

SIMON'S STORY: ORPHAN TURNED ENTREPRENEUR

By Ruth Young, Ed.D.

Simon Wanjala was born in 1991 in what he calls the “simple village” of Mototon in the Rift Valley of Kenya. Mototon is close to Mogotio Village in Baringo County, 121 miles northwest of Nairobi. He lived in a three-room mud house, each room being used to full capacity. One room was designated as his mother’s bedroom, which she shared with Simon’s four younger brothers. There was a sitting room, and a kitchen that doubled as Simon’s bedroom. As the eldest or “first-born” he was privileged not to have to share the same room with his mother. They lived this way until 2006.

Simon’s story begins this way: “We were brought up by our late mother without father; mum and dad had already separated. I never saw dad coming home although I knew him at a distance. Mum could become harsh whenever she saw me getting to my dad so we all kept our distance...”

“[In] 2006 my beloved mum started complaining [of] severe headaches; later it was discovered to be meningitis. She kept going for medication at Mogotio Hospital. I remember during those time I was kept to look after my young ones. The situation kept on till the month of September. I can’t remember the date but it was on a Friday afternoon my mum kicked off.”

THE MOVES BEGIN

Simon was in class six (6th grade) at Makongeni Primary School. Having nowhere to go, eventually he and his brothers went to live with his mother’s older sister, Helen Njoki. Helen had seven children of her own, and had also taken on the responsibility of caring for her younger sister’s four children. As Simon puts it, “...we all became sixteen in number depending on one mother. I am telling you it was really difficult, struggling up and down until the year 2007, which was the year that Kenya faced the post election violence that affected almost every part of the country. This is when we lost everything we owned; food, house, clothes and other properties...”

Mototon’s population was made up of people from the Kalenjin and Kikuyu tribes. The post-election violence that erupted around the country in late December pitted one tribe against another, and as Simon recalls the fighting was fiercest in villages in the Rift Valley. The Kalenjin wanted to flush the Kikuyu out of Mototon, and the Kikuyu were unable to fight back. Their houses were set on fire, usually during the wee hours of the morning, leaving little to no time for inhabitants to evacuate. People were seen running from their homes with no clothes on. Death threats were commonplace. Simon, a Kikuyu, was 16 years old and remembers spending nights in the forest.

SEEKING SAFETY

The nearest police station was in Mogotio. Simon's aunt sought refuge there, but the police had already vacated the station. Approximately 300 families had gone there to find safety, some sleeping inside and others having to stay outside. The Red Cross promised to bring food and supplies, but the Kalenjin hijacked their trucks. There wasn't enough food or water for all the families, and shelter was also scarce. Since Simon's family comprised 16 people they had to sleep outside. They lasted there for one month, and then one morning Simon woke to find arrows alongside the heads of people who were sleeping next to him.

After this event Helen decided to move her large family to the Nakuru Showground, 26 miles south of Mogotio Village where thousands of other displaced Kenyans were being sent. But the same issues they faced in Mogotio existed at the Showground refugee camp. Once again there was insufficient food and water supplies, lack of security, and barely enough shelter to go around. Simon's family stayed there for six months before moving again, but this time it was the Kenyan government that instigated the move, giving families the equivalent of \$100 USD to start a new life.

EAST THEN WEST

Simon writes, "The government took the concern and people were compensated with ten thousand shillings, so people decided to combine the money and buy one big land in Nyandarua..." Nyandarua is 47 miles east of Nakuru. There was no school in this area, so the community came together and built a temporary school building, and people who had teaching skills volunteered to teach the children. Simon was in Form One (9th grade) that year. At the end of 2009 the Kenyan government decided to compensate all displaced families with two hectares of land throughout Kenya, and Simon's Aunt Helen was lucky enough to get a plot in Rongai, 65 miles west of Nyandarua. Once again Simon and his four brothers and 10 cousins pulled up stakes and moved. Simon had completed 9th grade and was ready to begin his second year in high school, but there was no one capable of teaching high school sophomores near their new home in Rongai.

AN OPPORTUNITY

Aunt Helen cared a great deal for her nephew, and wanted him to finish secondary school, so she consulted other family members who lived 28 miles east of Rongai. They had heard about Bishop Edward Donovan Secondary School (BEDSS), a missionary school in Lanet Umoja that had opened with 23 students in 2009. They visited the school and met with the Head Teacher, James Maina, a man who understood all too well what had happened to tens of thousands of displaced and orphaned children in his country. He told her that sponsors had established a fund for orphaned secondary students attending BEDSS. Simon was elated! He now had

a chance not only to attend secondary school, but was also eligible for a full scholarship!

In January 2010 Simon became one of four orphaned students being sponsored by Juniper's Fare Restaurant of Waterbury, Vermont. This church-run restaurant was raising funds to support orphaned students at BEDSS. In 2012, Everyone's Child, Inc. (EC) assumed this responsibility by establishing a scholarship program to fund these orphans. Simon's sponsor became a teacher from Moretown Elementary School in Vermont. She had toured Kenya with EC in 2012. Her response to what she ascertained to be an ongoing need in Kenya was providing an education to children who had experienced tremendous suffering in their young lives. In her mind, the least she could do was to provide them with a way to escape their poverty.

