



quiltoids



Celeste Mergens (below left) with some of the young women helped by her feminine hygiene initiative. (Photo from Days for Girls International)

piece corps

*days for girls: stitching that gives the gift of time*

by tracy mooney

"Cloth or disposable?" is as common a question as "Boy or girl?" among parents-to-be, with many mamas opting to stitch up reusable diaper systems for their wee ones. And another highly personal sewing project that's trending is reusable cloth sanitary napkins, sometimes referred to as mama cloth. However, for volunteer sewists making menstruation hygiene kits for Days For Girls International, the whole "re-use" thing is much more than a fad. It's saving lives and empowering futures for women and girls in developing countries where menstruation still means isolation, shame and exploitation.

#### facts of life

Days For Girls International (DFG) has helped provide hygiene kits to women and girls in more than 70 nations on six continents. The effort is headquartered in Lynden, Washington, but involves volunteer sewists all over the world. And its mission addresses a very basic need.

A woman will use up to 16,800 disposable pads and tampons in her lifetime, which has a pretty

hefty impact on our environment (not to mention the chemicals used to produce those products). And in developed countries, women are blessed with plentiful options for dealing with this (somewhat annoying) feminine right of passage. But have you ever thought about what you would use for sanitary supplies if you didn't have any money?

This question did not immediately occur for Celeste Mergens, founder of Days For Girls International and a scientist in global sustainable development. A few years ago, she was busy helping communities in Africa develop clean water systems and find cheaper ways to live better. (For example, she figured out that by using sawdust in a stove rather than using costly wood, an orphanage in Kenya could cut its fuel costs by hundreds of dollars each week, leaving more money for food.) So when war broke out after the 2008 Kenyan elections, that same orphanage reached out to Celeste when its occupancy exploded from 400 to 1,400 orphans and displaced children almost overnight.

Celeste recalls lying in bed one night, her mind numb with the problem of how to help feed all

those children. Then she awoke at 2:30 a.m. asking this question, instead: “What are the girls using for feminine hygiene?”

She says she flew to her computer, sent off an email with that question, and got an immediate answer. “Nothing. They wait in their rooms,” the reply said.

The girls sit on a piece of cardboard on their beds for five days until their menstrual cycle is over, Celeste’s orphanage contact told her. They miss school. Worse yet, if they don’t have a family member to bring them food and water, they go hungry. Because these girls are orphans, they don’t have anyone to explain to them what is happening and misinformation is the norm. Industrious girls, the contact went on to explain, use cornhusks, newspaper, tree bark and even rocks to be able to leave their rooms during their period. These unthinkable solutions often cause rashes, infection and scars.

Unfortunately, there’s more. This need is often the means of exploitation by others. The girls told Celeste that unscrupulous men would offer hygiene supplies in exchange for sexual favors. And as orphans, these girls had no families to take care of them and protect them. Yet they were under strong pressure to avoid missing school, because orphans who get expelled for missing school during exam time due to monthly periods have few options to earn money other than sexual exploitation. A horrific cycle, yes, that affects girls as young as twelve.

Celeste says her initial response was to provide disposable supplies, and she tracked down a non-profit agency that provides supplies for 500 girls for \$200 per month.

“However, even if I could find a donor to provide \$200 per month to the orphanage, they would still use those funds for food,” Celeste admits.

Then there was also the issue of disposal. There is usually no waste management infrastructure in these countries, so the used pads were piling up in the latrines and being stuck to the fences sur-

rounding them, adding to the stigma that already surrounds this problem.

### the power of the needle

Luckily, she found that the sewing community in the United States was more than happy to step up and use its sewing skills to help, and Days for Girls International was born. Volunteers sew, donate supplies, money and even help transport kits to women and girls in need, creating what they lovingly refer to as the “undie-ground railroad,” which has grown to 200+ chapters worldwide in five years.

Each hygiene kit contains one drawstring bag for carrying supplies to school discreetly, two moisture barrier shields, eight tri-fold pads, one washcloth, one pair of undies, two zipper-lock plastic bags and a travel sized bar of soap. All these items are simple to sew, use small amounts of fabric and literally give the girls back eight months out of the three-year life of the kit. Plus, using cloth pads can help reduce menstrual cramps, skin rashes and vaginal infection.

Groups like one organized by Lucy Greene, a repair technician for Ann Silva Bernina in Albuquerque, New Mexico, gather donations of money and materials; cut and sew kit components; and do final assembly on the kits, which are then distributed by volunteers coordinating with DFG.



A Days For Girls kit includes washable pads, underwear, washcloth and soap. Items use little fabric and are simple to sew. (Photo from Days for Girls International)



Volunteers in Albuquerque's Days For Girls work group. From left, Jiny Taylor, Phyllis Jackson, Kay Osborn, Cheryle Harbaugh and Lucy Greene, group organizer.

