

## **SEPTEMBER NEWSLETTER: KENNEDY OTIENO** *by Idabel Chege*

At a tender age, Kennedy Otieno or more popularly known as Ashley, finds himself at the receiving end of the fists and tongue lashings of his abusive father. Being born in Korogocho slum, he is partially brought up by his parents and then taken to a childrens' home. As the second eldest boy in a family of eight children, he realizes that he is the apparent cause of his fathers' outbursts and his mothers' never ending attempt to protect him. Poverty is a factor too but young Ashley feels that there is more to it. This pushes his mother to take Ashley to Tumaini Hope for Children Program in Korogocho, in a desperate attempt to hide him from his father.

This now becomes a new reality for the young boy. The late George Asisi, founder of Tumaini Hope for Children Program, takes Ashley under his wing and teaches him leadership skills. He goes an extra mile and takes him to M Chandaria Primary School in Baba Dogo up until he sits for his Kenya Certificate of Primary School and scores a C+.

The Home was struggling as it is due to overcrowding and also the levels of poverty are high. Even though many schools send invite letters to Ashley, he is unable to join any of them since he has no fees, He struggles and works here and there trying to help the childrens home as best as he can but still no hope for him.

Mr. George finds him a school despite everything and in 2009, Ashley joins form one. He is beyond himself, but the joy is shortlived. After that one year, the school could no longer have him because his fees arrears had escalated out of control. He has always performed well in school, but this didn't retain his spot in the classroom if he didn't have the funds.

He is forced to go back to the Home and this is when he hits rock bottom. He starts to think about home, his father and his siblings. How his father would beat his mother, how during Christmas time he would buy toys and clothing for his siblings while he received nothing, how he hit him for no apparent reason, how his mother could never visit him for fear that she will be forced to go with him or even worse Ashleys' father will find out where he is.

Four months later and nothing is happening, he goes to a place called six to six in Lucky summer, where Neema School, a school started by the Giraffe Project, is situated. He courageously goes in and talks to the Principal Mr. Nyukuri, who agrees to admit him to the school in form two and begins learning. Maybe he saw how Ashley wanted to learn and also like Ashley puts it, 'this was all Gods' doing'.

In 2011, Neema School moved to Mathare, Tumaini building and Ashley still attended school. He would be sent home for fees but because he could not raise it, he was always accepted back regardless of the fact that he had nothing to offer.

I am now curious what it is that drives him to search earnestly for education and he says, 'I was desperate to learn so I just went to any school. I never knew Neema had sponsors so I never expected to get a sponsor. I just wanted to be in a school and learn. At Neema School I was allowed to learn and that was it, I never expected anyone to come and help me'.

In 2011, while in form three, Mr Nyukuri asked the students to write letters telling their stories and his story enable him to secure an interview with Richard and Denise Baines (founders of the Giraffe Project) so that they could hear Ashley retell his story in person.

Later in 2011, Mr Ben Mabuto, the new head teacher, gave Ashley a number which he proudly recites. Prior to receiving the good news that he has a sponsor, he is sent home for fees. Again he returns and is told that a wonderful lady called Sylvia from Belgium had become his sponsor. He is beside himself, he can't believe it. He thought that other students saw him as the poorest student of them all because he was always being sent home for fees. But it is all changing now. No more being sent away for school fees.

'Wow, I felt like I was on top of moving clouds. I was so happy. Nothing could hold my happiness. I was so happy. *Kupata sponsor akulipieshuleusomesimchezo (when you get a sponsor who will pay for your schooling so that you learn is no joke).*'

In 2012, Neema School again relocated to Ruai and Ashley was among the first class to sit for the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education and scored a D+. This grade devastated him because he anticipated scoring higher but this didn't happen. But he still held on to hope.

He is now nineteen years old. He can't go back to the childrens home due to the policy there where once you are over eighteen years you have to leave the Home. He finds himself living with friends and for survival he would participate in events where he would sing and perform and be paid around one hundred shillings. He would from time to time go back to the childrens home and help out when he had the time.

Hope is restored in 2013 where Sylvia his sponsor, through the Giraffe project allows him the opportunity to go to Unity College where he undertakes a Certificate and then a Diploma in hotel and Catering Management up until 2015. During all this time, he has no place to live but then again funds are provided for him that enables him to pay for his house rent as well as his transportation to and from school.

After a while, a vision is born and he sacrifices the time and energy to walk some kilometers to school just so that he can use his fare money to buy books and pens and take them to needy children around him. He would brave the cold, the rain, the hot sun and the dust just so a child somewhere would have a book to write on. This is how his vision of one day starting an organization that made a difference started.

In January 2015, after completing college, he starts a community based organization called the Hands of Help Children Organization and identifies three very needy kids. Their mandate is to support and promote the welfare of less privileged children through the provision of education and the three basic needs. At the moment, the organization can only provide for education and the two basic needs that is food and clothing, accommodation is a future aspiration for them.

In the area they operate, they act as watchdogs of the less privilege children in the slum areas. I can almost identify why he would choose to help people he didn't even know but I still ask, just so I can put it here in his own words. 'I am not an orphan, I have both parents and I went through such a rough childhood and my parents were there but they couldn't help me. Am not alone, there are other kids going through the same things I did right here in the community, and there is no one to help them or take care of them...they don't have a voice to speak themselves. That is what pushed me to start this organization, to help someone, to be their voice', he says.

With a team of six, he registers the organization and rents a small *mabati* (tin) house to serve as an office. A year and some months later, his journey has just begun. With no benefactors and having to find ways to keep the organization running like tutoring computer studies, designing cards as well as typing eulogies, he relies on well-wishers to donate books and cloths for the children which seem to be to some, something very minor but it goes a long way. When you choose to pay a certain amount of money for a child you have never met in a faraway place, you give this child hope, a chance to be someone who will change his or her community, and you might imagine that all you did was pay a certain amount of money every term to give this child education, but it is much, much more than that.

He currently has a total of seventy eight children ranging from two to fourteen years old under his wing. Can you see the ripple effect? One wonderful lady took upon herself to see to it that Ashley had an education, now Ashley has made it his sole purpose that these seventy eight children have the best shot in getting one by doing something as simple as providing school supplies, food and moral support like counselling for these children. The same way you have been there for the children you

sponsor here in Kenya. It has not been an easy journey for him but better is the end of the journey than the beginning of it.

His story is not done yet, in five years he plans to be a human rights activist advocating for the rights of the less privileged children, men and women I not only his home area but nationwide. He desires to go back to school and this time to learn about community development.

I am just but a writer who tells you their stories, and I know I might not express to you in totality how much you are changing peoples' lives, not only the beneficiaries of your generosity, but also their families, generation to come. Children grow up and become people of worth in the community, and through them they help another child or two elsewhere to make something of themselves. But we don't forget, it all started with one person making a decision to sponsor a needy child to be able to go to school and learn, and then that child becomes an engineer, or an activist, or even maybe, just maybe she may even become a writer.