MORE CHALLENGES

Simon was an affable student who was respected by his classmates and the staff. He realized early on that it would be a good idea to learn the names of kitchen staff as well as teachers and administrators as he could see that they were all helping him to realize his potential. He was now living with another aunt, uncle and their son in Lanet, grateful for the stability of a smaller family. Unfortunately they did not share the same feelings he did. At first Aunt Helen came to visit every other week, bringing with her maize, flour and sugar to compensate for his living with his aunt and uncle in Lanet. After a while she stopped visiting, and things became tense between Simon and his new family. The mother favored her son over Simon, and his cousin was not inclined to share anything that belonged to him, including his food and his bedroom. Simon made up his bed in their sitting room each night. He was thankful to have a roof over his head, but that was the only comfort afforded him. He remembers many times when he was told to stop studying and go to bed. His aunt would turn off the lights just to be sure that he was following her rules. The humiliation didn't end there. In the mornings his cousin would make a breakfast of ugali for himself, but Simon was told there was no food for him and he would go to school on an empty stomach. After school Simon was expected to work in the garden, and evenings found him washing Sammy's breakfast dishes. This aunt never came to his rescue, and Simon's interpretation was that she could see nothing about him that was worth rescuing. Through all of this Simon kept a level head, pushing on with his studies and his school commitments. He had been elected school captain (student body president) and decided to give that his all. He valued his education and especially the scholarship he was receiving, understanding that it was a "golden opportunity" in his life.

EMPLOYMENT

Simon knew that the situation with his cousin was not going to improve, so he approached Mr. Maina and asked if he could work on the school construction crew. He thought if he could earn enough money to rent a small home that he could devote

more time to his education. He was 19 years old and “energetic enough” as he put it to perform the kind of hard labor that these crews required. Simon was able to find a one-room hut that cost \$4.00 per month and said that he still had some flour and maize (corn) from his home in Rongai that could sustain him for the rest of the school year. James Maina understood that Simon wanted to find a place to live, but he also knew that he would need income to cover living expenses. When Simon’s food supplies ran low, he ordered food from the school kitchen for him. Simon viewed this kindness as the hand of God in his life, and in 2012 he graduated from Bishop Edward Donovan Secondary School with a degree in secondary education.

With secondary school behind him, Simon felt like a new man. He had survived his early years with no father, cared for his four younger brothers after the death of his mother, and lost everything familiar to him five times in the span of three years. In spite of all he had endured, the thought of how he would survive after school was more daunting to him than the trauma he had faced as a child. He worried about being away from the comfort and security of a rigid schedule and the watchful eyes of a school staff that cared for his wellbeing. His worries were short-lived however. The foreman he had worked with during the construction of BEDSS was now the manager of a large construction site in Nakuru. He hired Simon on the spot, knowing that he had an honest, hard-working employee in this young man. Simon went to work for him for one year, and began to see his life turn around. Even if he had planned for this, he couldn’t have wished for better circumstances. The boy who had started out his life in a mud hut and been displaced five times was now living in a cement house, with electricity to boot! Simon’s faith was unflagging. He attributed this “upgrade” to his God, saying: “God is really great!”

A HOPEFUL FUTURE

Better days were still ahead for Simon and his family. In 2013 his neighbor, a gentleman who taught at a local high school, approached him and asked if Simon felt he could teach high school. Simon replied that he could teach Christian Religious Education and Biology. He was hired and began teaching, quitting his construction job in order to work full-time as a teacher. The director of the school noticed that he was good at managing his time as well as the students, so before long he was made the school Deputy (assistant head teacher), and months later he was given the position of school principal. After a year however, the school director realized that Simon didn’t have a teaching certificate, so he was asked to step down. Simon was not dissuaded by this turn of events, and early in 2015 he became a businessman, selling kitchenware he had purchased with money he had saved from previous positions. Business was good, and Simon began to think about how he could repay his Aunt Helen who had been so good to him during his early years. He realized the best gift he could give her would be to bring his two youngest brothers, Stanley and Kevin home to live with him.

Today Simon, Stanley and Kevin rent a two-room home costing \$25.00 per month. The house has electricity inside and a water tap outside. According to Simon, this house “feets (sic) my standard.” He sells his kitchen products door-to-door or on the street and says that God never lets him down. “He always look (sic) at His young, innocent kids and provide for them through giving me customers...” Both boys attend Lanet Umoja Primary School, located 200 yards from BEDSS. Kevin is in 7th grade and Stanley is in 6th grade. They are both doing well in school and hope to attend BEDSS and receive the same scholarship their brother had at this school.

HELPING OTHERS

Simon’s goal is to help others who have experienced hardship. He says that his aim “...is to let society learn from me that God always provides for needy kids, that's number one. Number two is that I want society to understand that sometimes we need to sacrifice ourselves for others just like Jesus did.” Those goals are within his reach. In April 2017, Simon was hired to work with William Aludo, EC’s Kenyan Program Coordinator and a graduate from the School for International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont. For now Simon’s responsibilities are twofold. One task is bringing food to a primary school in Kampi Ya Moto, one of three schools that rely on EC’s fundraising to provide a lunch program for orphans who attend their schools. His second duty is acting as an assistant to William Aludo, encouraging and mentoring orphaned secondary students who attend BEDSS. William is a gifted counselor who runs monthly mentoring meetings for students who are receiving the same type of scholarship that Simon received when he attended BEDSS. Many students in this scholarship program won’t have the privilege of attending college, so in 2016 EC developed a mentorship program to offer them the tools they would need once they graduate from secondary school. William and Simon are teaching them life skills such as knowing what they want and can do in life, writing their first resume and approaching their first job interview. Simon’s experience has proven to be invaluable. He understands what it means to lose a mother and father, and still be expected to perform in school while living in a family where being on the bottom rung is commonplace. The students listen to him and know he identifies with their pain.

Simon’s future is full of hope. “Giving up” is not in his lexicon. He and his girlfriend Perpetua plan to marry, but he is waiting until after his two brothers have finished their primary education, two years from now. “To me,” he says, “it’s not long for God’s time is the best...”

To learn more about EC’s programs, visit www.everyoneschild.net.