

CORRIDORS OF DREAMS AND HOPE

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An African girl's life-long battle for freedom

Bukirwa Irene Kamara



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Dedications

To my parents: my mother, my guiding light, my rock, Joyce Zalwango Bugembe and my late gentle father George Wilson Bugembe, thank you for loving, educating and grooming me into the woman I am. You are my heroes. Your sacrifices and courage are constant motivators for me to be the best I can be. And to my beloved, loving and revered children – Edmond, Joyce, Sam and Edward – thank you for your unconditional love and unwavering support. You are my cherished blessings. I pray that the Lord will keep blessing you in all your endeavours.

Reviews

Reading this inspirational story and subsequently listening to Irene narrating what she has contended with gave me a sense of hope for a great outlook in life regardless of however sorry my past was. This is an emotionally gripping story. It is not just a chronicle of struggles but a demonstration of triumph in a very practical and tangible manner. Irene tells her story with passion and a desire to inspire the reader to reach out and achieve fullness of their potential. I could not help but relate her story to the many African stories which remain untold. I recommend that besides reading and being inspired you start making deliberate adjustments to your life based on a wealth of life lessons you will glean in this book. Well done Irene, I am confident this is the “first born” of the various mental offspring you will bless humanity with. I am proud of your transformational and impactful work.

Rabison Shumba

Inspirational Author – Motivational Speaker

Coach and Corporate Consultant

Harare, Zimbabwe

This is a story of a pair of dry and scaly feet that trod bare on uneven, thorny terrain and later slipped into high-heeled shoes - pumping carpeted corridors. That is the dramatic result produced by a generous dose of hard work and perseverance. Get ready to struggle to tear your eyes off the pages of this book.

Joshua Oni (PhD)

This is a gripping and inspiring story about an African woman's incredible journey through the corridors of her dreams in pursuit of freedom. A young girl from poverty-crippling rural Uganda, where stifling tradition deprives the girl child of education and women of progressive thinking, eventually defies the odds and achieves personal and generational freedom. Through education, she breaks the poverty shackles, overcomes adversities in her path and emerges triumphant. Her life story, although at times painful, unimaginable and soul-stirring, is a powerful portrait of perseverance and determination. The seeds of positive change that Dr Irene Kamara plants throughout her life journey uplift the lives of those around her, something we can aspire to.

Norah Maithufi (PhD)

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Preface

I Am an African Child

When morning breaks, so too
The African child wakes
His clothes are ragged, dirty, pieces of cloth
He takes the cattle out to graze
Later, he tills the hardened ground
Watching the privileged run to school
Though on empty stomachs

Child becomes man
He now owns a piece of land
And marries a wife
Though reading and writing
Remain foreign

Another African child is born
The cycle cruelly continues

I am just
Another African child

Children in Africa are born into a life of poverty. They tend to accept that their future will be depressing. Thousands are born every day on Africa's rich soil. Hundreds die every day due to a common sickly element: poverty. Poverty is the most deadly killer in Africa. When it fails to kill you, it rips your self-esteem from your clenched fists and breaks it down. It breaks you down, and creates a feeling of worthlessness. Only a few are able to conquer the often-overwhelming odds, to survive and free themselves from a poverty stricken life. Survival is a brutal cycle.

Only a fraction of African children acquire a primary education. Of that, an even smaller percentage goes on to obtain a tertiary education. The ones unfortunate not to be educated immediately fall back into the poverty cycle. That is, if they have not fallen foul to the various deadly diseases common in the tropical areas of Africa. An alternative is a life of crime. The land that is supposed to nourish and sustain the children does nothing for them, but welcomes their bodies as fertiliser. The politicians however, tend to satisfy their own agendas. If we took the time to assist our fellow African brothers and sisters, instead of quarrelling over the power to rule and dictate to the people, we would educate the youth, helping them to break the poverty cycle. This raises an ever-present question in my mind: 'Who will free the African child from this cruel poverty cycle that seems to have no end? Who will free the African child?'

