

Young Heroes should also be honored!

By Jeannette Musembi, Nairobi Kenya

My name is Jeannette Musembi, I work part-time for a website called African Science News Services as a news reporter and also contribute to a publication named 'Connect' that serves to encourage the youth of today on the importance of spirituality. Here is a story, which to me, thought it deserved to be heard of if not acknowledged.

I have been writing stories on several good-will organizations in the past that have been doing a great job to say the least. One of them was the Lions Eye Bank Hospital in Nairobi which has an impressive medical record of helping the unfortunate in the society. But during all that, there was one particular group that caught my attention and I decided to mingle a bit with them as I decided on how I would write my story.

The humanitarian group is a non-governmental organization going by the name 'Kuna Vijana', a Swahili word meaning 'there are youth'. The group was based on changing the mentality that 'the youth are known for all the wrong reasons' to becoming positive, responsible and contributing citizens to the society. This was especially so after Kenya experienced one of the worst political violence in decades, where countless of people lost their lives. This was of course, entirely blamed on the youth, who actively took part in rioting and destruction of property. 'Kuna Vijana' therefore actively seeks to eradicate this kind of behavior among the youth by fully tapping and utilizing talent and creating opportunities to kill idleness which is the biggest problem facing them today.

You cannot believe where I came across 'Kuna Vijana' while doing my research! Quite unique from the normal youth groups I encounter in my line of work. Here I was, chatting to my friend in the popular site 'Facebook' when she invited me to join and check out the group. At once I was impressed to see such a large group made up of more than 4000 youth ready to change their country. It was as if they had found one collective voice. I scrolled to see who owned the group so that I could ask a few curious questions on the driving force behind the creation of 'Kuna Vijana'.

True to that, I found the owner who surprisingly was also the original founder of the group and immediately I started chatting with him. My first question was obviously if they had an office in Nairobi where they conducted their activities from or where I would get to visit them. 'At the moment we just perform our activities and communicate to members online' came the reply. I was shocked on how they managed that number of people on net. I remembered scrolling through the myriads of initiatives begun and successfully completed by them over the few months. Some of them were; youth empowerment conferences, job openings that required people, training and workshops on conflict resolution, seminars, concerts, auditions for actors and dancers who would be picked for various productions and many more. All these were done at no fee or costs and the information sent to all members of the group efficiently. So what they did was hire a place out for workshops or trainings for the applicants (when they had one) or direct them to where the job interviews were being conducted. Convenient I might add, and so I had to meet the co-ordinator of such an organized group.

His name was Evans Muriu. Want to guess his age? 30? 35? Maybe late twenties? You cannot believe my disbelief when a short, brown skinned boy, dressed casually came in to meet me. Anyone could have taken him for a school-boy, and dismissed the idea that he had founded and owned the most effective group in 'Facebook' single-handedly. So about his age? At the time he was only 19yrs but he is now 20yrs if my memory serves me correct. Unbelievable, right? You would expect a 20yr-old to be chasing down college girls and parties during his spare time but contrary to that he was busy out, trying to make a difference in the community. He manages to jumble all this work with school at the same time. If it escaped me, he studies accounts in Strathmore University here in Nairobi, Kenya.

So we talk and he tells me all about the group; how he manages it and his greatest limitation so far, which is funding from well-wishers and sponsors. So where does he get the money? I ask. "Well I have several businesses which I run and own on the side that help me in financing the group. I also don't have to pay the management as they are all made up of volunteers of whom I value and appreciate for their hard work toward all the initiatives. I have great ideas for the youth; it's only that I lack proper funding." Great strategy it is; self-financing. At least he knew what he was getting himself into. "It's not easy, but we manage," he quickly adds. So he takes the opportunity and invites me to an event on 29th of August 2009, where they will visit a resettled IDP Camp in Naivasha named 'Jikaze' which was greatly affected by the post-election violence, to help the community get back on its feet. Great.

The day finally arrived and I was not disappointed. The team comprised of several members of 'Kuna Vijana' who worked tirelessly day and night to make the event a success. I was there watching in awe as they sat down and talked to the community about what they had come to do. It was very inspiring to see this organized group in 'Facebook', sitting down to encourage the community instead of the politicians who were the root of all the violence.

They had managed to message and inform all members of the group about the program and how they would lend a hand in the exercise. They also created the event on 'Facebook' so that non-members also got to know of it. Talk about the use of technology! So in collaboration with several institutions and churches, they organized drop-off points for all donations, gave out numbers if one opted to send monetary aid, made flyers and posters on the event dates, and worked with several community radio stations to spread the message. Although some sponsors did not come through, they took heart and worked with what they got, which was very encouraging indeed.

They counseled the youth of 'Jikaze' community on taking charge of entrepreneurship skills, played with the children and donated clothes, shoes, learning material that they had collected from their group as well as some few well wishers who came through. The community was very grateful for that. As if that wasn't enough, they officially launched a relief program and that meant that it was not the end of them coming there. They would continue helping the community until they fully became efficient enough to help themselves.

True to their word, they did just that. On 20th of October 2009, one and a half months later, they returned to the community with donations from other interested groups who had partnered with 'Kuna Vijana' to donate sanitary towels and panties to the girls and counseled the young women on their roles

in the community. Much to the surprise of many, the event was a success since they had encountered a problem once again in finding sponsors and funding for the project.

So I remembered the wise saying of Mahatma Gandhi; become the change you want to see. Evans Muriu has shown great courage and determination in wanting to create a positive change in the society despite all the odds against him. His dream is to go nationwide and open offices for his group where all youth can readily and easily access information and help. Right now he is working on a 'Kuna Vijana' website that will help young upcoming artists sell their music and work online and also expose them to the market. It will also feature an online TV and radio that will air documentaries on situations affecting the African continent to create awareness especially among the youth. Although he is not as financially fit as he would like to be, he knows he has a responsibility to fulfill and he aspires to do that to his last breathe. His parting shot? "Always be passionate about what you do in life, it's the only sure thing you got to keep you going". Surely, this fine specimen of a young man deserves to be given a round of applaud, if not a golden platform from his countrymen and even the world itself for setting the pace for other young African people to follow!