

SUNDAY LIFE

## Auntie Maureen; shining a light for Uganda's street children



Mwagale, second left with a baby during Christmas holidays last year.

(email the author)

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*Maureen Mwagale is carrying a child – Eric, (her godson) while she talks and laughs to a group of about 10 women in a small room in Balikudembe Church-Kisenyi. She is wearing a red T-shirt with Kaana (the future is in your hands), the name she decided on for her project.*

The Moroto Girls (a name they decided on themselves) are here to listen to a business proposal Maureen pitched to them earlier in the week. She starts expounding on the money-making scheme; on the table sit kilos of beans which are to be shared between and sold by the women. Each is supposed to put Shs100 away at the end of the day for their joint saving account. Eventually, they would make enough to buy sacks of beans and then clothes for sale before reaching their target of opening up stalls in Karamoja to help them support their children.

A single mother of two pre-teenage boys, Maureen has for two years been leaving her home in Crawley, U.K, to spend Christmas with the street children in Kisenyi. She was inspired to do this in August 2008 after reading an article about the plight of street babies. Immediately, she got onto the phone, calling friends and family to find out as much as she could about these children. "It was horrifying; children as young as a few months being put on the streets to beg for money," she said, "And all this happening in my home country."

After getting the needed information and following her intuition, she planned a Christmas party for the children. She organised fundraising events at work, church and in the town where she lives for money and clothes. "I also held events like cake sales at my work place, sold African jewelry (made in Uganda) at village, summer, and Christmas fairs back home as well as receiving donations from individuals who care about these children."

Her mother had already been doing some groundwork; gathering the women with children and acting as the go-between for them and Maureen, who arrived in the country with clothes donated by well wishers, shoes and toys for some of the youngest children. She rented a hall in Kisenyi where the party took place.

In April 2009, she was back and spent a lot of time on the streets of Kampala, in Kisenyi and Katwe, also making her first trip to Karamoja (where the women originate) to see the state of their home town. But what really highlighted the plight of the Karamajong babies was her visit to Kampiringisa Juvenile Remand Centre, where these children are taken when arrested off the streets by KCC.

"There is lots of discrimination towards the Karamajong people," she said shaking her head. "On December 29, I witnessed KCC rounding them up along Jinja Road roundabout. On the pickup was a young girl carrying a three-week-old baby who wasn't hers. She kept telling the officers that the baby wasn't hers but they wouldn't believe her," Mwagale recalls. The baby, Eric, spent the night at Kampiringisa until Maureen went with his mother to rescue him the next day. What saddened Maureen the most was that the mother (Molly) was impregnated by a government official at the age of 16 while in Moroto at a resettlement camp.

This Christmas, she received help from more volunteers like Coca Cola and Ripples who donated drinks. Spiritual Family St. Andrews Church in Crawley, Mk Airlines, Euro Cargo Aviation, Avipartner and Ice Mark Africa made sure all the clothes and presents got into the country free of charge, while National Water and Sewerage Corporation financed her tree growing project.

In line with the worldwide Plant for the Planet: Billion Tree Campaign, she involved the women and children in a tree planting ceremony (fichus and palm trees) along Mulago and Gayaza roads. All the trees were named after some of the Karamajong babies to show that they too contribute to the future of the country. This year, she organised the baptism of 52 street babies at St Balikudembe Church on Christmas morning.

It's still far from finished and Maureen still faces challenges like raising general awareness to the plight of these babies. She also has to deal with these women in a certain way because they have a different cultural background and idea of survival. They won't hesitate to lie and most of them think everyone is out to use the other so trust doesn't come by easily. "They believe they are outcasts and that everybody is out to get them and therefore have a tendency of being economic with the truth." Maureen explained. "There is a high dependency culture and they need to be educated on how to earn from odd jobs and skills like bead making instead of relying wholly on handouts."

Maureen, although determined to bring about change, is greatly disheartened by the attitude of her fellow Ugandans towards the Karamajong community. Charity begins at home and she sees no reason why Ugandans should not adopt the same philosophy. Why depend on Unicef, WFP and all these foreign NGOs to come and sort out a few hundred street babies, yet as a nation we can curb the nightmare of these children?

She also challenges the churches in Uganda (all denominations) and all the other faiths to come together and stop what is happening on the streets. "Pastors drive past these babies in their big cars to go and preach the word of God. If giving is taught in church, the giving should start at the top. I believe that one's acts determine one's faith. Not words," she stresses.

She urges people to acknowledge the Karamajong as human beings, as Ugandan citizens that have the right to live anywhere in the country. Not all people living in Kampala were born there. So we need to work on integrating the Karamajong into society and not shun or treat them like dogs.

Maureen also plans to work with the government to stop the trafficking and abuse of these children as well as get them off the streets. "I am planning to set up a daycare for the children both here and in Karamoja so their mothers can work/learn new skills while they are being taken care of," she informs me, handing the now sleeping baby to his mother.

"These babies have no choice and somebody needs to look out for them. I have made it my business and will not rest until the abuse and trafficking stops. Whatever happened to children's rights? The world looks on as the baby trade in Kampala goes on," Mwangale lamented.

For the last two years, she has left her own two boys in the UK to spend Christmas with friends while she makes other children's dreams come true. It breaks her heart to be away from her boys but has explained to them how unfortunate the Karamajong children are and they both support and understand what she is doing.