I was born into the poverty cycle in 1957 in the small, remote town of Kayunga, in Uganda, roughly 70 kilometres northeast of the capital city, Kampala. I am one of seventeen children seeded by my father, who had ten girls and seven boys. Eleven of the seventeen were born to my birth mother, of which I am the eldest. Our village, Mayaga, was not far from Kayunga. My tribe, the Muganda, belongs to the largest ethnic tribe in Uganda, the Baganda, whose mother tongue is Luganda. The Baganda, a very proud tribe, was entrenched as the dominant tribe in the country during the British colonial era. The British chose the Baganda as an ally. They subjected other tribes to colonial rule, while the Baganda received special status within the British Protectorate of Uganda. The Baganda are polite. For example, women will kneel in respect when greeting a male figure or elder. This etiquette is still commonly practised in many African cultures. In South Africa, Vhavenda women show respect by kneeling down on both knees, or lying on the floor on their side, when greeting men or elders. In Nigeria, the Yoruba have a similar practice. Baganda homes are governed by strict rules. The family sits together on a mat while eating. The head of the family sits separately on his own mat, signifying that he is the leader of the house. On the mat that the family sits on, men sit on one side and women kneel on the other.

In many ways, the Baganda culture I grew up in kept women inferior to men. Females were deprived of education and the progressive thinking that would have helped them to achieve their independence. Females were not allowed to eat chicken, eggs, pork, mutton and any type meat, except for beef. Females were expected to obediently prepare these foods. When they were around, my brothers would usually help me by tasting the food to tell if it was correctly seasoned. The only seasoning we had was salt. The head of the family would be served first. He would then serve his sons and the other male figures in attendance. Females would prepare beans and other vegetables as sources of nutrition.

I never ate chicken or other meats aside from beef until I purchased these with my own hard-earned cash. At least I knew how to prepare the meat well, having done it hundreds of times before. My mother, on the other hand, still follows these practices and her cultural ways, and has never tasted chicken. Females were also not allowed to ride bicycles or wear trousers. To this day, I am unable to ride a bicycle, despite trying in vain to learn. It's a lot harder to master than I was led to believe. I purchased my first pair of jeans when I arrived in Southern Africa when I was 25 years old. That caused a stir on my return home six years later.

Gender inequality is a major contributor to the decline of women into poverty. Many women have been raised to accept a lower social status to men, and this reduces their power to act independently. Females are not supported in their education. Of those who are educated, many drop out to assist the family with domestic and farm work, or they get married. Life is more difficult for girls raised in a village, because the whole village raises them and elders command a great deal of respect. Girls must kneel on the ground on both knees, regardless of the surface and whether it is painful or not, when encountering an elder. Girls must also not forget to greet in the appropriate manner, saying 'sir' or 'madam'. If you failed to kneel, you would be reported to your parents as a disrespectful child, and that would result in a beating to teach you a lesson in respect.

In our home, we had no way of accessing news of what was

happening in the country, aside from listening to the radio, which had no batteries most days. Thankfully, I wasn't concerned with what was happening in the country at that young age. Later, I would realise that, in many ways, Uganda is similar to many African countries, with its poor infrastructure, its tribal and religious differences, and its corrupt politicians. The constant desire for lasting power results in the country's needs and people's rights being neglected. A large number of Ugandans, the majority being the youth, live in the poverty cycle. Even now, with all the technological advancements, poverty still plagues the country, especially in the rural areas.

However, Uganda's education system has always been of a very high standard. The problem is that employment is limited in a country that has poor infrastructure. Those lucky enough to be employed are not able to live on their wages, and they have to have a second source of income. Most people start small businesses. This creates a very competitive and fast-paced environment. Due to ever-present poverty, Ugandans have learned to be innovative. Everything is sold on the streets, from food to hardware, and even medicines.

Rural communities depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood, although the piece of land a family owns is often too small to support that family. As a result, people are forced to find work on nearby farms. They are desperate, willing to do almost anything, and they are exploited. They earn wages that are nothing to speak of, breaking their backs daily just to survive.

Most women who live in the country work on the farms. I would wake up early every morning and walk down to the farm with the rest of the family. The females are also responsible for caretaking. This includes domestic tasks such as preparing food, fetching water and firewood, and cleaning the house and the clothes. There is no time left to rest. The males would nap after a hard day's work, while the females would immediately start preparing the night's meal.

