elective in Kenya.

A woman was brought in by ambulance. She'd delivered twins. Doctors rushed the babies into the clinic and were caring for them by the light of a kerosene lamp.

No one realized that out in the ambulance the woman was slowly bleeding to death.

"It didn't faze me as much as I thought it would because no one else around me was shocked," recalls Chamberlain Froese.

"In retrospect, I realize we were so focused on saving the twins, we forgot completely about the mother."

It would take several years after witnessing that tragedy before the moment struck her, when something inside crystallized what she needed to do.

Long before that, however, the seeds of her work were being planted. She was six when she tagged along with her mother, Margaret, who was working as a nurse at a Christian camp in Muskoka during the summer.

"I loved the smell of antiseptic," says Chamberlain Froese, without cracking a smile.

"I would stay up there just sort of observing. I liked the feel of being around medicine."

She grew up in a middle-class neighbourhood in Scarborough, the third of four children. One of

the major influences in her life came from the missionaries who visited the church her family attended, and who billeted in her home.

"That gave her the opportunity to see what people can do," says her father, who was vice-president in the agricultural department for Scotiabank, handling loans for farmers.

Chamberlain Froese remembers the visits well, and seeing the photos of abject poverty, hearing them talk about the hardships some people face. She felt called to do something when she was only seven.

"Even as a young child I really felt that something had to be done. It

seemed like a pretty unfair world."

From 16 to 24 years of age, she honed her leadership skills working as a camp counsellor.

Neighbour Lorraine Fish, who taught Chamberlain Froese in elementary school, recalls that those skills were evident even as a child.

"I would babysit the family, but in reality I didn't have to babysit at all because Jean was there," says Fish.

"She was only 10 but she was more like the oldest, a leader. She was always very responsible. She would just step up and take over."

Chamberlain Froese was, by her own description, studious, but not popular. Her friends dispute that

and say she was well liked and above all, determined.

She tried out for the school basketball team, undeterred that most of the girls towered over her, and made the team.

"She was always focused," says Fish, who isn't surprised by her achievements.

"We knew when she went overseas that the mountains were going to move for her."

Husband Thomas Froese smiles proudly as he recites a childhood story from when Chamberlain Froese and her sister were confronted by a gang of boys who tried to steal their Halloween candy.

Chamberlain Froese was 13 and promptly tackled one of the boys and pounded him.

She listens, then smiles and adds, "I haven't beaten up any boys since."

After earning her science BA and medical degree at the University of Toronto, Chamberlain Froese did her residency at the University of Western Ontario.

She decided on obstetrics and gynecology as her specialty, a decision that would be pivotal in deciding her future.

"I liked that you were going to be delivering babies and being part of this wonderful moment in people's lives," she says.

"There was no sitting in an office all day and I was dealing with women, working in the delivery room while also doing surgery in general."

She started working as an obstetrician/gynecologist at St. Joseph's Hospital, and took short-term leaves to go overseas.

Between 1998 and 2000 those leaves took her to Zambia, Zimbabwe and Pakistan, where over and over she witnessed the tragedy of women dying needlessly during childbirth.

She began to realize the women weren't dying by accident, but rather were victims of complacency.

She saw how women were isolated in villages without transportation, how, even if they had a car, they still needed their husband's permission to go.

No one questioned it, despite the high number of deaths.

In her book *Where Have All The Mothers Gone?* (Essence Publishing, \$10), Chamberlain Froese writes about a 17-year-old female brought to the hospital several days after going into labour.

She delivered a stillborn by Caesarean, then died on the operating table.

"When you start to see the facts and see that all these mothers are dying, then all of a sudden there was a single moment that I thought, wow — what can we be doing to make it better?" says Chamberlain Froese.

In November 2000, Chamberlain Froese headed to Yemen, one of the poorest countries in the Arab world, to work in obstetrics.

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Need to know

Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese will speak on maternal health in Burlington on June 19 as part of a series called Advocacy Break-fasts which is structured around the UN Millennium Goals.

When: 9 to 11 a.m.

Where: St. Luke's Anglican Parish Hall, 1382 Ontario St., Burlington

Cost: \$5 to cover expenses and to make a donation to the speaker

Contact: The church asks that people call by June 16 so they know how many are coming. Please call 905-634-1826.



