

Penn. Tea Co Sends First Five Kenyan Kids to School



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by Heidi Kyser

Ajiri means "to employ" in Swahili. Considering its mission, Ajiri Tea in Upper Black Eddy, Penn., could just as easily have chosen a name that means "to educate." In February, profits generated by Ajiri Tea were used to send five Kenyan orphans to school.

Ajiri co-founder Sara Holby said she and her co-founder (and mother) Ann Funkhouser based the business model for Ajiri on that of [Newman's Own](#). Here's how it works: Women's groups in Kisii, Kenya, make labels and twine using dried banana leaves and bark from

banana trees, and beads from recycled magazines. The Pennsylvania team imports tea from Nyasiongo Tea, a Rainforest Alliance-certified producer that is also in Kisii. Holby and Funkhouser, along with Kate Holby (Sara's sister), assemble the products produced in Kenya and sell them through the 70-plus distribution points they have secured throughout the eastern U.S. They channel 100 percent of the profits of the sale of the tea to the Ajiri Foundation, a 501(c)3 nonprofit organization whose goal is to fund school education for orphans in western Kenya. Nick Miyogo oversees the Kenyan operations and acts as liaison to the U.S. business.



"Today, the first five orphans began school," Sara Holby told WTN on Feb. 17. "That was our goal: to put kids through school. The women (in Kisii) are working to put kids from their district through school. They choose the orphans. We put everything together into a product here, but the money from it goes back to the community where it originated."

Ajiri Tea officially began in October 2009 following approximately nine months of planning by Holby and Funkhouser. Holby spent September 2008 through January 2009 in Kenya volunteering for a non-governmental organization that handed out food and drugs to HIV patients. In January, Holby said, the program abruptly halted when the organization lost its funding.

"Within a two-week period, all these people who were relying on us for food and drugs were suddenly cut off," she said. She felt there had to be a better way to make a difference in the country she'd grown to love.

Holby stayed in Kenya another six months. During that time, conversations with her former coworker Miyogo, as well as visits by her mother and sister, led to the development of Ajiri Tea.

"We all talked about how we should do something more sustainable, something that employed people instead of just giving handouts," she said. "When my sister was there (in May and June), we really started laying the groundwork. We found the women's groups to make the labels, and we found the factory we wanted to buy our tea from."

Holby said she and her mother – who left her job as an editor for a finance firm on Wall Street in March 2009 – are working full-time, and Kate Holby, who is still in college,

helps out when she can.

Sara Holby and Funkhouser both went to [St. Lawrence University](#) in Canton, N.Y., and went to Kenya for study-abroad programs. While Holby was in Kenya, she lived with a family that owned a tea farm, and she spent a couple days picking tea there. Before founding Ajiri, her experience with tea was limited to that and drinking "about five cups a tea per day," she said.

"We didn't know a thing about business or tea," she said. "We just launched into it blindly... but with a vision."

Holby described the tea as "strong black tea, but without a bitter aftertaste. In Kenya, they make it with a lot of milk and sugar." She said she consulted with independent outside tasters, who assured her the quality of the tea was good.

"We haven't really tried to sell to any tea connoisseurs yet, but once people try the tea, they're impressed by the taste of it, as well as the packaging," she added.

The company is doing wholesale to specialty grocers and retail on its [Web site](#). Holby said she doesn't plan to launch any branded Ajiri retail locations.