The main food grown and eaten was matooke (a green banana), sweet potatoes and cassava. An average meal consisted of peeled, steamed matooke mashed up and served with a sauce consisting of groundnuts, peas and beans, or any vegetable, depending on availability. Meat was, and still is, considered a luxury food in the

rural areas. It is eaten mostly on special occasions, such as Easter or Christmas. Fruits, readily available, are a great source of nourishment.

While the land is fertile, and the tropical climate advantages farmers, rainfall can be uncertain. The country's poor infrastructure – bad roads, limited crop storage and lack of skills-training – inhibits farming progress. Significant crops may be lost to a lack of rainfall, resulting in minimal or no profit. I remember our family having to sell our crops at low prices when we could not store them to wait for a better price. We would usually make a loss.

I would have to leave the country later to have the opportunity to achieve my dreams, but I see that as a blessing. Having always dreamed of a better tomorrow for me and my children, I strove daily to take every opportunity afforded to me. In so improving myself, I have made a life for us, and along the road I have managed to serve as an inspiration to fellow African people to lift their self-esteem and dignity. I have always believed in making a positive difference in the lives of those in and around my life circle, even those who just pass by. Any positive difference made to a life, no matter how small, is a necessary one.

After I got married to my husband, we left the country with our first-born, with every intention of returning in the near future. We had planned on saving up enough money to return and open a small business that could support our family and help our siblings through school. This was supposed to take three years, but 34 years later I find myself a citizen of South Africa, and almost certain to live my life out here. My desire to be among my siblings and relatives would only be realised during visits, which were spaced years apart.

In most African families, the few who succeed in securing an education and a good job, end up financially supporting the family, and sometimes the extended family. I was obliged to help pay for my siblings' education, and I had to balance that with taking care of my family. My mother requested me to do this. It is difficult to refuse a request made by your mother. My husband also provided the same support to his side of the family.

Saving enough money to accomplish our goals was much harder than we had imagined. We fell well short on our modest, combined

income. We managed to purchase a small piece of land in Kampala, but we would have had to build a house first before moving back to Uganda to live there, which proved difficult. We put this on hold until our finances improved. And there were the children. Moving them between two completely different schooling systems in two different countries, and thereby disrupting their education, was not advisable. I remembered my mother's wise words: 'Give your children the best education, for a good education is an imperishable asset.' I chose to give my children the best chance possible in life by finishing their schooling in South Africa.

There is a saying: 'To those who much is given, much is also expected.' I know how far I have come from my humble beginnings as a poor African child. My parents' endurance afforded me an education, which led to the freedom I now have. I wish to hold the hand of African children, to show them the road I have travelled, to show them the way. For a girl who was born into extreme poverty on a remote rural farm in Uganda, who struggled to afford and obtain an education, and who later raised four children alone after a difficult separation in a foreign country gripped with xenophobia, I believe that I have achieved much in my life. I have much more to offer to my fellow Africans, especially the youth, women and children. My beliefs are centred on perseverance and education, which I believe open the gates to success. I also believe that we become the choices we make.

This story is about an African girl, woman, and mother who travelled, and is still travelling, the paths of the African female in life. I hope that my story will serve as an inspiration to the African child who, struggling through poverty, has lost courage and faith. These are children who don't have the means to reach for their dreams. I hope to encourage them to rise above the feeling of helplessness, to empower them with the knowledge that it can be done with strong optimism and faith in one's self and God.

Writing my life's story, to make a difference in someone's life, is a humbling undertaking. Nothing in my life has come to me by luck. We have to be prepared to catch opportunities as they come. I try to always be prepared to receive new opportunities.

Now, here is my story ...

CHAPTER 1

My roots: A treasured childhood

I Search for My Freedom

I search for inner freedom
I search for external freedom
I search for my freedom

From chains of poverty to basic needs
To unleash my potential
And be myself

To express my thoughts and be listened to
To just treatment as an African
To be true to myself
I search for my freedom

On 18 December 1957 I was born to Wilson and Joyce Bugembe, known to me as Taata and Maama, in Mayaga, in Uganda. All of the umbilical cords of my father's seventeen children are buried in our backyard. This is a Baganda ritual called '*okwahula abaana*'. The dried piece of cord that falls off is buried near the house. This symbolises the acceptance of the new-born into the family. The elders of the family perform the ceremony, and it is celebrated with a big feast. I got to witness this ceremony performed for some of my siblings, and it was always an exciting experience.

