

JEDIDAH'S JOURNEY

PREFACE

I met Jedidah in 2015. She had gathered in a classroom at Bishop Donovan Secondary School in Lanet Umoja, Kenya with several other Everyone's Child scholarship students to hear me speak. Each had received a scholarship from Everyone's Child because they were fully or partially orphaned and unable to pay for their secondary education.

In my remarks, I tried to encourage these young men and women who were about to go out into the world, knowing that most of them had no support system at home to fall back on. The students were attentive but relaxed, and certainly some were wishing they could be out playing football or walking through town instead of sitting in a classroom listening to me.

As I was wrapping up, Jedidah, in her last year of secondary school, raised her hand to ask if she could speak. "On behalf of all of us," she began, "we would like to thank you for giving us this opportunity to receive an education."

I was floored. No child of any age had ever said "thank you" for the gift of an education. I never looked for gratitude from these students. Just knowing that they were receiving what comes so easily to some, but to them was almost impossible to attain, was always enough for me. When I found the words, I said that it was because of people I knew back home who wanted to make a difference in the

world. And I meant it. None of what Everyone's Child does would be possible without the unflagging support of people who see the need and respond. I left the classroom with photos on my camera and an indelible mark on my heart.

Last winter I wrote to Jedidah, asking permission to tell her story. She gladly agreed. I emailed her with questions about her life, and she spent several weeks sending me her replies. Here is her story, partly in her own words, which are indented.

JOY

It will be my pleasure to tell about my life story. It's been up and downs but in everything i grow to be strong everyday and i thank God for everything i have passed through in life.

Jedidah Waithera Kuria was born in 1996 in the small village of Jogoo, 100 miles northwest of Nairobi, Kenya's capital. She is the youngest child in her family. Her early years were carefree and untroubled, spent going to school and playing with friends until the last rays of daylight would drive her inside. She and her brother, sister and mother formed a tight knit family. She remembers her mother as a joyful person and feels that she inherited that personality trait from her.

i can never forget her face because we were very close and i was the last born. She had a big heart and loved people. i can remember her because i have her

pictures. i can say she looks exactly like my big sister and every time i look at my sister i see my mother in her. My mom was very loving and i felt safe when i was with her. Even though i was a kid i can feel that love up to now.

STAYING TOGETHER

Tragedy struck in 2003 when her mother contracted HIV/AIDS and died a year later. Jedidah was eight years old. She remembers days when her tears would not stop flowing. Children in school made fun of her. Family members wanted to split the children up, but their grandmother wouldn't hear of it. She decided to care for the three siblings in her small home in Jogoo. Jedidah recalls not understanding what was happening, only that things were confusing, and that she missed her mother very, very much.

To compound the problem, Jedidah and her siblings had no relationship with their father, having never seen him or known him.

When i was young i used to believe that my dad passed away. In my family nobody talked about him. i myself wanted to ask about him when i grew up but i just couldn't. i heard from a neighbor in Molo when i was there last year that my dad was looking for me. We left our contacts there and after a week he called. We talked a little bit and never talked again. He was

planning on meeting us but that didn't push through. i have never met him. i don't know his name, how he looks, and at a point i feel like he was already dead.

Life continued to present challenges for Jedidah and her family. The tribal clashes that affected Kenya in 2007 rendered them homeless. Insurgents burned her grandmother's house to the ground, leaving them with nothing. The children hurried from the charred ruins of their home looking for safety. They slept outside for days, or found shelter in abandoned farms, always hiding, always afraid of being attacked. But the family stayed together.

ASSISTANCE AND EDUCATION

In January 2008, Jedidah's family moved in with her great uncle in Molo for a few weeks, and then moved to Nairobi to live with an aunt. They attended Kinoo Primary School and were given clothes and food through a church sponsored program. Meanwhile, Jedidah's grandmother left for Mombasa to live with her son. A wealthy man, he built them a house outside of Nakuru. When the house was finished, the grandmother sent for the three siblings, and then brought them to Nakuru for a new beginning. Life was looking up for Jedidah. She began to dream about her future and thought that she might like to become a journalist one day. She and her siblings began attending Lanet Umoja Primary School where they received a daily meal and were given uniforms from Everyone's Child (EC). Jedidah remembers the end of each term when people donated items for the orphans to bring home to their families.

