

More than just tea

Bucks County family sends profits from tea company to orphans in Kenya

By Kathy Lauer-Williams
OF THE MORNING CALL

Ajiri Tea packages contain handcrafted images of red-clad women carrying water, planting crops and playing instruments. Inside, the hearty black tea is fastened with twine hand-twisted from banana leaves.

Sales of the specialty black tea, available in shops in Bethlehem, Hellertown, Emmaus and Coopersburg, help orphaned children get an education in an impoverished area of Africa.

Sara Holby, a 22-year-old from Upper Black Eddy, Bucks County, hopes the tea company that she started with her sister and mother will also provide jobs for Kenyan women and help tea farmers in western Kenya.

"We want to have a long-term impact by employing women and sending money to help education," Holby says. "We hope to make a difference in Kenya today and in the future."

Holby fell in love with the country when she studied in Kenya for a semester, through St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y.

"Kenya is the most beautiful country," she says. "It has green rolling hills dotted with little huts with tin roofs and bright red dirt. And the people are so nice and incredibly welcoming."

However the country also is struggling with an epidemic.

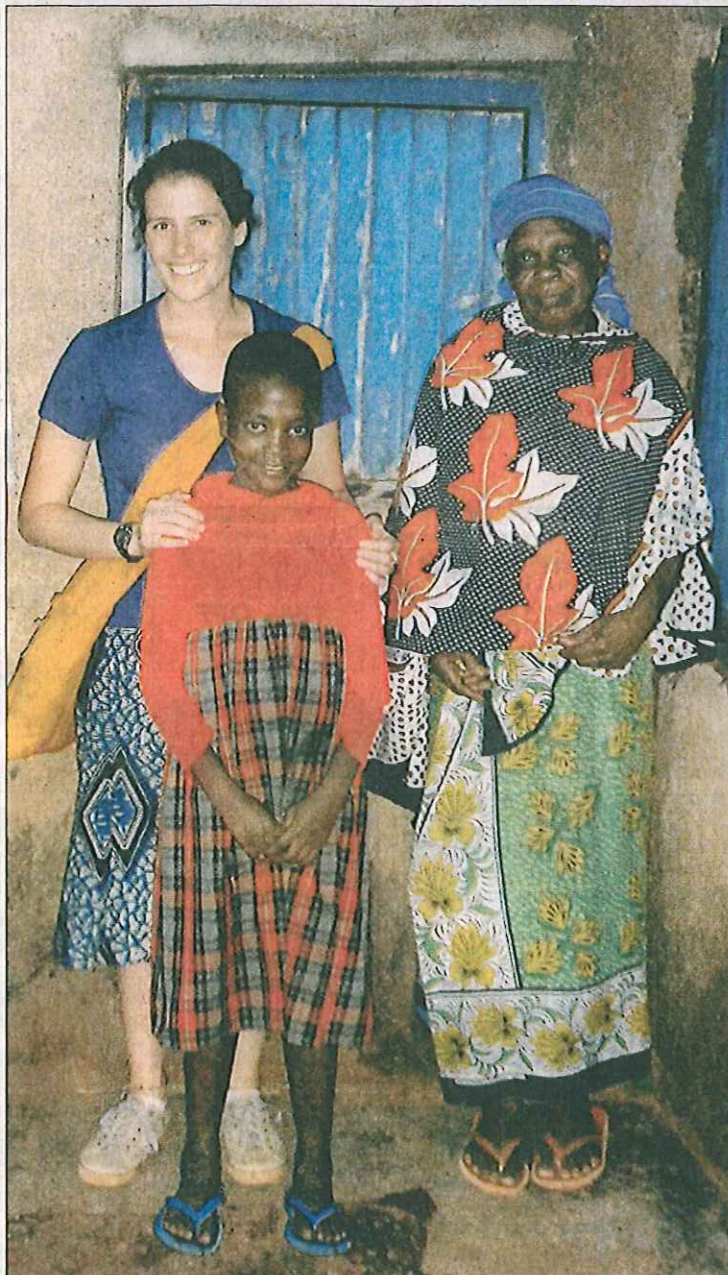
"AIDs is very prevalent in western Kenya and has had a huge impact on the people," she says. "It has left a lot of single mothers and kids with HIV. Many kids who are orphaned live with

Please see **TEA LIFE 2**



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A women's group makes designs for the packages and hand rolls twine.



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Sara Holby, who started Ajiri Tea Co., stands with 10-year-old Diana, who lost her parents to AIDS and is HIV positive. With them is Diana's grandmother, who is helping to take care of her.

AJIRI TEA

■ **What:** Ajiri Tea is a full-bodied black tea hand harvested in Kenya and packaged using twine made from banana leaves in boxes that are hand decorated by Kenyan women. The company was started by a family from Upper Black Eddy, Bucks County, with profits going to the Ajiri Foundation, which pays school fees for orphans in western Kenya.

■ **How much:** 3½ oz. loose tea, \$8.50 and 16 tea bags, \$7.50.