Maama told me that a woman who lived two houses down the road from us delivered me at our home. It was a traditional delivery, as most births in the village were. The equipment used for the birthing process was sterilised with hot water boiled over a wood fire. It was done this way because the nearest hospital was more than 40 kilometres away. You had to walk six kilometres to catch a taxi to the

hospital, and only during the day. Maama always says with a broad smile that I was a healthy, beautiful bouncing baby, her first-born, who brought joy into her life. I see happiness in her eyes when she talks of that time.

Mayaga is a place where cows have the right of way, and where lush, green bushes and thickly nestled trees offer a sense of tranquillity. The village was literally one big family, with households positioned but a stone's throw away from each other. It was common for neighbours to ask you for anything from salt to medicines, at any time of the day. I remember crossing the road on many early mornings to ask the neighbours for hot coals to get the fire going so that we could start cooking. The whole village raised a child. Everyone had a hand in nurturing and even, at times, disciplining children.

Children were taught to respect their neighbours as they did their parents. My parents insisted on strong family values: love, care, respect, honesty, faith, compassion and hard work, despite the hardships. These values helped my parents raise their seventeen children, and to this day they keep me grounded and focussed through life in good and trying times.

For most men in the Baganda culture, especially married men, the kitchen is off limits. A man is not allowed to cook and do household chores if a woman is present. The woman is expected to tend to all household chores and nurture the children. I was brought up to do as Maama told me, and to wait on my husband hand and foot when married. Like most African girls, I was raised to be subordinate to my husband. Marriage was held in high regard. To have a baby out of wedlock was considered blasphemy, so one had to be careful. Some of the values females had to follow were incredibly strict. Deviation from these values would result in one being considered uncultured and disrespectful, and harsh punishment would be dealt out. In some extreme cases, disobedient women would be kicked out of the community.

My half-sister was sent away to live with my aunt when my parents found out that she was pregnant while she was unmarried and still at school. We were told that she was a disgrace to the family. She was not allowed in the house or to be with the family at gatherings

and meals. While she was preparing to travel, she was to stay in a make-shift hut outside the main house, where she slept and cooked for herself. It was a frightening and confusing experience to see our sibling treated like that and sent away, not allowed to communicate with family.

The males, on the other hand, are not held responsible for their actions. When a boy impregnates a girl, whether she is of age or not, and he accepts that the child is his, the parents will look after the child while he continues with his studies or duties, as if the child was never born. The female is treated like dirt. She is looked down at, and she cannot protect herself. Contraceptives are considered culturally and religiously wrong. I never knew about contraceptives until I was in university, and I am doubtful that Maama knew anything about them, because she never spoke about them. It makes sense that she birthed eleven children, stopping only because she had left my father. The only way in the village to stop getting pregnant was to keep away from sex until married. Maama never let any boys come over to visit at our house, and we were not allowed to visit anyone, including family. She only knew one way to prevent us from falling pregnant, and to stop us from learning about boys, and that was to keep us away from boys.

The house was a simple, five-roomed one that Taata had built with his bare hands. The sitting room was so small that the whole family could not sit in it all at once during a meal. A single, tiny wooden window in the wall allowed light in. Maama's room was just across from the sitting room and was also lit by a small, wooden window. There was never enough light in her room. A candle provided enough light to move around.

Polygamy was normal, and I also had a stepmother. My stepmother's room was adjacent to the sitting room. That left two rooms for the children. Space had to be made for all of us by using the sitting room as well as my parents' room. Each child had to share a bed if they had one. I was privileged to have my own personal space next to Maama's bedroom. A small passage led to her room, just wide enough to fit a bed for one child. My bed was made from dry branches from the coffee trees grown on our farm. All the children had mattresses

made from Maama's old garments filled with straw. My parents slept on a cotton wool mattress.

The kitchen was built a few metres away from the main house to ensure that if there were ever any fire accidents, the house wouldn't be burned down. There were three rooms adjacent to the kitchen. One was for storing firewood, the other was a chicken den, and we kept a few goats in the last one. The meals were prepared on a three-stone cooking fire. It is still done this way, as electricity is non-existent in the rural villages. If a male worked in the kitchen, he would crouch. Females would be expected to kneel on both knees. Maama used to always say to her daughters that girls who squat like boys would never get married.