Each time when the school was about to close for the holidays, parents and students would give whatever they had, like beans, maize, flour, cooking oil. Everything was divided among ourselves. Even clothes and shoes. Any time school closed for the month we would go home with something and our families were happy. We too were very happy.

After graduating from primary school Jedidah moved back to Molo where her uncle paid for her to attend a boarding school. But in December 2010, he died suddenly, leaving her with no one to pay her school fees. She tried to continue her education, but was continually sent home because she was unable to keep up with the payments. Ashamed and discouraged, she returned to her grandmother's home in Nakuru without much hope of being able to complete her high school education.

When she was 18, Jedidah applied for an EC scholarship at Bishop Edward Donovan Secondary School in Lanet Umoja. In her application letter, she promised to work hard and wrote "to study well and achieve my dreams is my life desire." She won a scholarship in 2013 and enrolled in Form 3 (11th grade).

When i joined the school life was so good... i loved the school so much because i never had a hard time

*studying...and i was never sent home
because [i lacked] school fees.*

At first, Jedidah's grades were excellent. But after one year, she began to doubt herself and her ideas, wondering what would happen if she succeeded in school. Who then would pay for her to go to university or college? Her scores began to fall and her dreams began to fade. Though she longed to continue her studies, she felt she needed to find a job instead.

EMPLOYMENT AND A WRONG TURN

Jedidah graduated from high school in December 2015 and moved to Mombasa. She knew she needed to earn her way and hoped to start a small business. She took a job cleaning rooms at a hotel. Within five months, she was able to afford a small room of her own at \$25 per month. She made friends, enjoyed her independence, and began thinking of pursuing her dreams again.

Before the end of 2016, Jedidah met a man in a cyber café seven years older who began to take an interest in her. She was attracted to him also, but was never quite certain about his feelings, as he was reluctant to show any affection toward her in public. She found his mysterious nature somewhat alluring but mostly frustrating, so she decided to stay away from him for a while. When she reconnected with him after several months, he told her that she could earn \$300 a month as a housemaid in Dubai. Her sister was already in Dubai and Jedidah was filled with hope at the thought of her life taking a new direction. This man helped her to get a passport, a

visa and even an airline ticket. He was open and friendly, and her attraction for him was rekindled. With no one there to tell her to be careful, Jedidah wound up in an all too familiar trap. She decided to give her heart and body to him, thinking that this would deepen their relationship. It was a decision she now bitterly regrets.

i had many plans for myself on how i could put up a new business. i was to leave for Dubai in January 2017, but everything changed in a blink of an eye. In my heart i was so excited but at the same time i was devastated.

CHANGE OF PLANS

A few weeks before she was due to leave, Jedidah discovered that she was pregnant. The father of the child told her to get an abortion. She was against ending the pregnancy so he denied his involvement with her and told her to get a DNA test once the baby was born.

i was soo stressed up and could not tell anybody from my family about it. Now i knew i had to work and get some money because i needed it when my baby would be born. So i stayed in Mombasa and cancelled everything about Dubai.

Jedidah had already quit her job, moved out of her home and sold her belongings in preparation for her trip to Dubai. A friend took her in, and also helped her look for work. After two months of praying and

looking, Jedidah found work in a mobile money (Mpesa) shop and was able to earn enough to find a room to rent. Not long afterward however, morning sickness took its toll, and she had to quit. All the funds she had saved were quickly depleted.

Life became hard on me again. i used to cry like everyday in my house. But i still held on, i had to be strong for the unborn innocent child.

