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Ajiri Tea

A new company founded by a young alumna empowers women and educates children in Kenya

Sara Holby '08 is quick to smile and quick to laugh, no matter the circumstance. That ever-positive demeanor was a strong trait for a college student heading off to volunteer in a remote Kenyan village, as Sara did during her junior year. She returned to Kenya the next year, thanks to a Global Citizen's Grant through the McKeen

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Center for the Common Good (see page 12), and continued her work, along with classmate Liza Cohen '08, with the same NGO, providing health-care assistance to villagers wracked by HIV/AIDS. The health care clinic's funding suddenly dried up, but Sara's desire to make a long-term difference in the village of Kisii did not. A former BOC co-president and recipient of the BOC's James S. Lentz Leadership Award, Sara's cheery persona belies a fierce drive.

"Sara's had challenges and difficulties [in Kenya] but I think that's why it turned out so well," says Susie Dorn, director of the McKeen Center for the Common Good. "I'm just blown away by how she's not just returned for a year, but she's returned for life."

Back in Pennsylvania, Sara's mother Ann was laid off around the same time Sara's clinic closed. Ann had also studied and worked in Kenya as a student, and was eager to partner with Sara on a new plan. Along with Sara's sister, Kate, they decided to form a company to sell Kenyan tea, with a spinoff non-profit foundation that would return the company's profits to the Kisii area to pay school fees for village orphans. Importantly, Ajiri Tea would employ local women to hand craft the prod-

uct's artful packaging—in the Swahili language, "ajiri" means "to employ."

"The idea is that the women are creating the product that is enabling the children in their community to go to school. So it's a cycle," Sara explains. "Our goal is to employ women, not just give them a handout. If you give them a source of income and they're

earning their money, you help the whole family. It has a much better trickle down effect."

Sara sends the tea income directly to her colleague, Nick Miogo, in Kisii, and he personally takes the children to buy supplies and personally delivers the funds directly to the schools to pay the fees.

"There's a lot of corruption in Kenya," Sara says, "and this way we insure that our profits go directly to the children and there aren't any of the usual channels for the money to be lost in." Nick also teaches the women how to make the labels, delivers the supplies to them, pays them, and sends the completed labels to Sara in the States.

Ajiri Tea sold its first box of tea in the middle of October, and the Ajiri Foundation sent six local orphans to school when the new school year

began in February. In Kenya, primary education through eighth grade is free, however many of the children, especially orphans, lack simple necessities that make proper education possible. For instance, a fifth-grader named Diana, who has HIV, and is an AIDS orphan who lives with her grandparents. Ajiri Foundation purchased her schoolbooks, uniform, shoes, soap, and toilet paper—"Things that she didn't have at home," Sara says. "That cost \$60."

And, the tea, of course. "The tea is really good tea—that's the thing I always forget to mention!" Sara laughs. "It's Kenyan black tea, which doesn't usually come to the US. There are very few Kenyan tea vendors here." Ajiri tea

is grown in the Kisii district on small-scale, family-owned farms that are Kenyan Tea Development Agency (KTDA) co-ops. Sara and Ann wanted a KTDA factory (not big plantations) and found a one that not only had a woman manager, but was at the time just receiving its Rainforest Alliance certification, "so that means all farmers growing the tea are following the protocols," Sara explains.

Sara has placed the tea in 75 stores so far, including the Bowdoin Bookstore, The College Store and several other Brunswick shops. It's also available to purchase from the Ajiri Web site: www.ajiritea.com.

