

Empowering Girls

An interview with Kakenya Ntaiya, founder of the Kakenya Center for Excellence, a school for girls in her native Kenya.

LIFE FOR KAKENYA NTAIYA was supposed to follow the traditional path. Engaged at age 5, she was to end her education by the time she was a teenager and begin her preparations for marriage. But Kakenya had a different plan. First she negotiated with her father to finish high school. Then she negotiated with the village elders to do what no girl had ever done: leave her Maasai village of Enoosaen in south Kenya to go to college in the United States. She promised that she would use her education to benefit Enoosaen. The entire village collected money to pay for her journey.

Kakenya received a scholarship to Randolph-Macon Women's College in Virginia. As an undergraduate, she became the first youth adviser to the United Nations Population Fund. In that capacity, she traveled around the world as a passionate advocate for girls' education, which she sees as a crucial tool for fighting the practices of female genital mutilation and child marriage. She went on to the University of Pittsburgh, where she received her doctorate in education in 2011.

Kakenya is now fulfilling her promise to her community. As the founder and president of Kakenya Center for Excellence, a girls' primary boarding school in Enoosaen, Kenya, Kakenya believes that education will empower and motivate young girls to become agents of change in their community and country.



Kakenya Ntaiya with her students at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in her hometown of Enoosaen, Kenya.



IE: What inspired you to pursue your higher education in the United States?

NTAIYA: The opportunity to study in the United States came when I met Dr. Ole Ronkei, a man from our village, who was then studying at the University of Oregon. He had supported a few other men from our community to study abroad. I asked him if he could also help me go to the United States like the young men he had helped. He agreed, but the challenge for him to support me was the fact that I had an arranged husband waiting to marry me. I remember telling him not to worry about the husband and that I would handle that situation if he would just show me how to go to the United States. I applied to the Randolph-Macon Woman's College where I was accepted and given a scholarship.

IE: Why did you decide to return home to your village to start your school for girls?

NTAIYA: I was the first woman from my community to go to college and get an education. I was fortunate, as I avoided getting married at an early age, but many girls in my community undergo the ritual of female genital cutting and thereafter are forced to marry at an early age. Their dreams end when they get married. From my education in the United States, I learned about child rights, and I



NAFSA Executive Director and CEO Marlene Johnson speaks with students at the Kakenya Center for Excellence in Enooaen, Kenya.

COURTESY OF MARLENE JOHNSON

Visiting Kakenya's School

BY MARLENE JOHNSON

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, I have served on the U.S. board of Kakenya's Center for Excellence (KCE), helping raise financial support and providing Kakenya with guidance as she implements her vision to educate the girls of Enooaen. Visiting the school has been on my "bucket list" so getting on the airplane to Nairobi was an exciting adventure.

The seven-and-a-half-hour drive from Nairobi to Enooaen proved to be an exciting and perfect orientation to visiting the school. The drive through the Rift Valley—lush mountains, hectares of corn, potatoes, kale, onions, and other vegetables and fruits of all kinds, cattle, goats, and sheep grazing along the roads and on the hillsides, children and adults walking for kilometers to tend the animals, carry produce to market, attend school, or jobs—provided a view of the daily lives of the people in this region. The road from Nairobi to Kilgoris is paved; it's a six-and-a-half-hour drive.

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COURTESY OF KAKENYA NTAIYA



wanted to extend that information to the many vulnerable girls in my community. We started the Kakenya Center for Excellence as a way to provide girls with an opportunity to continue in school and to empower them to avoid female genital cutting and early marriages.

IE: You founded the Kakenya Center for Excellence in May 2009 with a first phase enrolling 32 fourth-grade girls. How are the girls from the first fourth-grade class doing now?

NTAIYA: Our first group of girls is now in high school. They performed extremely well in their eighth-grade exams, which has enabled them to go to the best high schools in the country.

IE: How has your school grown since your first class enrolled? How many girls and grades are you serving now?

NTAIYA: There are 170 girls now at the school in fourth through eighth grade. We also have 22 girls in high school.

IE: What are your future plans or The Kakenya Center for Excellence and hopes for the girls who graduate one day?

NTAIYA: Our future plans are to expand our core programs to reach more girls, both through our health and leadership trainings and by building another school for girls in our community. We hope that the girls who graduate from our program will become leaders who will return like I did and invest in our community in one way or another. **IE**

INTERNATIONAL EDUCATOR first crossed paths with Kakenya Ntaiya in 2010 when her story was included in the feature article, "The Unprivileged Child" by Susan Ladika about education for girls and women in Africa, which appeared in the January/February 2010 issue.

Link to original story: http://www.nafsa.org/_/File/_janfeb10_womenafrica.pdf

VISITING KAKENYA'S SCHOOL

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The road from Kilgoris to Enosaen is unpaved, untreated dirt—or mud after a rain—full of rocks of all sizes. The 25 kilometers trip took an hour, and the driving was not for the faint of heart.

We arrived at the KCE campus in the midmorning. The campus includes a dormitory, five classroom buildings, a cooking house, and plenty of space for outdoor physical activities. The girls were all in class, so Kakenya introduced me to the eighth grade and the seventh grade classes, where I was invited to visit with the girls on my own. What a pleasure! They had lots of questions for me, but the first was always: how old are you? Then, where are you from? How old is your husband? How old is your mother? Do you go to church? What is your job?

My first question for them was this: what do you like about attending Kakenya's school? In every case, the response was "we get to study in the evenings with the other girls" or "we are learning so much" or "because we're all girls, we can talk about personal things." To the question "What do you want to do when you complete your education?"—the answers included "doctor," "surgeon," "lawyer," "police officer," "accountant," "teacher," and "airline pilot."

When I learned that one of their evening study strategies is a student-led study discussion, I asked them to show me how that works. Within a couple of minutes a leader was chosen by consensus, and the

discussion proceeded using the model they employ in their evening study periods. The discussion leader asked a question, called on a classmate to respond and another to comment on that, and so it went. The girls' engagement, enthusiasm, and focus was heartwarming and exciting!

Later, to my question, "do you like that this is a boarding school and if so, why?" The girls answered "because we can study from early in the morning to late at night, rather than spend so much time walking to and from school!" Their day starts at 4:30 a.m., with studying beginning at 6 a.m. and concludes between 9–9:30 p.m. In 2013 this discipline resulted in the eighth grade class scoring second in Transmara in the national exams, and eighth in the county (out of 520 schools).

Kakenya's is but one story—of a young woman with a dream and a commitment to her village, and the tenacity to take advantage of the opportunities at Randolph-Macon College and the University of Pittsburgh. Our opportunity as international educators is to encourage and support in whatever way we can to allow these young leaders, from wherever they come and whatever their dreams, to make a difference in their part of the world. It's hard to imagine more inspiring or important work.

IE

MARLENE JOHNSON is Executive Director and CEO of NAFSA: Association of International Educators.