

# From Holland to children in Korogocho with love

What began as a casual chat with a waiter at a hotel in Nairobi has turned into a lifelong bond between a Dutch woman and some children of Korogocho

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A group of about 17 teenagers are all happily singing and dancing at the monumental Uhuru Gardens in Lang'ata, Nairobi. Not even the scorching sun can take away their broad smiles, sweet voices and dance moves.

To many of them, this is their first trip to Uhuru Gardens. For some, it is their first day out — away from the dark and littered alleys of Korogocho slums.

With them is a tall Dutch woman. Her name is Mary-Ann Sandifort, and she has been a regular in Korogocho since July 1996.

Mary-Ann, then a journalist with a Dutch newspaper, was visiting Nairobi with her husband Frank Masson, an economist, when a conversation with a waiter at the hotel they were staying in got her interested in Korogocho.

"The waiter informed me about life in Koch (Korogocho) and the Italian Priest, Father Alex Zanotelli, who had settled at the St John's Catholic Church in Koch. His social work with the children and families there stirred my curiosity," says the 51-year-old communications consultant.

When Mary-Ann and Frank decided to pay Father Zanotelli a visit in Korogocho, they were impressed by the support programmes he had put in place for street children and the less fortunate members of his congregation.

Father Zanotelli asked the couple to support some of the needy pupils from his church — First, Steven Nyaga Kamau and later Raphael Obonyo — who had both performed well in their Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) exams.

She spent the next two nights at a flat in Korogocho meeting the families of the two boys. Mary-Ann did not know then that it was the beginning of a love story between her family and the children of Korogocho.

She would later make subsequent visits. "I was impressed by the strength of the people living there and how they survived. I had been in the slums of Zimbabwe, India and Mozambique. But in all those, I would say Koch is the worst place to live in the world. It is very overcrowded

and filthy, yet, the families and children living there have a very strong resolve to succeed. I have never encountered such hope in my life," says Mary-Ann.

She again visited Korogocho in 1997. She rented a flat and spent a month there. It was then that she got inspired to document the lives of people that she met in Korogocho.

For 14 years, she developed this into a book, which was published in Dutch in 2010.

Even though she is a woman of means, Mary-Ann stays in Korogocho whenever she visits because she has become accustomed to the community. She also likes the dramatic occurrences in the slum.

"Whenever I'm here, the unexpected happens. I meet someone new or something good happens," she adds.

Nyaga and Obonyo later finished secondary school.

"But it was Obonyo who joined University of Nairobi and started community initiatives at Koch, while Nyaga got himself busy as a human rights activist," Mary-Ann shares. She explains that were it not for the negative social influence that Nyaga had from home, he would have had an interest in college. "There was a lot of drunkenness in his family and the area, and we talked to him about it," Mary-Ann says emotionally.

Sadly, Nyaga was later murdered by thugs in Korogocho in February 2012 and Frank and Mary-Ann travelled to Nairobi for his burial at the Lang'ata cemetery. His death, Mary-Ann says, affected Frank, especially because he was very attached to Nyaga.

In the meantime, Obonyo graduated in 2005 with a Bachelor of Commerce in Finance from the University of Nairobi. Three years later in 2008, he founded the Obonyo Foundation — an initiative to promote education in urban slums.

**Giving back**  
Obonyo began with awarding top performers in Korogocho and organising soccer tournaments to create awareness about the importance of education. During one of her visits, Obonyo requested Mary-Ann to support the initiative. Since then, she has helped fundraise for secondary school scholarships for 17 out of the 25 students currently in the Obonyo Foundation scholarship programme.

Through the programme, one person from the Netherlands supports one child for four years of their secondary schooling. Obonyo, an external adviser with the UN Habitat's Youth Advisory Board, says that he is grateful to Mary-Ann for making it her obligation to see that needy and brilliant



PHOTOS | ANNE KAMONI | NATION

Mary-Ann Sandifort during the interview



PHOTOS | ANNE KAMONI | NATION

ABOVE: Mary-Ann Sandifort and the children under the Obonyo Foundation Scholarship programme.

RIGHT: Viona Atieno

EXTREME RIGHT: George Mugenyu



minds from Korogocho, Baba Dogo and Mathare slums access education.

