President's Letter, Mary Ann Millsap

Greetings! And I hope you are all safe and well. What a year this has been for East Africa and our GTL scholars! All 317 GTL girls started school in January, as usual, and in mid-March, just six weeks into the new school year, all students were sent home as every East African school closed to stop the spread of COVID.

Despite locusts, floods, drought, and a pandemic, the GTL scholars persisted. When Tanzania reopened its schools in June, ALL 55 GTL girls returned and all are COVID free! Similarly, when Kenya and Uganda re-opened their secondary schools in mid-October for students in their final secondary grade, ALL GTL girls returned. That gives us an anticipated graduation rate of 95 percent! That is, of the girls initially funded in their first year of secondary school in 2017, 95 percent are scheduled to graduate in April 2021. This number is incredibly important – it means that virtually everyone is succeeding, not only a few stars. Their success is a great credit to the girls themselves – and also to the schools and to GTL who created this opportunity for them!

In fighting COVID, Tanzania's GTL young women are helping us here at home. During our visit there in 2019, GTL alumnae gifted us with beautiful khangas, vibrantly colored East African printed cotton fabric used not only for traditional dresses but also as a skirt, head-wrap, and now… face masks! This spring, women in Fuller Village, an independent living community near Boston, brought out their sewing machines to make face masks from the material. Included among recipients is a Boston shelter for homeless women.

We are so thankful to you, our friends and donors, for your continuing support. And tell your friends! Some of you made special donations this year that we have directed to our in-country coordinators for COVID-related transportation costs and food security issues that GTL scholars faced. Thank you! Your donations today will go directly to pay tuition for our 300+ scholars in their 2021 school year and, in some cases, additional COVID-related costs. We look forward to continuing our work together.

MaryAnn wearing a face mask made from Tanzanian cloth

What we know about the impact of Covid-19 on our scholars

East Africa responded quickly and emphatically to the Coronavirus pandemic. In mid-March, Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania shut down their economies and borders and instituted strict curfews to stop the spread of the coronavirus. All schools in East Africa were closed and students were sent home, including

all GTL girls in residential secondary schools. Covid cases have been relatively contained in East Africa. As a result, Tanzania opened all its schools in May 2020. In Uganda and Kenya, all the schools reopened in mid-October, but only to the graduating classes. The plan is to open fully with all other students in mid-January 2021.

On top of the pandemic and its lockdown, East Africa has experienced multiple natural disasters this year. In January 2020, swarms of locusts descended upon Kenya that devastated farmers' crops and grazing for pastoralists' cattle. It was the worst locust invasion in 70 years. New swarms could start to arrive again in November and December. A second natural disaster that is causing havoc is flooding, due to unexpected high rains. By mid-May 2020, two consecutive seasons of record rains created flooding, especially in Kenya's Rift Valley.

GTL scholar, Phyllis Lekisio's home, Baringo County, Kenya May 2020

In the Lake Baringo locality where 47 GTL scholars live, the rising waters of the lake displaced more than 5,000 people and destroyed schools, hospitals, hotels, and roads.

Livestock move around in Baringo's flooded areas (May 2020)

For our GTL scholars, we had multiple concerns about the possible impact of Covid-19:

· **What would be the extent of sickness and loss of life, given the fragile East Africa health system?**

In comparison to the US and other countries around the world, the number of casualties from the pandemic is relatively low in East Africa. With a combined population of 157 million people, slightly less than half the population of the USA, the three countries of Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania have fewer than 2,000 deaths from Covid-19, combined.

Since May 2020, when all the schools in Tanzania were opened and all the students throughout the country went back to school, there have been no reported cases of the virus surging up to now. Nor have there been reported cases for the graduating classes that returned to school in October in Kenya and Uganda.

· **What would be the consequences of interrupted schooling on student performance and student retention?**

The students have lost valuable learning time. With little, if any access to the internet, distance learning

is a challenge throughout East Africa. Most GTL girls' families are either subsistence farmers or cattle herders, often with no access to electricity, much less internet capacity. It is too soon to know the consequences of a lost academic year on student performance, but in Tanzania, the four GTL scholars completing Form 6 (the final year in that country) performed well enough on their exit exams from secondary school to be eligible to attend university.