Jean Chamberlain Froese delivers her message on women's health care in a Ugandan classroom.

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The work was arranged by Inter-serve, a Christian organization for professionals living in challenging parts of the world. She dedicated herself to working there for five years.

One year after arriving, three American medical missionaries were murdered by a terrorist in the hospital where she worked. She was to have been at the meeting in the room where they were killed.

“The fact that I was supposed to have been in the hospital that morning of the attack really struck home that to me that our lives are not in our hands — that it wasn’t God’s timing for me to go,” says Chamberlain Froese.

Another important event was unfolding in her life. She’d already met Thomas Froese through mutual friends just before leaving for Yemen.

He was an education reporter at the St. Thomas Times-Journal, and shared her social justice values as well as her Christian beliefs.

They were both 35. A few weeks later Chamberlain Froese called him on a whim and invited him to a wedding.

“I was so sick and tired of going to all these weddings by myself,” she says.

Recalls Froese, “She had a quiet confidence about her. I was struck by how easy she was to talk to.”

They dated for eight weeks, then Chamberlain Froese headed off to Yemen. Their relationship developed through e-mails, then in January 2001 he came to visit.

They became engaged on Valentine’s Day and married on July 29, 2001.

“We were surprised when she got married,” says Fish. “We always thought she’d stay single because here she was travelling to Yemen and the Middle East.

“But when she met Tom we were, like, oh good, she has a bodyguard.”

Froese smiles when told of the comment, and doesn’t disagree. He is Save The Mothers’ communication co-ordinator, and developed a campus newspaper in Kampala.

He also helps edit her speeches and newspaper articles. He believes in Chamberlain Froese, and knows that while this is God’s work for her, it also comes from the heart.

“We were talking about (the Middle East) and there she was crying as she thought about their needs,” he says. “It was a remarkable moment that spoke volumes to me.”

After their five years in Yemen, the couple chose Uganda as their new home because of the high maternal death rate and because Chamberlain Froese had built up contacts there during her previous work.

They then began the work of



The Froese family on their Ugandan front lawn: Jean and Thomas with children, from left, Jonathan, 5, Elizabeth, 7, and Hannah, 4.



Their kids (Jonathan, Hannah, Elizabeth) will have ‘a different world view because of this,’ says Thomas Froese.

Facts on maternal mortality

- Every minute at least one woman somewhere in the world dies from complications related to pregnancy or childbirth.
- That means 1,450 women every day or 536,000 women die every year.
- For every woman who dies in childbirth, around 20 more suffer injury, infection or disease. That’s about 10 million women a year.
- In the 20th century, pregnancy and childbirth killed more people than tuberculosis, suicide, traffic accidents and AIDS combined.
- Five direct complications account for more than 70 per cent of maternal deaths: hemorrhage (25 per cent), infection (15 per cent), unsafe abortion (13 per cent), eclampsia (very high blood pressure) leading to seizures (12 per cent) and obstructed labour (8 per cent).
- While these are the main causes of maternal death, unavailable, inaccessible, unaffordable, or poor quality care is also fundamentally responsible.

— World Health Organization

“They said Hannah,” says Froese, smiling. “You can’t write a script like that.” They called her Hannah Laura Mirembe, which is Ugandan for peace.

The daily challenges of raising children in an impoverished country can hit home. Jonathan was once sick for months with stomach problems.

“I’m convinced it was because he drank some water while he was having a bath,” says Froese.

They both work to make life there fun, and have filled the yard with swings, slides and a trampoline.

“The kids see it as an adventure,” says Chamberlain Froese.

Adds Froese: “They’re getting such a unique exposure to humanity. They’ll have a different world view because of this.”

Their biggest challenge, whether they’re in Canada or Uganda, is finding time for each other.

“We both talked about how we cannot let Save The Mothers dominate who we are as a family,” says Froese. “If that’s not strong, then STM will collapse.”

As long as their bond keeps them on course, they’ll work on their long-term goal — making Save The Mothers International self-sustaining in Uganda. After that, they hope to expand it to other countries, possibly Yemen, Kenya, Rwanda, Tanzania and Burundi.

When that happens, they would settle here in Hamilton permanently. The time frame for that is around seven years, when Elizabeth enters high school.

