

TEWODROS FISSEHA – the story of a ‘Giraffe Child’ by Idabel Chege

As I prepare for the interview with Tewodros, there is a curiosity of who he is and what more I will discover even after countless emails. We begin with him confidently introducing himself and I am instantly caught in wonder as to what his story is really about beyond the mature and bubbly personality. With him being only twenty five, and an Economics major at the University of Manchester, it seems like he has always had it all together, but this is certainly not the case.

His story starts when he came to Kenya over ten years ago and settled with his mother, brother and sister as Ethiopian Refugees. In order to make ends meet, his mother began a home-based business preparing a popular Ethiopian delicacy called anjera and selling it in Eastleigh slums where they lived. Life goes on and he sits for his Kenyan Certificate of Primary Education and scores three hundred and ninety nine points which, in Kenyan standards, is very good and ensures him a slot in any of the national schools. He finds himself invited to join Jamuhuri High School, “I was very disappointed to hear that that was the only school that wanted me”, Tewodros says.

Almost instantly his face brightens again and he tells me that his primary school principal told his mother that they should look for another school and he was sure that Dagoretti high school would accept him. Here is a clear and evident example that people are placed in our lives to help us go to the next step and everybody who knows you and all those that you know are placed in your life for one purpose or another.

He is accepted at Dagoretti but as it is a couple weeks before he joins the school he secures a job at a cashier at a restaurant referred to him by his mother’s friend. The proceed he then gives his mother to help with purchasing items for enrolment as well as school fees. His first year goes by, his mother struggling to pay his fees as well as feed her other two children. By the time the second year is coming round, he has fees arrears to an extent that the school principal wants him out of the school. Giraffe Project Coordinator at Dagoretti High School, the late Mrs. Wanji, learnt of Tewodros’ predicament and when he approached her saying that he intends to drop out and enroll in a day school walking distance from him home, she contacted Giraffe founders, Denise and Richard Baines and secured an interview for him. This bought him time as he puts it. He says, “Principal akatulia”, which translates as ‘Principal let me be’.

After his interview Denise contacts him with the news that a wonderful German lady will sponsor his education and I can’t help but want to know what his reaction was when the news came so I ask. “Oh that was...I was so glad, I was so glad like, we are not allowed to have cell phones at Dagoretti High School, but I knew someone who had one as I so wanted to ring my mum and tell her the good news, I was so happy, I was like yep, am not going home now. I was so happy”, he says smiling.

You might think that the story ends there, but you are wrong. In October 2012, through the United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the UK governments' scheme called Gateway Protection Programme, his whole family was granted an opportunity for relocation to the UK where he, and his siblings, could further their education.

At this point, in Tewodros's third year at Manchester University, his journey is just beginning. He is taking a semester in the University of Massachusetts and will return to his college in September for his final year to graduate in July 2017. He is already looking for an internship in a good company for further experience once he graduates. His brother and sister will be joining university next year after they complete their pre-university education. His mother is currently in her final year in school preparing to join KSO.

This is the ripple effect of a person taking time to take up a child from a far-away land and pay for their education. It opens possibilities for these children, possibilities that were only a dream until a stranger stepped in and made them a reality.

He is okay now because someone made a choice to stand with him. His last words? "Acha sasa nikunywe chai", Let me now have some tea.

"Your contribution, as little as it is, can make a huge difference in a person's life. Because all they want is an opportunity."

Tewodros Fisseha