EMERGING LEADERS

FOR THE DIGITAL WORLD

EXTRACT

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Judith Okite from Kenya opens her eyes to opportunity

My father is originally from Uganda, and my mother is from Tanzania, and I was born in Nairobi, Kenya; in short, I am an East African and a Christian by religion. I am the second born in a family of five, with four boys and one girl.

My father began his career as a secondary school teacher and then later changed to a financial clerk. He worked with the government telecommunication company, Kenya Posts and Telecommunication Corporation. Later, the Corporation split into two: Posta and Telekom Kenya; one entity to handle postal (parcels, letters, etc.) and the other telecommunications (landlines, mobiles). My father remained with Telekom Kenya until his retirement seven years ago.

My mother began as a secretary in the public service office and then later changed her career to banking. She worked with the former East Africa Building Society (EABS), which was later bought by a West African bank and changed to Eco Bank, where she worked until her retirement two years ago.

A little about Kenya

Kenya is in the eastern part of the African continent. The country is named after Mount Kenya, the second highest mountain in Africa, located in the central part of the country. The country's geography is as diverse as its people. It has a long coastline along the Indian Ocean, and as you advance inland, the landscape changes to savannah grasslands and arid and semi-arid bush. The central regions, and the western parts, have forests and mountains, while the northern regions are near desert landscapes. Our pride is in the wildlife; I don't think that there is any kind of wildlife that cannot be found in the different

parks across the country. We produce world renowned tea and coffee and more recently became a major exporter of fresh flowers to Europe. The service industry is driven by the telecommunications sector. Kenya is also a major and world-renowned athletics powerhouse.

My education

In my early years, we lived with my aunt (my father's sister). She is the one who actually brought us up. With both parents focused on their careers, she was the one who was there whenever we needed anything. At the age of five, I started attending pre-school, simply because I did not want to stay in the house while my elder brother went to school. When he came back home, we couldn't play anymore because he didn't want to be disturbed. He had homework to do, and I thought to myself, 'This is cool, I want this!' I stayed in pre-school for one year and then joined primary school a year earlier than required. There was nothing much that they could do; they couldn't take me back to pre-school because I was a bright student. In Kenya, the educational system is known as 8-4-4, meaning eight years in primary level, four years in secondary school, and four years in university, depending on what you're doing.

Unfortunately, my education was cut short. I got into a road accident and had a spinal injury, staying in a coma for 18 months. Then the longest journey to recovery began. I

am a devoted Christian, and I believe that it has taken the hand of the Lord to be where I am today because even science does not have an explanation for it.

My love for computers

In my earlier years, my dream was to be either a doctor or a lawyer. I wanted to be able to interact directly with people, to help them out, save their lives, make a difference.

Computers did not have a place in my life. I could not understand how one could stay for hours staring at this 'dead' box. What has always kept me going is passion, and, in whatever I do, I must be passionate about it for it to succeed.

After seven years of visiting one doctor after another, one hospital after another, one country after another, I figured the time had come for me to work out my life and

my future. My career had to definitely change! My parents had spent all they had on my medication and treatment. They told me they did not have any more money to spend on me, so I began the search for sponsorship. First, my church sponsored me to get a certification in computers. It took me an hour and a half to get to class, but I did this for three months until I completed it with credit. After this, I began to love computers. While training in a leadership class in my local church, there was a lady, Mrs Josphine Kingo'ri. We got to talking, and she told me she was working with the National Council for Churches in Kenya. We became very good friends, and I became very open with her and shared with her my new found vision 'to empower and improve the lives of people with disabilities'. She advised me to go slow, 'First things first, let's get you more educated.' Two weeks after this initial talk, things moved so fast. There was a young man

that the Council had sponsored to go to college. Unfortunately, he had passed away. 'So that the Council does not lose this money,' Josephine said, 'Please write your proposal, look for a good college, and attach the prospectus, stating what you would like to do but do not exceed this amount of money.'

Online learning and teaching

That's how I landed in Kenya College of Communications Technology (KCCT). This is where I met Mr John Walubengo, my mentor. He introduced me to KictaNET, the national ICT mailing list. I went to face-to-face meetings with him and got involved and more interested in ICT and what it was doing and what it could do at a time when Kenya was revising its national ICT policy, which became the Kenya Communications (amendment) Act 2009. At this time, I was working on a project, an open source e-learning platform. Mr Walubengo invited me to join the discussion group to add my input, and, more importantly, to sample the e-learning platform that was being used. That was my first interaction with the Diplo platform. I was thrilled

about Hypertext and at the opportunity of 'playing around with the platform' to familiarise myself with it. Trust me; I took full advantage of it. Time flies too fast when you're having fun. Soon, the discussion came to an end, and I asked Mr. Walubengo if I could continue accessing this platform. He introduced me to the Internet Governance Capacity Building Programme (IGCBP) and told me he would send me the application when it opened and that hopefully, if I got sponsored, I could get to use the platform again.

I continued with my project and downloaded an open source e-learning platform with all its dependencies, worked on it with all my heart, and when it was up and running, it was one of the most satisfying things I had ever done in my life. For two years on a contract basis, I lectured at KCCT in user proficiency courses, on web development, on Linux and Unix Basic, and on administration, and I hosted the exams on the e-learning platform. It was great! The initial plan was for KCCT to adopt it, but they did not. In late 2007, the Director at Malezi School called me to implement the platform in

his school, which I did gladly. Unfortunately, the aspect of free and open source software was not very well understood and so within six months I was out of there.

In 2008, I was selected for the IGCBP. I did the foundation phase, then advanced and got into the research phase. I met wonderful people online, and it was as if the tutors were always physically around. I got the opportunity to be in the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) in Hyderabad, India – the third Forum.

Opening my eyes to opportunity

I have stayed active in the IGF. If you open your eyes wide enough, there is always an opportunity. For example, when I attended the West Africa Internet Governance Forum (WAIGF) on behalf of the East Africa Internet Governance Forum (EAIGF) in 2009, I saw great potential in West Africa and joined the African Caribbean Pacific states (ACP) training. Additionally, we at the Free Software and Open Source Foundation for Africa (FOSSFA) hold our stakeholders conference every two years. This was a great opportunity to get a wide number of people within ACP countries together.

In Kenya, I am part of the KIGF team. I co-coordinated the online discussions alongside my colleague Barrack Otieno from Diplo that led to the Kenya National IGF report 2010. The West Africa Internet

Governance Forum is run by a consortium, where FOSSFA is the lead partner and I was the coordinator in 2010, on behalf of FOSSFA. I was part of the secretariat (programme and logistics coordinator) at the 2009 EAIGF in Nairobi, Kenya.

Final reflection

While consulting with the National Council for Persons with Disability, I have been able to digitalise the registration of persons with disabilities. The first phase was registering 50 000 people, and now in the second phase, we would like to extend this beyond the capital city, seeking partners who can fund the resource centers to make work easier and more manageable.

The Internet is the greatest tool ever invented. Wisely used, it can greatly improve lives and the development of any nation. The question is how to give it top priority and keep it away from politics.

Parting shot

I have found my place and will work until I have achieved my vision.

I will forever remain grateful to Mrs Josphine Kingori, Mr Cornelius Amukwachi, Ms Nnenna Nwakanma, Mr John Walubengo, Ms Alice Munyua, Mr Sebastian Buettrich and the large Diplo family and many more that I cannot write here. Just to say 'You are a great contribution to who I am today'. Thank you very much and God's blessings be upon you.

Judith Okite lives in Nairobi and is FOSSFA's IG Coordinator. She is also consulting with the National Council for Persons with Disability in Kenya. ∎

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