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Contact:

Stephanie Yang, Director of Public Relations

Tel: 415-683-6894

Fax: 415-681-3995

stephanie@cardsfromafrica.com

<http://cardsfromafrica.com/>

ON 15TH ANNIVERSARY OF RWANDAN GENOCIDE, GREETING CARDS
ARE REBUILDING ORPHANED FAMILIES

Orphaned heads of households find unique combination of work and mentorship
through a Rwandan greeting card producer

Kigali, Rwanda (April 7, 2009) – Fifteen years after the Rwandan genocide left behind a generation without parents, Cards from Africa is commemorating the anniversary by celebrating the lives of orphaned young people transformed through a unique combination of work and mentorship.

“Every day used to be so difficult,” recounts Florance Uwingeneye, who lost both parents and a younger sister in the 1994 genocide. “All the things we had while our parents were alive disappeared. Since I joined Cards from Africa, my life has changed tremendously.”

UNICEF currently estimates that there are 860,000 orphans in Rwanda, about eight percent of the population.¹ Cards from Africa exclusively employs orphaned young adults in the production of intricate handcrafted greeting cards that are sold around the world. The workers are all heads of households, responsible for one or more younger siblings. With the strong wages they receive from Cards from Africa, they are able to provide food, shelter, clothing, health care, and school materials for their younger siblings. Providing school materials is key: although the Rwandan government has eliminated school fees at the primary education level, the cost of notebooks, pencils, and school uniforms keeps most orphans from attending school.

“Our goal is to help Rwanda address the significant challenges facing its orphaned population,” says Cards from Africa founder Chris Page. “If we can empower the eldest siblings and keep the younger ones in school, then these families can break the cycle of poverty in this generation.”

Over 150 orphaned young people have worked at Cards from Africa since its inception. Uwingeneye’s story is representative of the transformation that can happen for an entire family. After the genocide, her older sister tried to take care of the remaining children, but times were extremely hard. “We didn’t have food to eat, or go to school. We didn’t feel safe,” Uwingeneye recalls. Then in 2000, her older sister died, leaving behind a two-week-old baby. Now the eldest sibling, Uwingeneye had to assume responsibility of the entire family. She found a job as a housemaid which paid only 4000-5000 Rwandan francs (approx. \$10) a month. Even with the neighbors’ help, the family barely scraped by.

In 2006, Uwingeneye discovered an opportunity to work at Cards from Africa, and her family’s prospects quickly changed. “I am now able to pay for rent and for education for my little sister!” she proclaims proudly. “I can afford all the basic needs of life because of the money I make at Cards from Africa.”

Of course, income isn't the only challenge facing these orphaned young people.

"Before I came to work for Cards from Africa, I was so desperate. I had no joy, no hope, no forgiveness or love for others," confesses Athanasie Muhorakeye, another cardmaker.

Page recalls what he learned as the company grew: "We quickly realized that these orphans needed a parental figure that could mentor, counsel, and advise them, especially through the intense emotional trauma caused by the genocide. They also needed help with life skills, such as cleanliness, healthy relationships, and financial management."

Page hired "Mama Esther" Makombe, a warm older Rwandan woman, to be the company's counselor and to provide a parental presence for the card staff. Each morning, Makombe starts off the workday with a half-hour of life skills training. A gentle, empathetic listener, she also meets with the orphans individually, offering support and guidance for their unique challenges. She makes two home visits a month, where she can see how each family is living and meet the younger siblings.

For Muhorakeye, these times were instrumental in overcoming the bitterness of the genocide: "After meeting with Mama Esther for some time, I realized I needed to change. Mama Esther listened to me, advised me, and encouraged me. Today, I have hope. I have forgiven the ones I used to hate. Finally, I am free."

Stories like those of Uwingeneye and Muhorakeye give Page hope for Rwanda's prospects: "Fifteen years after the genocide, we have Hutus and Tutsis working together to rebuild each others' lives and families. We are seeing restored people provide for their younger siblings, get married, and begin to dream of what they can do with their lives now. The despair is gone and has been replaced with hope."

But there is still more work to be done. The waiting list for employment at Cards from Africa has over 50 names, and there are an estimated 101,000 child heads of households in Rwanda, according to UNICEF.²

"This is where our friends around the world can make a difference," encourages Page. "The more people find out about what is happening in our little workshop, the more jobs we can provide and the more transformation will take place. There's a lot more to be written in Rwanda's story."

About Cards from Africa. Founded in 2004, Cards from Africa produces handcrafted greeting cards and provides employment to young heads of households in Rwanda who have been orphaned by the 1994 genocide or diseases like AIDS and malaria. The orphans are paid strong wages, with which they are able to pay for food, shelter, health care, and school materials for their younger siblings. The company was the 2006 Runner-Up in the BBC/Newsweek World Challenge, which funds innovative enterprises that benefit their communities, and has received mentions in publications such as Newsweek and O Magazine. It is a proud member of both the International Fair Trade Association and the Fair Trade Federation, and is committed to fair trade principles, including strong wages, protection of children from labor, and environmental sustainability.

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¹The State of the World's Children 2009, http://www.unicef.org/sowc09/docs/SOWC09_Table_4.pdf

²Rwanda: facts and figures, http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/23867_20292.html