Lucy started the Albuquerque group after learning about the DFG mission from a fellow quilter in nearby Los Alamos, and being profoundly moved by a YouTube video by Debbie Hutton showing Albuquerque resident Lisa Spader and Compassion Beyond Borders distributing DFG kits in Kenya, along with tools, toiletries and other supplies. The response of the Kenyan women to the kits is what gets you, Lucy says. the DFG hygiene kits being distributed to Kenyan girls. (*Go to <http://youtu.be/IASjni5VyeA> to see Keeping Girls in School.*)

"It's something that brings you to tears," she says. "When they saw those kits come out, they knew about them and they were totally excited."

Seeing that video was enough to get Phyllis Jackson involved in Lucy's effort.

"I could not get over how the mothers of the girls (in the video) danced when the bags were presented," says Phyllis. "Our community is supporting another community!"

Lucy organizes about three sew sessions a year, but many area sewists/quilters (including from Peacemakers Quilt Guild, and Thimble Weeds Quilt Guild) and other volunteers pick up kits and do their sewing at home. The Albuquerque group has produced about 300 kits over the last four years, and these sewists—most who have daughters and

granddaughters—have a deep emotional attachment to the DFG mission.

"I have daughters and I've travelled and I've seen what the rest of the world is like. And I believe in education," says Kay Osborn, who regularly participates in the DFG sessions organized by Lucy. As we talked, Kay doesn't miss a stroke in cutting the simple 12 x 13 shapes for the bags.

Meanwhile, fellow volunteer stitcher Cheryle Harbaugh is making pads, sandwiching flannel pieces and serging them together. It takes seconds.

"I have a granddaughter... what better way to serve your community than to help other

people? And you're doing your favorite thing, anyway, which is sewing," Cheryle says.

### tweaks over time

Over the years, the kits have undergone 23 design changes based upon the feedback of the girls," says Jan Bode, a sewing specialist for DFG. The initial designs looked very much what typical disposable pads look like. After getting feedback from the women and girls using them, the team realized that the girls were not able to hang the laundered pads up outside in the sun because of social stigma. And that's an integral part of the plan because the sun kills germs.

After many design changes, the current design looks like a washcloth. The moisture barrier shield is made of PUL (polyurethane laminate) and holds the tri-fold flannel pad in place. A very small amount of water is needed to clean this design making it eco-friendly in areas of the globe that have little water to spare.

"We wanted a healthy solution that is a gift to the girls," says Jan. "I always ask our volunteers to create beautiful kits, and by beauty I mean beautifully sewn so they last a long time."

DFG also encourages volunteers to make sure the kits are not perfectly coordinated or matchy-



Above: Kits finished at a recent sew-session in Albuquerque, and ready for shipment. Below: Two of the thousands of girls who will no longer miss school or work because of lack of feminine hygiene materials.

matchy. Instead, it asks for kits made up of many brightly colored prints. (Something that fits right in with any quilter's stash-busting strategy, don't you think?)

"Imagine that you are one of these girls waiting in line and everyone gets a beautiful bag filled with matching pads and liners. But you get the last kit that has a drab grey bag and mismatched pads. You wouldn't feel so good, would you?" says Jan.

### beyond the kit

DFG's outreach goes way beyond the bits of flannel, PUL and cotton, though. the organization trains "ambassadors," or women who live in these countries who can teach other women and girls about health and hygiene, and how to make the kits for themselves.

In tapping local women for this leadership, DFG has made some heartbreaking discoveries about the lack of basic education, such as occurred with one young trainee, about 16 years of age.

"I initially thought this must be a mistake," says Celeste. "We usually choose much older girls. But when she began to speak we realized she was incredibly charismatic and well spoken. She even speaks four languages. She was perfect!"

Yet as they began the training and explained the menstrual cycle, the young girl astounded them by saying "I have had that for two years. I thought I



had AIDS. I thought I would die."

The Days For Girls program not only empowers women around the world, but is quickly making a global difference. Celeste and her team have found that in addition to educating and empowering the girls, they literally get time back. Those eight months that would have been lost, spent sitting on their beds, is now spent learning in school. Ultimately, the cycle of poverty is being reversed simply by providing women in these under-developed nations with a hygienic solution and information about normal body function. More than handsewn kits, they provide education, safety and dignity. DFG's

goal is to reach every woman worldwide by 2022.

Talk about the power of the needle!

For more information on how you can volunteer or how to sew the kits, visit [www.daysforgirls.org](http://www.daysforgirls.org). ✨