■ **Where available locally:** Wise Bean, 634 N. New St., Bethlehem; Bee Natural, 21 N. Main St., Coopersburg; Cottage, 379 Main St., Emmaus; Queen's, 516 North St., Emmaus; Frey's Better Foods, 1575 Main St., Hellertown; Java Queen, 126 Northampton St., Hellertown.

■ **Info:** www.ajiritea.com.



EMILY ROBSON / THE MORNING CALL

Sara Holby brings boxes of Ajiri Tea that arrived from Kenya to an Emmaus store owned by borough resident Emma Ville.

PHOTO GALLERY

Photos of Sara Holby in Kenya and at a store in Emmaus
themorningcall.com



TEA

Continued from LIFE 1

their extended family."

After graduating from Bowdoin College in Maine in 2008, Holby returned to Kenya the following September. She was volunteering with an organization that provided free medication and food, but the group folded in January. Holby realized that by handing out food and medicine, the organization had made people dependent.

"I started thinking about ways to do something that was more sustainable," she says.

Sara's mom, Ann Funkhouser, went to Kenya to visit. She, Holby and Nick Miyogo of Kenya decided to create Ajiri Tea Co., selling the bold and flavorful tea from the Kisii region of Kenya.

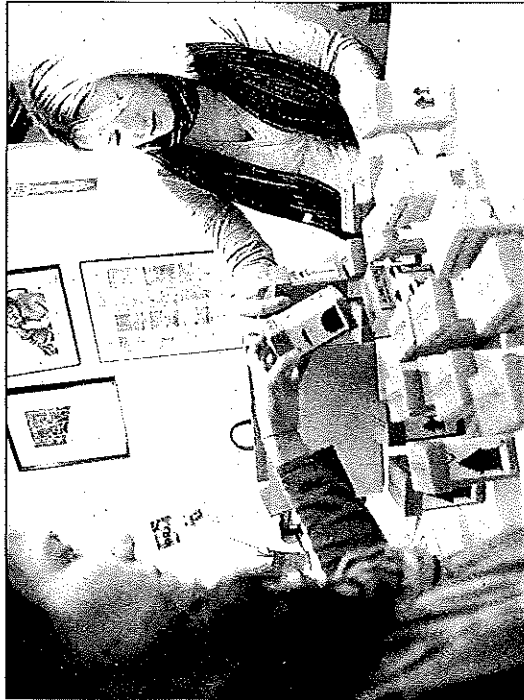
"They wanted to employ local women through the company. Ajiri means "to employ" in Swahili, the national language of Kenya.

"We came up with an idea, put everything together and it took off," Funkhouser says. "I guess we were supposed to have a business plan."

First they set up the Ajiri Foundation to direct the profits.

"The goal of the company is to pay school fees for orphans who can't afford it," Holby says.

Although primary schools are free, children struggle to pay for uniforms and books. Once children start eighth grade, they also must pay a tuition, and many



Sara Holby (left) drops off a shipment of Ajiri Tea, from Kenya, to Cottage, a store in Emmaus owned by Emma Ville of Emmaus. Holby, her sister Katie Holby and her mother started a tea company that benefits Kenyan orphans.

EMILY ROBSON / THE MORNING CALL

leaves to make the twine. The first time the women were paid for their work, they were so excited they sang and danced, Holby says.

"What makes this really rewarding is it is crucial to help women," Funkhouser says. "Often they are the main support for the whole family. They face 80 percent unemployment. And just to give these women a job is huge."

When she returned to the United States, Holby made the rounds of area stores to get them to carry the tea.

"We've only been selling it for six weeks and it's selling like hotcakes," Funkhouser says. "It's in 32 stores, and they're all reordering. That means it's selling."

So far, stores are carrying the tea in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. Retailers include Park Slope Food Coop and Sahadi's in Brooklyn, as well as local independent stores such as Cottage in Emmaus and Frey's Better Foods in Hellertown.

She hopes to pay the first school fees for children in January, when the Kisii school term starts.

Her dream is that the company will become successful enough that she can hire employees and draw a salary while continuing to support the Ajiri Foundation. She wants to model Newman's Own, the for-profit food company started by actor Paul Newman that benefits non-profit groups.

"This has been good for Sara," Funkhouser says. "It's a great story and I think it has a lot of potential. It really turned into a family project and the exciting part is — it's working."

didn't feel like work."

Next the sisters began to look for a woman's group to handcraft the labels. They found one in the village of Tabaka, where women were not allowed to work in the local soapstone-carving industry. Of the 25 women, eight are widows with children and 10 are grandparents supporting grandchildren.

"Giving women their own incomes empowers them," Holby says.

The women design and handcraft each label using dried banana leaves. They hand cut, roll and lacquer long, triangular strips of recycled magazines to make paper beads for packages. They twist dried banana

children are forced to leave school. In May, St. Lawrence student Kate Holby traveled to Kenya to help her sister. The two started looking for a factory in what turned out to be a painstaking experience.

"It took us all day to go to one factory," Holby says. "We'd get in a 15-passenger van filled with 25 people and hurdle around the country. I now know a lot more about tea than I'd ever thought I'd know."

They settled on Nyanسیونgo Tea Factory, a collective of small 1- to 2-acre farms in the region.

"We didn't know anything," agrees Kate. "But it was so fun and interesting, it