Regarding student retention, all 20 GTL girls from the Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda, one of the poorest regions in East Africa, are returning to school. Ten of the scholars in Form 4 returned in October, all are scheduled to graduate in April and all are in the top 20 percent of their class. Three are in the top 10 percent. The other 10 students in the lower grades are confirmed to return in January.

GTL scholars from Karamoja region, Uganda, at St. Kizito High School (October 2020)

As noted earlier, all 55 GTL girls in Tanzania returned to school in June. In fact, over the past five years, no GTL girl in Tanzania has dropped out of school.

· **What are the consequences of the Covid-19 lock-down on the well-being of GTL students?**

A perennial concern that underlies poverty in East Africa is hunger. Many children face hunger in ordinary times, but hunger has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Millions of children get food and clean drinking water from school. With schools closed, they are dealing with the debilitating effects of the lack

GTL scholars from Baringo, in the Rift Valley, Kenya, receive foodstuffs and sanitary napkins from Beatrice Merige, GTL Coordinator (July 2020)

of healthy food.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recently encouraged schools to reopen in large part to help contain hunger. In July, GTL responded to a plea from the Rift Valley Coordinator in Kenya to send financial support to her and 10 GTL scholars who needed help with food and sanitary pads.

· **To what extent would the pandemic increase rates of teenage pregnancy and child marriage?**

Throughout East Africa, girls have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic and pregnancies are on the rise. A Global Citizen Report in August 2020 reported that 152,000 teenage girls had become pregnant in Kenya, a 40 percent increase from the country's monthly average. Worldwide, teenage pregnancies are on the rise as well.

Especially concerning for us was the status of the 20 GTL girls from the Karamoja region in northeastern Uganda – a desperately poor pastoral area where severe hunger could have forced families to marry off girl children for the bride price (that is, cattle). One of the 10 graduating students from Karamoja has enrolled in school and is four months pregnant, with the baby due

before graduation in April 2021. The Uganda Coordinator is looking into infant care options to enable the mother to succeed and graduate from secondary school after birth of the baby.

In August, a local news agency visited the home village of several GTL girls in the Rift Valley in Kenya to investigate the rising incidence of teenage pregnancies, again in a predominantly pastoralist community. A non-government organization (NGO) called Inua Dada, which supports girl empowerment, organized the meetings. The GTL girls and their peers received counseling on sexual and reproductive health as well as information around physical safety, as cases of sexual assault are also prevalent in the area.

GTL Scholars at Pemwai School in 2017, the year Cynderella front, second from right started high school

Day in the life of a GTL scholar during the pandemic lockdown

We asked GTL scholars to tell us how they were spending their time during the lockdown. Here are the stories from two scholars, Cynderella and Sanaipei, both Form 4 students who live in the Rift Valley of Kenya.

Cynderella comes from a family of very bright children but her single mother lives in extreme poverty and never went to school. Determined to go to secondary school, Cynderella passed the required national primary school exit exam at the end of 8th grade but was unable to get funding for secondary school. Because she had to have current scores to enter secondary school, she had to repeat the exams each year. In 2016, when she sat the exams for the third time, her family could still not afford to pay tuition for secondary school. She attempted suicide but was rescued and counseled by the local government administrator, the chief in her area. Her exit score was barely above the acceptable mark, but her primary school headteacher recommended her to GTL, saying, "I trust that with a good learning environment, she will improve and indeed excel." And, with GTL funding each year, in January 2020, she entered Form 4 in the top 7 percent of her class!

The pandemic has hit Cynderella's family hard, as her mother, a charcoal farmer, lacked access to markets when cessation of movement into the major towns was imposed. As a family, it has been a struggle for her mother to put food on the table for her five siblings who are at home.

During the pandemic lockdown, Cynderella's daily routine included farming charcoal with her mother from 9am to 4pm and studying at least two subjects each evening from 8:30-10:40 pm. She is grateful that her mother was able to afford a solar-power subscription service called M-Kopa that enabled her to have electricity to study at night. She did not have access to online learning or TV/radio lessons. Luckily, her uncle was able to obtain past examination papers so she could study various subjects for future exams.

When Cynderella started secondary school with GTL support in 2017, she also enrolled in a resource center called Miti Saba (Seven Trees), thanks to the local chief who assisted in her 2017 rescue. The program provides certified leadership training for young girls from different communities in Kenya and across Africa. During each school holiday, Cynderella

attended a week-long workshop to gain knowledge outside her secondary school curriculum and to interact with
young women from different walks of life.