"She has given these children hope and an opportunity through education. Besides the hopelessness that some are going through at home, they will emerge to be future leaders," says Obonyo, who holds a Master in Public Policy degree from Duke University through a Ford Foundation International Fellowship Programme (IFP).

Mary-Ann fundraises through family, friends and personal contacts. She, her husband Frank, and her sister, Mieke Sandifort, are also sponsors. She explains that getting sponsors on board is not easy as the economy in the Netherlands is dwindling. She has to convince some of the sponsors, whom she says are not wealthy people, to sacrifice some luxury and support a needy child. "I have to keep on pushing and making sure that all the school fees is paid," she states.

**Bi-annual visits**  
All the children in the programme attend Our Lady of Fatima Secondary School in Kariobangi. Mary-Ann visits them as often as she can raise an air-ticket — sometimes twice in a year. She had visited last July and knows all of them by name. As such, they have become part of her family.

"Whenever my husband is making a stop-over in Nairobi, he too rushes to Korogocho to see how the children are

doing. It is not about the money. It is about sharing and seeing them grow," she adds.

She and Frank have been married for 32 years and do not have biological children. She has two sisters and a brother. She grew up in a middle-class family and her parents divorced when she was 13. "I saw my mother endure the sorrowful moments," says Mary-Ann, who has just come from a holiday with her 82 year old mother and Frank in Zambia.

Most of the children in the Obonyo Foundation programme come from dysfunctional families with parents either separated or affected by alcoholism. In some of the cases, the children have lost a parent to HIV and have only one living parent, who is very ill.

And such example is Ameyo Akello Willis, 16. The Form Four student comes from a single-parent family. Willis says that prior to joining Form One through the programme, he had stayed at home for a year and had almost given up on education. The first-born in a family of three, Willis had scored 367 marks, but his mother was unable to raise the fees required to join secondary school.

"I can see my future brightening," he now declares. His dream is to become a lawyer so that he may champion justice, he says, especially for the less fortunate in society.

Also in the programme is Viona Atieno, 19, a Form Four student who also comes

from a single-parent family, having lost her father in 1996. Her younger brother has not gone beyond Standard Eight as her mother, a domestic worker, only earns enough to cater for their daily needs.

"We clean the church twice a week and it pays for our rent. In between the week, my mother does other domestic work, like washing laundry and cleaning people's homes. That's how we survive," she narrates. Viona wants to become a journalist.

#### Looking for scholarships

A new entrant into the programme is George Mugenyu, 15. He too comes from a single parent family, having lost his father in 2005. He scored 410 marks in last year's KCPE, and he has been called to Lenana High School. However, his family cannot afford the fees. His mother was diagnosed with tuberculosis and is bed-ridden.

In the meantime, the foundation has secured a place for him at the Our Lady of Fatima Secondary School. But Mary-Ann and Obonyo are concerned that given the situation at home with his mother bed-ridden, the boy may not do well at the day school. Mary-Ann is still looking for a sponsor who can see George through boarding school.

The children regularly communicate with their sponsors through letters, phone calls and emails. And whenever Mary-Ann visits, she moves from house to house, delivering letters and gifts from their sponsors and checking on their wellbeing. On some occasions, she stays in Korogocho for weeks and later leaves for her country with letters to their sponsors. In each visit, she delivers not only smiles, but hope to these families

Mary-Ann is concerned that not all the sponsors are willing to extend the scholarship after four years. She is currently in talks with some organisations. This, Obonyo says, will help break the cycle of poverty by getting the children to access higher education so they can get better jobs.

"This will make them productive enough to give back to society," he says. While growing up in Korogocho, Obonyo experienced poverty first-hand.

Even though he loved school, he often found himself out of school because his parents could not afford to raise the required fees. But through sponsorships and scholarships, he was able to acquire education and develop himself.

"That is why I am passionate about education. I believe it can transform lives. I continue to champion access to education for all," he says. Mary-Ann has been the strong pillar that helped him realise this dream. She is currently studying Africa Studies at Leiden University in the Netherlands. She says she is on a mission to change the lives of people who show passion. "That is why I will never stop building a school or an orphanage," she declares.

#### MY SON HAS ASD, I MUST LEARN HOW TO CARE FOR HIM

## No way, my child is no 'accident'

TO CUT A long story short, I'm given the diet guide from the Autism Society of Kenya. It has about a half a page of to-do list. The rest is about "elimination". Cutting certain foodstuffs from our diet.

