



# Loving other children as her own



Kimera with some of her children. PHOTO BY EDGAR R. BATTE

## IN SUMMARY

Remie Suzan Kimera's heart went out to orphans that were destitute. With the little she had, she set out to start an orphanage and her family has now grown to 21 children that she dearly loves.

When I call her to confirm my appointment she tells me that she is on her way to St Mary's Kitende to find a place for one of her teenage children. Surprised, I ask her, "Are you for real?" She says, "Yeah".

Remie Suzan Kimera is only 29 years and not old enough to have a teenage child but her heart is big enough to accommodate them. A walk into her compound is not just a sneak peek; it tells it all- children and babies all over the place at the Entebbe-based orphanage.

No sooner has she parked her car than a group of children run to welcome her back, even though she's only been away for barely 15 minutes. "These are my children," she tells me as she carries Babirye off the ground. It is an ordinary day at Purpose Uganda Babies Home, a multi-faced facility characterised by cries of babies, two sets of twins playing, other chewing on sugarcane and a teenage girl running around. I ask her about her choice of name for the place, "It's because I was purposed on making a difference," she shares.

Working with Research Medical Council which ran in collaboration with The Aids Support Organisation (TASO) brought her in contact with orphans, child-headed homes and mothers burdened with the weight of hopelessness and the worry of living in a stigmatising community yet they had children to feed and give hope.

Every time Kimera came in contact with these ladies and their children, she broke down and she began helping them from her pocket. "I have always wanted to do this but I didn't think I would do so soon. I thought I could do it during my 40s but somewhere along the way this urge became too much," she explains as she cuddles one of the babies on her lap.

## Lessons from childhood

Part of her childhood experience had taught her that care and love were not guarantees in life. When her mother was around, she remembers her home being a popular hangout for relatives and friends. When she passed on, she was shocked at how suddenly hearts could change.

"I saw how we were being thrown back and forth like property. No one wanted to be with us. I guess they didn't want us because we were dependants," she emotively recounts. So when she began helping out mothers, their children and orphans in 2005, off her salary, she knew what it felt to be a destitute.

But then along the way her beneficiaries began abusing her kindness, getting the money and not helping the children or finding phony reasons for having lost the money she had given them the previous day so she could give them more.

Barely a fortnight after receiving her pay, she would have nothing left of it but still she was glad she was broke. At the time, she was lucky not to be paying bills. "I was still staying with my dad. Every now and then I would go out and visit different orphanages but the conditions there were worrying and the children had been turned into beggars," she recollects.

She had a different vision when she set out to start Purpose Uganda. "I wanted to give children more; I wanted to teach them how to work and values that would shape them into better men and women. I just did not like the idea of orphanage owners turning children into pitiful faces," she adds, evidently holding back tears.

## Founding Purpose

When she started staying on her own she was lucky to share a house with a person who was equally compassionate. "When I asked Barbra Apule if she was okay

with me helping these mothers and orphan, she told me she was. We started getting children from some of my clients and we began with four children as their mother underwent treatment," she recounts.

The duo was staying in a three-bedroom house. "We squeezed our valuables in one and then shared the two bedrooms with the children. We would sleep in shifts. I would sleep till 1am and Barbra would wake up and take her shift till 5am and then we would wake up and cook and prepare before the maid came around," she further explains.

The maid was an elderly woman who would only feed and change pampers so when they left work at 5pm they would return home to wash, clean, cook, bathe the babies and then put them to bed at about 9pm.

"One friend, a lawyer, warned us that we would be arrested because we were not registered. He wrote us a legal document and then advised us to introduce ourselves and our project to the local council chairman and then police. People in these offices were happy about our project," Kimera recalls.

The chairman was in fact shocked and asked them why they were not out and about partying like other girls their age. Their landlord also learnt of their orphanage-in-making. "He told us that he could give up his main house so we would have more space but his wife asked for a lot of money. We were renting the smaller house at Shs300,000 and she wanted Shs800,000 if they were to rent us the main house," she shares.

They settled to pay Shs600,000. Kimera's sister worked at an orphanage in Kitebi and had some German volunteers so she talked to them and they were willing to do some work at Kimera's as well. One of their friends Hilda Nalika began spreading word about the project among her circles and many people would give items and money. But again the children were always sick and medical bills ran Kimera broke.

"I had left my job because I was always in hospital or dosing at work and when I missed work I had to give a reason. I ran out of lies. My supervisors were not complaining though because I tried to do all my work but some jealous colleagues had learnt of my project and imagined I was getting money from funders so they began reporting me to superiors," she adds. In November 2009 she resigned before she got sacked.

Soon Apule got a man and she moved out. Rennie Kimera was left alone. One child got so sick around the time and passed on and she contemplated running away. "I packed my bags and called my dad telling him I was going home but when I got the bags to the sitting room, the children came and hugged. One of them said, 'I love you auntie. Who are you going to visit?' I went to my room and cried. I was broke and didn't know where to turn. It was a terrible experience," she recollects.

She was sick too and her immunity was weak because she hardly slept especially if one or two of the children were admitted in hospital, sometimes on oxygen. Her resolve for Purpose Uganda was tested. "I asked God, 'did you call me here to suffer?'"

Meanwhile she was then looking after 12 children because police had brought her more children who had been abandoned. Today her adoptive family has grown to 21.

Yet she now shares this story and feels her energies can get sucked out by her project but not drain her completely, at least not of the hope that she can change the childhood for another baby or orphan.

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