Jedidah finally found a job working in a bar from 3 o'clock in the afternoon until 6 in the morning. Standing for many long hours was hard, but dealing with drunkards was even harder. Her boss also drank and deducted what he owed for his drinks from her paycheck. At the end of most months, she barely had enough to pay the rent, much less take care of her other needs.

All this time the new life inside of her was growing, demanding more of her body. Each morning she came home to her small room exhausted from another long night at work. Her doctor told her that she was overdoing it and that she might miscarry. Once again she stopped working, this time for fear of losing her child.

i used to sleep hungry with no food. Even at one time the landlord wanted to throw me out for lack of rent.

MERCY

In desperation, Jedidah finally broke down and told her sister about her pregnancy. Her sister contacted their grandmother and arrangements were made for Jedidah to return to Nakuru.

i felt so embarrassed that i did not do what i had planned to do that year. i stayed at home with the help of my sister and grandmother. Then come October when i was supposed to deliver my baby more complications began.

With government hospitals on strike and private facilities far too expensive, 22-year-old Jedidah, with no money and only the support of her aging grandmother, was faced with the dilemma of where to go to have her baby. Her due date came and went with no labor pains, so she was induced.

When the time came i went to a hospital where [a] normal delivery was free. Before i could give birth i had complication and the doctor told us to hurry and go to a hospital that offered operations since i was bleeding and the baby could die if i took long. We rushed to a private hospital and i had an operation and the baby and me were saved all thanks to God.

In October 2017, Jedidah gave birth to a healthy baby boy she named Liam. To this day she doesn't know where the funds came from for her to go

to Mercy Mission Hospital. She does know that she would have certainly lost the baby had she not gone there, and quite possibly might have lost her own life as well.

PRESENT DAY

i am back to Nakuru at the moment and doing well, at the moment. i want my son to grow up at least be one year of age so i can work for him and me. I want to be able to provide for him.

Am thinking of again going to Dubai when my son is a year old but the stress i have is i don't have somebody to leave him with. If only my mum was alive she could stay with my son but she is no more.

This is not an unusual story. All across the globe young women end up as un-wed mothers. It happens to girls with a promising future and to those with no future at all. So often the partner doesn't want to take any responsibility for the pregnancy, leaving the future mother alone to make decisions about their child.

Being a single mom is not that easy. The father don't want anything to do with him, even the DNA thing he threw that away but what can i do about the situation now. All i can do is pray and work.

LOOKING AHEAD

Jedidah's story is still being written. She loves farming and hopes to start a small business selling fruit juice, which will allow her to keep her son with her until he is old enough to go to school. A friend has offered her a small shop to conduct her business, but she lacks the initial capital to get started.

Additionally, while primary education and now secondary education in Kenya are free, preschool is not, so soon Jedidah will be faced with the challenge of affording a preschool program for Liam. There are other worries as well; another uncle wants to come back to Nakuru to live with his mother (her grandmother), and has threatened to throw her and the baby out of the house when he arrives. In all of this Jedidah has maintained a positive outlook and continues to strive toward her goals.

*All i know is that better days are ahead.
i just have to be patient and wait upon the
Lord because i believe that everything
happens for good to those that believe in
Him.*

This story is one of promise and potential, but it also demonstrates the reality of the challenges Jedidah faces. That is why it must be told. For those trying to help, it can be overwhelming to consider fixing all of the hardship that is in the world. But in the 2,000-year-old words of Rabbi Tarfon, "It is not for you to complete the task, neither are you free to desist from it." Everyone should simply do his or her part. That act alone can make all the difference for someone in need.

GAINING STRENGTH

From the first time I met her, Jedidah's words have had a powerful effect on me. Her grateful outlook was what first inspired me to tell her story, and provides here an apt ending:

Writing about what has happened to me in life made me feel like i was released from something that i was locked up in a while. i feel relaxed and gained more strength to move on with life. All thanks to you sister.

Truly all thanks goes to God and to those who support Everyone's Child.

If you enjoyed this story, please visit www.everyoneschild.net to learn more about our programs and the children we serve.