

Missionary to Uganda Irene Gleeson Dies at 68

Australian “grandmother” to 8,000 Ugandan orphans died peacefully on Sunday afternoon in Sydney after a 14-month battle with esophageal cancer.

Founder of the Irene Gleeson Foundation (IGF), Irene Gleeson died surrounded by family and friends, a spokesperson for the family said on Monday night.

Gleeson will best be remembered as the courageous Australian grandmother with an unshakeable faith who traded her Northern Beaches home 22 years ago for a war zone in order to rescue children from the ashes of war.

In 1991, Gleeson sold everything she owned, said goodbye to her four grown children and 13 grandchildren, and towed her modest caravan to Kitgum—a small, isolated community on the Sudan border and home to one of the world’s most terrible conflicts. Then, under the shade of a Tamarind tree, she began teaching traumatized children to sing.

Many of the children she rescued were former child soldiers who had been kidnapped by religious extremist Joseph Kony and his band of rebels.

A trained teacher, she then added reading and writing to her repertoire, carving out letters of the alphabet in the dust. Eventually she began feeding the orphans, sinking wells and establishing building works.

But development didn’t come easy: Gleeson was the target of several rebel attacks, suffered bouts of malaria and depression, and dealt with extreme isolation.

Despite the setbacks, the tenacious “Mama Irene” never gave up

on her dream of restoring hope and dignity to the Acholi people. Today her legacy remains: 8,000 children who wear red T-shirts symbolizing the blood of Jesus and who each receive food, clothing and medical care daily; three primary schools; a 60-bed AIDS hospice; a vocational training center that caters to 1,500 students; a community church and a radio station broadcasting to more than 1 million people in the region. Thousands came to know Christ through her ministry.

Gleeson's work has been recognized by the president of Uganda, Yoweri Kaguta Museveni, and by the Australian government. In 2009, she received the honor of Officer of the Order of Australia for "service to international relations, particularly through sustained aid for children affected by war and HIV/AIDS in northern Uganda," and media outlets began to dub her "Australia's Mother Teresa."

Her autobiography is due for release in 2014.

Gleeson's funeral is open to the public and will be held at 10 a.m. on Monday at C3 Church, 34 Wakehurst Parkway, Oxford Falls, Australia.