

Robyn Nietert

President of Women's Microfinance Initiative

She didn't have a background in economic development and knew little about women in Africa. But Bethesda's Robyn Nietert did have a desire to help others and a can-do attitude. That spurred the Carderock resident to found the Women's Microfinance Initiative (WMI) with her neighbor, Betsy Gordon. In the past two years, WMI has helped 1,400 Ugandan

and Kenyan women start or expand small businesses.

Niertert is a classic example of the axiom that dedicated individuals can effect major change.

In late 2006, she had retired from a successful career as a telecommunications attorney and was reading *Banker to the Poor*, Muhammad Yunus' 2003 account

of starting a micro-lending program in Bangladesh. Coincidentally, a member of her church told her women in Uganda needed loans to start businesses. "You know what," Nietert said, "we can do that."

In January 2008, Nietert, Gordon and a small board of directors formed WMI, using \$3,000 of their own money for loans. Today, WMI has a revolving loan fund of \$200,000, thanks to donations. Interest on repaid loans and a 100 percent repayment rate fund salaries for the women who run the program in Africa—all WMI "graduates"—and the construction of facilities there.

Niertert, 57, has long believed in her ability to make big ideas happen. She put herself through George Washington University Law School, eventually becoming a partner in the firm that became Brown, Nietert & Kaufman, where she once worked as a paralegal.

"A lot of people talk the talk," says David Kaufman, Nietert's former law partner. "Robyn follows through."

Niertert has traveled to Africa multiple times, including with her husband, Malcolm Stevenson, and two daughters, and she stays in contact with the women she helps.

"I'm not an economist or a Ph.D.," Nietert says. But "it's important to believe in your ability to analyze a problem and develop solutions to it." — Amy Reinink