Still, when that time comes, says Froese, “my sense is that Jean will always keep her hands in it. It’s in her blood.”

ddavy@thespec.com
905-526-3317

Training the leaders

Save The Mothers International is a two-year diploma program taught at Uganda Christian University that leads to a master’s of public health leadership.

The goal of the program is to train leaders in the community to become advocates for change.

The curriculum includes classes on gender analysis that aim to help students recognize the important influence that gender has on a woman’s health.

They also look at the status of women in Uganda, as well as reasons for delay in getting medical help and family planning.

For more information on the curriculum see Save The Mothers website at savethemothers.org.

building the university program at Uganda Christian University.

The two-year program is for community leaders — politicians, journalists, teachers and clergy — who receive their master’s in public health.

“I try to plant seeds in their minds,” she says. “For Ugandans, many who have taken the course say, ‘I just didn’t know it could be any different.’”

There are signs it’s working. Earlier this year four members of Parliament who had taken the course successfully lobbied the government to reject the budget on the grounds that there wasn’t enough money to prevent maternal deaths.

“When the pressure hits, she finds the strength and fortitude to carry on,” says Froese.

■ ■ ■

It’s a full house at Wycliffe College in Toronto where Chamberlain Froese is speaking.

“Half a million women die around the world in childbirth every year,” she tells the crowd.

The room is dead still.

Her talk is entitled Mothers: The Missing Link. It’s a lead to the speech she’ll give at the G8 Youth Summit on June 24. It’s a lucky coincidence for her that Ottawa put maternal health on top of the agenda for the G8 Summit.

For Chamberlain Froese, the Summit is perfect platform to raise awareness.

Those who know Chamberlain Froese well say part of the reason for her success is her gift for networking and developing allies.

As Patrick Mohide, chair of the obstetrics and gynecology department at McMaster University (where she is an assistant professor) says, “She has managed to accomplish what she has because of her ability to inspire others.”

Last year Mohide nominated her for the Teasdale-Corti Humanitarian Award from the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada.

“Jean is one of the most remarkable and most dedicated people that I have ever met.

“She cares deeply and passionately about the horrible toll of death in childbirth around the world.”

There’s also her steely determination. Says her father, “When she got her mind on something, nothing could stop her.”

■ ■ ■

It’s 10 a.m. on a rainy Saturday morning. The family is settled into their modest townhouse in Ancaster. They rent it out to Redeemer University College students when they’re in Uganda.

It’s tastefully decorated in earth tones with leather couches, large wooden mirrors and Ugandan art. It’s all Froese’s work.

“We have major role reversal,” says Froese, a freelance writer and

author, who is also an occasional Spectator columnist. “I’m the stay-at-home dad. My office is across the street at Chapters.”

This is family day and it’s precious for Chamberlain Froese, who travels widely. She sets aside time to be with her children — Elizabeth, 7, Jonathan, 5, and Hannah, 4. The kids are downstairs watching Treehouse under the watchful eye of their Ugandan babysitter Dorothy.

As Chamberlain Froese talks about her work, a little face pops up at the top of the stairs.

“Hello,” says Hannah, a darling Ugandan girl who is full of sparkle and mischief.

Chamberlain Froese smiles back at her daughter.

“She’s come a long way,” she says.

Hannah came into their life by an act of serendipity. Chamberlain Froese had gone through the agony of a miscarriage.

The pregnancy had been unplanned, and to her surprise she realized she longed for another child.

They decided to adopt a girl and call her Hannah, after Froese’s mother.

But how would they choose when so many children needed a home? Around two million children in Uganda have been orphaned by war, AIDS and maternal deaths.

It turns out the child would choose them.

They’d just arrived at the orphanage when Froese felt someone nudge his arm. He looked down into the face of a three-year-old girl and asked her name.

Reading

■ Where Have All The Mothers Gone? was written by Dr. Jean Chamberlain Froese and is available on Save The Mothers website at savethemothers.org.

■ Ninety-Nine Windows: Reflections Of A Reporter From Arabia To Africa And Other Roads Less Travelled, written by Thomas Froese, was published by Epic Press and is available on Save The Mothers website as well as Amazon.ca or on Froese’s website at thomasfroese.com.



Chamberlain Froese with an Ugandan boy in rural Uganda on the Nile River.