

AMREF DAGORETTI CHILDREN GET SURPRISE VALENTINE TREAT

The sound of laughter filters through the air as children of the AMREF Dagoretti children in need of special protection programme, debate on whether a street boy is better than a street girl. Occasionally the opposing side strongly disagrees with the theme of the debate. It is Valentine's Day and many of the children present would not have been aware of the day's significance given that most of their Valentine Days are usually spent hungry in the streets or begging for money. But this year, it would be different, in their midst is Caroline Mutoko, Radio presenter of Kiss 100 FM, a Nairobi radio station, debating with the street children and assuring them that neither sex is better than the other and that both sexes are equal.

Caroline had chosen the AMREF street children rehabilitation centre as her Valentine this year. She had announced on the radio that her wish was to spend her Valentine's

Day with street or homeless children.

John Muiruri, the AMREF Dagoretti Child In

Need of Special Protection manager invited her to meet the children at the project.

"I wanted to do something unique this year and on this day I wanted to show love and concern to the less fortunate," she says. Kiss 100 FM station, treated the children to a 4kg cake and board games.

The children's home, situated about 15 kilometres from Nairobi's city centre, at Waitthaka in Dagoretti, was started in 1999 with a total of 35 children, later in the same year an additional 25 children joined the home. The project covers six divisions of Dagoretti with its major activity areas being Kawangware, Dagoretti and Kenyatta markets.

The project's entry point to the street children is through football. "Football



Caroline Mutoko chats with children at the project

interests children and since majority of the street boys are children then it is easier for us to reach them," says Mr Nicholas Kiema, the AMREF Dagoretti social worker. During football matches, Mr Kiema and other social workers from the project talk to the street children on health issues and the dangers of drug abuse. "We

also listen to their problems and see how best we can help them."

This, Mr Kiema says, helps in building trust between the

street boys and the AMREF social workers.

In addition, AMREF social workers feed the street boys and also carry out medical check-ups with the help of the University of Nairobi. "In case of any medical problem we refer the street boys to the nearest medical centre," Mr Kiema adds.

After a bond of trust has been created it becomes easier for the street boys to join the AMREF Dagoretti children in need of special protection programme for rehabilitation. Once in the rehabilitation centre the street boys undergo a thorough medical check up, de-worming and also get the chance to get an education.

The project, through football, targets street children between the ages of 9 and 18 years and currently has two teams that street boys can enroll in; namely Dago Toto that has boys between the ages of 9 and 14 and AMREF Stars that has boys between the ages of 14 and 18.

PROFILE

Mohammed Kamau

A member of the AMREF Stars Football team, Mohammed commands a lot of respect from his peers at the centre and also from the AMREF social workers. Mohammed is one of the street

boys in the home who has made remarkable improvement through the rehabilitation programme. He has reformed and has stopped sniffing glue-- a drug that is commonly used by street children in Kenya.

Born in Murang'a District in 1986, Mohammed's mother died when he was still young. When he was 10 years his father got a job in Nairobi and they moved to Lunga Lunga, an estate near Nairobi's industrial area. It was at this time that his father became violent and began hitting him every night. Mohammed at his tender age could not withstand his father's blows and decided to run away from home. He ended up in Kawangware, a slum in Nairobi, and recalls that his first days in the streets were not easy.

"My first week in Kawangware was hard because I used to be harassed by other street boys in the area but we later came to know each other," Mohammed says. This led him to join a gang of street boys since that was the only way he could survive in the streets. Away from his cozy and warm bed due to circumstances out of his

control, Mohammed had to make do with the cold and sometimes wet earth ground: "I had to sleep on a 'gunia' (sisal sack) under a makeshift stall at the Kawangware market and it used to get very cold sometimes," he recalls. The cold compounded with hunger made it very difficult for him to sleep at night. And that is when he was enticed by his friends into

trying out glue. "I came to like the glue since it made me want to sleep because it would get really cold at night," he says.

"Once you get used to it (glue) you are hooked," Mohammed chuckles. "It

was hard using the glue because it used to give me chest infections and I had to look for money to buy it," he says. Mohammed used to get his money by picking up potatoes that had fallen off from transport carts during the Market days at the Kawangware market, which he would later sell. On other days he would be paid by stall owners to dispose rubbish from their stalls. On a good day Mohammed could make Kshs50 (US\$ 66 cents) which he would use to buy food and glue worth Kshs10 (US \$13 cents) which would last him an entire night. But on a bad day he would be forced to search for food or fruits in the bins near the market.

Mohammed first came into contact with AMREF at Kawangware sports ground in the year 2001 when the street boys in the area were invited to a friendly football match. "After the game they (AMREF) gave us food and after we finished eating they educated us on the dangers of sniffing glue," he recalls. AMREF social workers continued to come to Kawangware to play football with the street boys and soon Mohammed found himself drawn to them.



The project's dance troupe practicing for a performance

“ After they (AMREF) finished building the centre they asked if I wanted to join them,” he accepted the offer and soon after joining the centre, Mohammed stopped using glue.

Although the centre does not have any boarding facilities, AMREF social workers were able to get him a place at the nearby Kivuli centre that is run by the Catholic Church. “ I am very thankful to AMREF for giving me a place and also an education,” he says.

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however, he has reformed and dropped the dangerous habit.

“I used to sniff glue worth Kshs 60 (US 79 cents) daily, I would buy it in the morning divide it into two in order to keep some safely for the night,” he remembers shyly. He adds that they bought it from people repairing shoes in the market or from the older street boys who

peddle it.

Street boys are well known for their notorious behaviour such as pick pocketing and mugging, among other crude methods of extorting money from the public to use them for buying, among other needs, glue and other dangerous drugs. Apart from the barbaric behaviour of getting money, however, John says he used to render some menial services such as cleaning the market stalls, vehicles and carts which transport fruits and vegetables to the market and he got paid for the work.

He would also collect potatoes that fell off the transport vehicles as they are being off loaded at the market. He would then sell them cheaper than the market price to anyone willing to buy. “My mother was very happy when I joined this place (rehabilitation centre) because I went back home and now every evening I assist her to fetch water and do other house chores,” he said.

Since he was taken to the centre, he has never looked back to street life again nor engage in any anti-social behaviour as he used to before. In the streets, Mbogua says that besides sniffing gum, he also used to smoke cigarettes and bhang – habits he has now dropped since joining the centre. Mbogua’s ambition is to train as a mechanic and be able to earn a decent living for himself and his future family.

HAPPY TO BE ALIVE

John Mbogua, a 19-year-old former street boy is grateful that he is alive today courtesy of AMREF’s Dagoretti child in need of special protection rehabilitation centre. John who used to live at the stalls in the open air Kawangware market joined the centre two years ago. He looks back at his past life experience as a street boy with a lot of bitterness and regrets.

“ If it were not for AMREF to rescue and bring me here, maybe I could have died long ago due to the dangerous habits and behaviour we used to engage in. Some of my friends who were not lucky have all died,” he says.

The boy who left school in Standard Seven opted to join the street life to escape the myriad suffering in their Kawangware slum home. He is born to a single mother of four who sells food in makeshift tents or kiosks at construction sites in order to provide her family needs.

John is one among many other disadvantaged street children being rehabilitated by AMREF in the newly found Dagoretti centre. Like any other street boy, John was not spared the glue sniffing habit among all other street behaviours typical of the street urchins in Kenya. Since he joined the centre

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