Cynderella has been eager to resume school, and she is grateful that Kenya schools opened on October 15 for graduating classes. She is now scheduled to graduate in April 2021. She aspires to become a journalist so she can highlight social issues affecting women and other vulnerable groups in her community and across Kenya to global audiences. With GTL and local support, she has managed and largely overcome her depression, and now is well on her way to becoming a confident, smart young woman.

When we talked with Sanaipei in May 2020, she had been home for two months. Like Cynderella, Sanaipei also lives in the Rift Valley and has been supported throughout secondary school by Growth Through Learning.

She is also in Form 4 and is in the top 10 percent of her class. Sanaipei comes from a single-parent family. Her father is dead and her mother has no education. Sanaipei returned to her family's homestead at the start of the lockdown.

Sanaipei receives food and sanitary items from GTL (July 2020)

Sanaipei sitting, getting her hair braided by her friends at home during the pandemic

Her daily chores, beyond preparing breakfast, included going to the nearby water reservoir to draw and carry water back home with buckets used for bathing, cooking, washing clothes and dishes. This required multiple walking trips to the water point, about 20 minutes away from her house. In addition to hauling water, with her siblings she fetched firewood used for cooking. During the lockdown, the family was lucky to have a tree fall in their homestead, saving hours of time they would normally spend fetching firewood.

According to her 2017 GTL application, Sanaipei's mother is disabled and HIV positive. Sanaipei reported that her mother was sick, and that she had to request support from her church and relatives for medical supplies and food. In July, Sanaipei's home in Baringo, Rift Valley, was flooded out, and she had to evacuate and live with a relative. GTL was able to deliver some food and sanitary supplies, but during this period of time, she was stressed as things seemed to be getting worse.

Studying has been difficult for Sanaipei. While she worked on assignments for two hours early in the morning using the materials handed to students just before they were sent home, she said that she was

unable to complete her assignments as there were concepts that she did not understand and had no one to explain them to her.

In July, her school created WhatsApp groups for parents' cell phones to receive learning content from the teachers and to give students a platform to ask questions. Sanaipei's biggest worry at the moment is the final national examinations as she has heard that she needs to have caught up on her reading before April 2021, when she sits for them. Sanaipei is a very good student, and says, "I need to study and read ahead in preparation for this. "

Through the WhatsApp application, Sanaipei also talks with her sister Viona, a 2016 GTL graduate from Mogotio Girls School who emerged at the top of her class in her final examinations.

Viona in Yokohama, Japan (2019)

Through the Ashinaga Africa Initiative, Viona qualified for a fully paid scholarship to Doshisha University in Japan and is currently in her third year studying Economics and Computer Science. Viona is a great influence on her sister and is encouraging her to do her best and focus on her studies. Mercy, the GTL Programs and Digital Communications Manager, talked to Viona on Whatsapp recently. We were excited to hear that she's faring well and keeping safe in Japan. She resumed her classes fully online in September.

In October, Sanaipei returned to secondary school and is motivated to study hard and prepare for her final examinations starting in March 2021.

All schools in East Africa are adhering to strict guidelines from public health experts to keep the pandemic in check.

Students being sprayed with sanitizer during their return to school at Kapropita Secondary School (October 2020, Nation media photo)

"We must not be blind-sided by our efforts to contain COVID-19 and end up with a lost generation. Just as countries are opening businesses safely, we can reopen schools. "
Dr Matshidiso Moeti,
WHO Regional Director Africa

GTL Programmatic Cycle

We are often asked about how girls are selected for GTL support and how we track their progress throughout their high school education. We rely on our ten volunteer in-country Coordinators in East Africa who do a marvelous job of identifying, vetting, and mentoring the students who join the scholarship program. Four of the Coordinators are veterans who have served in this role for over a decade each. In 2019, each Coordinator was paired with a recent GTL alum to share the coordinating tasks and to serve as role models for current GTL girls. A Coordinator's role is complex and multi-faceted. In addition to selecting and mentoring students throughout secondary school, they also have to monitor the academic performance of the students as continuous sponsorship hinges on high academic performance throughout the scholarship.

We asked Godfrey Okello, the Coordinator in Western Kenya and an English Literature/ Guidance and Counselling teacher at Sega Girls, a partner school, to explain the process. Godfrey has volunteered as a Coordinator for 12 years. He gave information that assisted us in developing the following chart to illustrate the in-country coordinator's roles and the overall GTL programmatic cycle.

