

Polio survivors and other young people with disabilities often face a daunting future in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Most come from families too poor to pay for even the most basic support, such as braces, to help them walk. And most are excluded from mainstream schools and community life because of their disability. Without help, many are left to literally crawl along the margins of society with little chance of a better life.

Since it was founded by a group of young people with disabilities in Kinshasa in 1999, StandProud and our partner organization, l'Association Congolaise "Debout et Fier" (ACDF), have helped more than 5,000 young people across the DRC to walk again. We tailor support for every young person we help. In many cases, providing some relatively inexpensive treatment and equipment is all that is needed to dramatically improve a young person's mobility and significantly change their life forever.

Since 1999, StandProud and ACDF have grown and expanded, establishing and maintaining six brace-crafting workshops across the DRC—in Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, Bunia, Butembo, Goma and Kalemie—that provide free equipment for as many disabled Congolese young people as possible. And there are StandProud organizations registered as non-profits in United States, the United Kingdom and Switzerland with all volunteer staff.

Although our beneficiaries are primarily children who were paralyzed by polio during the first years of their lives, or who become paralyzed as a result of ill-advised injections in their hips during treatment for malaria or other diseases, we also help young disabled people suffering from spasticity, those born with club feet, and people with spinal cord injuries who were previously confined to wheelchairs.

StandProud and ACDF use a variety of approaches to improve the mobility of the people we help, and to ensure that these improvements are maintained.

This work includes bracing, corrective surgery and casting, and replacing poor quality equipment. But helping a disabled child with their immediate physical needs is only part of a good solution. Any assistance will have only limited impact unless it is also accompanied by additional support.

To achieve this, we supplement our brace-making and treatment activities with an education and skills training programs to help our beneficiaries become more active members of their communities. Parents are taught about the importance of sending their disabled children to regular school along with their non-disabled siblings, and provided with some basic assistance with school fees to encourage attendance.

Our professional training equips our beneficiaries with the skills to become program managers, accountants, IT experts, and brace-makers, and we are proud to include lawyers, medical doctors and physical therapists among the "graduates" of our program. We provide employment where possible to many of the young people who have benefitted from our programs.

Having a staff made up of former beneficiaries helps build self-confidence for new arrivals. And seeing other people with a disability managing a large operation and doing most of the work involved makes an enormous impression on both children with a disability and their families visiting our facilities for the first time. Our staff members not only craft the equipment for new arrivals and teach them to walk, but also treat minor illnesses, help them with their homework, and even physically carry them around until they can manage on their own. As a result, the young people are surrounded by positive images reinforcing the message that people with physical disabilities still have many important capacities and can play useful roles in society.

To complement our other work, StandProud and ACDF also employ a unique approach for supporting young people with disabilities in the DRC, including confidence building, an “extended family approach” and providing rehabilitation homes where young people can stay before and after their treatment.

At StandProud we also believe that we need to do what we can to prevent disability, to help ensure that our impact on the environment is minimal and to build an organization that is sustainable and meets the needs of young people in the future. To help prevent more young people being exposed to polio, we collaborate with the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, Rotary International and Rotary clubs in the DRC, to encourage all Congolese to vaccinate their children against polio. And we collaborate with other initiatives across the DRC to improve water quality, sanitation systems and poor hygiene practices that are at the root of polio infection.



Photo courtesy of Derek Jeter

We also work to reduce our impact on the environment. StandProud and ACDF use only recycled scrap metal, purchased locally, to construct our braces. Metal braces are easily repaired, unlike plastic braces, and we do thousands of repairs each year. We use recycled leather to make our brace straps, belts and corsets. And we use second-hand shoes, also purchased locally, in which to “set” the braces.

Despite the unrelenting political crisis in the DRC, and some of the worst poverty in the world, we continue to work to seek out and partner with people and organizations from around the world to assist young people with disabilities in the DRC to increase their mobility, reclaim their dignity and have the opportunity to integrate into the society around them.

Find out more about the work we do or become a StandProud supporter now at www.standproud.org or write to us at info@standproud.org. ■

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