The assessor has told me that the test results are inconclusive. But I reckon he's just being polite. I'm also a counsellor. I know he doesn't want to hit me with the full weight. Not just yet.

The unspoken result is that my third-born son, Issa, who's three and a half, has autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Essentially, we are being told to start our lives afresh. We have been accustomed to eating and doing things a certain way. Now we are told that we have to radically shift. We are being told, in not so many words, that all this time we have been doing things the wrong way. All along, our ignorance of the condition and how to manage it, has been our undoing.

#### Angels are watching

I want to sit somewhere and cry. And I mean really cry, not just whimper and fight back tears. I want to cry me a river. Many times, I have known that crying will ease the emotional tension, although it won't solve anything. After the assessment, I head home with wet eyes. Today, it's not going to rain: it's going to pour. I can feel it.

"Did I do something wrong during conception?" I ask myself. "Or did something happen at birth or after birth, which may have contributed to Issa's condition?"

I am not sure, I am concentrating on the road ahead. The journey is all a blur to me. I don't remember how I get safely home. I guess the angels are watching over me.

#### Crying a river

On arrival, I go straight to the shower. Nope. I don't want to take a bath. I want to cry. Really cry. That's exactly what I do. Cry. It's the first time I've bawled in a long time.

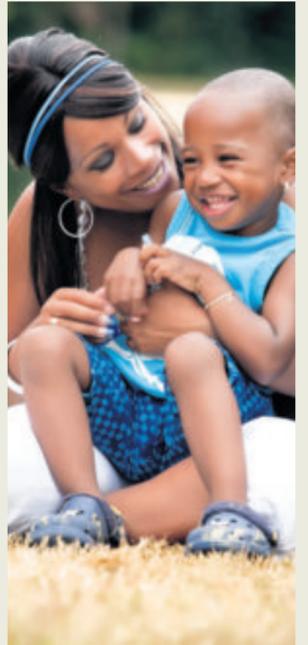
Crying works. I know it's not the elixir, but it takes care of some immediate burden. I feel so relieved afterwards, but I know I have to get cracking on what the doctor said.

#### Kitchen makeover

I start in the kitchen. Into the garbage bin, I chuck the tomato sauce, margarine and all foodstuffs that contain wheat. Other condemned foods such as sugar, I now put in an airtight container.

These are strictly out of bounds for Issa, although the rest of the family can use them in moderation. I don't know how Issa is going to handle the transition. Bread has become his favourite food. Henceforth, he's going to give it a wide berth.

Of this I'm doubly sure. It's going



to be challenging adapting to this restricted diet. I'm prepared to tough it out, whatever it takes. What's more, we don't have another option, but to toe this diet line.

#### Whiz kid in the making

They say that "mothers know". I can't put my finger on it, but my sixth sense tells me that Issa is headed for big things.

Fast-forward ... Issa has been to school for only three months, but he can spell words like rauka, kubamba, Kenya at fifty, KENWA, prank stars. The works.

Besides, he can write from one to 20, and A-to-Z. For your information, he can start from Z all the way to A without thinking or looking at a notebook. Plus, he can write words backwards and forwards, correctly, off-head. And it's only three months. Yippee!

This explains why all my house walls — including the gates — are decorated with Issa's writings. If you visit us, don't dare to tear any packaged thing upside-down. He will cry that you patch it up, and open it upside-up or in a readable way. Forewarned is forearmed!

#### Mama's awesomely special gift

I'm learning that, like the Bible says, every child, regardless, is a gift from God. Issa's just what God ordered for me. He's no accident. He was sent to the right address at God's appointed time.

I have also learnt that some famous folks who made history or invented things were known to be autistic. People like Charles Darwin, Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein. So my Issa is special.

And I mean special, as in awesome: not special, as in oddball.

This is the diary of Asunta Wagura, a mother-of-five who tested HIV-positive 25 years ago. She is the executive director of the Kenya Network of Women with Aids (KENWA). Email: asuntawagura@hotmail.com

WHENEVER I'M HERE, THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS, I MEET SOMEONE NEW OR SOMETHING GOOD HAPPENS"

Mary-Anne Sandifort

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Number of children who Mary-Ann Sandifort has been able to help through the Obonyo Foundation. The foundation was started by Raphael Obonyo, whose education Mary-Ann and her husband personally sponsored