Characteristic of the GTL program is its ongoing, in-person connections with local communities, especially in recruiting eligible girls. Coordinators receive suggestions from religious leaders, local community leaders, staff from primary schools in the area, former and current GTL scholars, teachers in the schools with current GTL Scholars, and GTL Website inquiries. It's a real community affair.

Godfrey Okello, Western Kenya Coordinator

Godfrey Okello, sitting first left, supervising admission of new students at Sega Girls (January 2018)

"This fabulous [2019] newsletter! Honestly, the beauty and positive energy in the faces of the women in that newsletter speaks words for the organization!

Emily - Long time GTL donor

We are happy to hear from Emily and look forward to hearing your feedback on our newsletter. Contact us by sending an email to Mercy, GTL Programs & Digital Communications Manager mercykinyodah@growththroughlearning.org

GTL PROGRAMMATIC CYCLE

Stage 1

Continuous review of enquiries of interest in the scholarship program from local religious leaders, primary school teachers, GTL partner schools, GTL scholars/alumnae and from the website

Stage 2

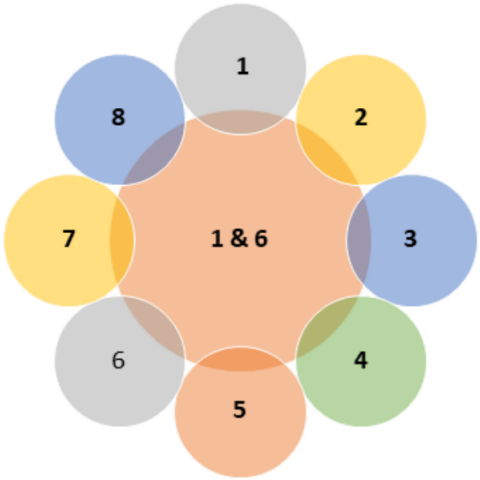
In-person interviews and phone calls are made by Coordinators to possible students

Stage 3

Data verification of possible students using the criteria of selection is done by the US office and scholarships offered

Stage 4

Once students report to schools, mentoring of students commences and tuition is wired directly to the schools



Stage 5

All individual detailed hard copy application forms and photos are mailed to the US office, processed and stored in Salesforce

Stage 6

Mentoring of students by coordinators continues and monitoring of academic performance throughout the year

Stage 7

Scholars in the graduating year fill out exit survey forms before they leave school. Some join higher learning institutions although GTL doesn't offer post secondary scholarships

Stage 8

Alumnae form WhatsApp groups to keep in touch and network. GTL facilitates their in person networking events every two years

Diana Achieng, GTL Graduate, Western Kenya Coordinator and College student

Godfrey Okello with GTL Western Kenya alumnae from left: Matilda Bright, Ruth Olum, Hope Ijaza and Oprah Jael (August 2019)

When the students graduate from high school, some of them join institutions of higher learning. GTL does not pay for higher education and many of the students get loans from the government, grants, and scholarships to pay for tuition. Post-graduation, the Cooordinators make an effort to stay in touch through groups of alumnae using Whatsapp. GTL facilitates biannual networking for alumnae in East Africa.

In 2020, in Western Kenya, fifteen GTL graduates were expected to join University. However, with the closure of institutions due to the pandemic, the young women are looking forward to continuing their post-secondary studies in 2021.

The main challenge that the Coordinators face during the programmatic cycle is that there are far more students in need than GTL can afford to help. Our funds are limited. Secondly, the level of need of accepted students is much more than the scholarship covering tuition, room and board. Godfrey says, "Some girls require more than just fees. Some need support with personal hygiene products and sanitary towels. As a coordinator, I sometimes go out of my way to buy them these products, to make them comfortable with going to school, knowing that tuition without the basic personal products needed may not produce the desired results."

GTL East Africa team from left Teresia Wanjiru, Caroline Lentupuru, Sr. Lucy Diu (Central Kenya, Baringo and Tanzania Coordinators respectively), Wanjiku K. Mwangi (GTL Executive Director), Godfrey Okello and Diana Achieng (Western Kenya Coordinators), Scovia Nakabiito, Sr. Salome Nnambi, Beatrice Merige (Uganda and Kenya Coordinators), Beatrice Merige (Rift Valley Coordinator and Mary Ann Millsap GTL Board President.

Reflection from a Board Member, Penny Wells

What would it be like to be Sheila, a 12-year-old girl in rural Tanzania from a large family so poor that they could not take care of her? She went looking for work and was taken in by another family who allowed her to attend primary school in return for herding their cows and goats. This was Sheila's life just a few years ago, but now Sheila is 19 and on her way to graduating from a first-rate boarding school at the top of her class thanks to a full scholarship from GTL. How did this happen? What does it mean to Sheila, to her family and her community, even to the countries of Tanzania and East Africa?

I joined the board of directors at Growth Through Learning in June 2019 after a career in administrative law and nonprofit management. I was interested in GTL because of my lifelong commitment to young people and because of GTL's reputation as a well-run small international nonprofit. An added attraction was that GTL served girls in a part of the world where girls, half of the population, have been limited in opportunities but where their full enfranchisement could be transformative. I have never visited East Africa, though I long to.

As a board member and as a donor, I have an urge to understand what it is like to be Sheila or another young girl in Kenya or Uganda or Tanzania with a GTL scholarship. The stakes for young women in East Africa are high: both the payoffs of education (later marriage, smaller families, better health, better income) and the odds against getting that education (girls rarely attend secondary school at all in EA and when they do, most don't graduate). Girls with a full scholarship to secondary school have the equivalent of a golden ticket to a very different life. The data GTL has collected on the family circumstances of our girls (the poverty of the families, the prominence of single parenthood and the lack of parental education, the large number of children) confirm how transformative that ticket is. The almost incredible graduation rate (95 percent!) confirms how much the girls appreciate and deserve this ticket. With opportunity comes responsibility, and we have been able to measure the yield to the community in terms of leadership, service, and culture change.

I acknowledge how difficult it is for Westerners to understand or even imagine what life is like for young girls in rural East Africa. But in an increasingly interconnected world, the real-life stories of these girls speak for themselves. These young women are thriving and achieving with just a little water and fertilizer from us in the States. To borrow a phrase from a US cultural icon, they "are not throwin' away their shot." Such relatively small investments on our part go such a long way in these girls' lives, and the lives of their families, communities, and countries. I believe all of us as global citizens will be better for it

Founded in 1997, Growth Through Learning (GTL) is a secular organization that supports education and development in East Africa, by providing full secondary education scholarships for exceptional young women in Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania who would otherwise be unable to afford education beyond primary school. GTL encourages a cross-cultural exchange of information and ideas, especially promoting women's empowerment in East Africa.

YES! I would like to support Growth Through Learning with a gift in the amount of:

DONATE at: www.growththroughlearning.org

- $50 transportation to school and books.
- $100 support for a GTL Coordinator's expenses.
- $350 supports a girl for half an academic year
- $700 supports her for a full year
- $1000 school fees for a student plus programmatic support
- $5000 become a sustaining friend of GTL
- Donate an amount that is right for you
- Volunteer with Growth Through Learning - contact Wanjiku K Mwangi; Executive Director at execdir@growththroughlearning.org to learn more
- Visit us on Facebook Instagram and LinkedIn: @growththroughlearning and if you like what you see, share with your friends.

GTL legacy society

Come join the GTL Legacy Society through a once-in-a-lifetime bequest to GTL! It is a flexible and convenient way to give. You can donate a specified sum of money, a percentage of the remainder of your estate, or a particular property — and because you are not making a gift until after your lifetime, you can change your mind at any time. In turn, GTL will use your gift to provide girls in East Africa the education they need to realize their aspirations for themselves, their families, and their communities. Several years ago, an anonymous gift left to GTL continues to pay part of our management and administrative costs, providing a bedrock of comfort so that most money we raise annually goes directly to the girls' education. GTL is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt, charitable organization whose legal name is Growth Through Learning, Inc. Your gift should be made out to Growth Through Learning, Inc.

GTL's federal tax identification number is 04-3372808.

If you notify GTL of your intent to support us with a planned gift, you will become a member of the Growth Through Learning Legacy Society. If you have already included GTL in your estate plans, please let us know. We would appreciate the opportunity to thank you for your generosity.

For assistance, or to further explore the benefits of making a planned gift, please contact:

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Please consult your estate advisor if you are considering this type of gift.

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