A coffee and banana plantation grew five metres from the house. It scared me senseless at night. Many times, I heard weird noises coming from the plantations. I imagined creatures within. The black, moonless nights were the worst. The darkness terrified me, and moving between the kitchen and main house at night was a nightmare. I ran every time I had to cross between.

To this day I am scared of night-time darkness. This served as added motivation for me to escape the village to the city. On nights when the moon was full and bright, I played with my brothers and sisters in the yard, telling stories. Life might have been hard at that time, but those simple moments brought joy and happiness that was always needed. We always managed to work together, cry together, laugh together and appreciate that family was crucial in the grooming of a person's life. Being able to do everything together is essential to progressing, especially when poverty is a factor.

After every day of hard work, we children always found ourselves sitting around the kitchen fire, cooking supper while singing African folk songs and telling stories. These were stories passed down from our elders. Some were scary, about witchcraft and wicked people. Others were of princesses and kings living happily ever after. It was a time to laugh and sing, to bond and dream of a future filled with marriage and careers. The only professions we knew then were nurses, teachers, doctors and police officers. As we waited for the food to cook, we would roast maize, cassava or sweet potatoes on hot

coals to snack on. At times the hard work of the day was too much and we found ourselves falling asleep, but someone always had to be awake to make sure that the food did not burn. That love and bonding – the togetherness my family exhibited – got us through very tough times. Those memories live with me and provide me with a strength often needed to keep me grounded when times are tough and I need a guiding light.

CHAPTER 2

My parents, my heroes

My father, George Wilson Bugembe, and my mother, Zalwango Joyce Bugembe, shaped me into the woman that I am today. To better understand me, you would have to get to know them. It took me some time to recognise and appreciate my parents' motivation to make a better life for their children. They laboured every day, year on year, in harsh conditions, to ensure that we were educated, fed and clothed. It confused me that two people with such different personalities could coexist and raise eleven children through much suffering and hardship. Other families in the same situation didn't usually stay together. This made me wonder what type of people my parents were. I believe, to this day, that their unconditional love for their children got them through it all. They were kind, committed, focussed, and they had endurance.

My father, who has since passed away, was born in 1922. He was the last-born child – one of two boys and six girls. He was a dashing man. He always looked cheerful. He had a narrow-bridged nose, hollowed cheeks that highlighted his face, bold, brown eyes, and a strong build for a man of medium height. He had no formal education, having grown up as the youngest child in a poor family. He was a patient, peaceful, and philosophical character who respected and appreciated peoples' uniqueness. But he was still a tough man. He was soft-spoken but authoritative in his disciplining.

I truly admired these attributes. I have applied them to my life – to respect and understand before judging. I raised my children the same way. Every person is different and deserves respect. It was either black or white with Taata. There was no grey area. He was a man of few words, but when he spoke, he made his point clearly. He was an incredibly good listener, and a voice of reason within the family. Maama had a totally different parenting style.

Taata was my earnest friend. When I received the news of his passing, I was devastated. It was a Thursday, 30 December 2010, just

before midnight. I sat alone in my house in South Africa. My younger brother phoned me to tell me of our father's passing. The pain I felt, and the thoughts that circled in my mind, were indescribable. I had planned to bring my father to South Africa to show him how far I had progressed from our humble begins, but I couldn't afford it. I never had the opportunity to go home and say goodbye. I felt alone in my sadness. My children were at university. My husband had returned to Uganda, and the rest of my family was far away, also in Uganda. I could only pray for his soul, and look to God for strength. I had written him a note, which read:

My father,
My best friend and confidant,
My cheerer,
Patient and magnificent,
Your love was incredible,
I miss you.

You ran a tough but fulfilling race.
You left this world a better place.
Your legacy lives through your children.
May your soul rest in peace, Taata.

Taata was committed to his family. He provided for us to the best of his ability, in the only way he knew how to, by working all day in the blazing sun on the farm. He hardly missed a day's work. He only took off when he was really ill, or when he attended community obligations, such as funerals. He saw no importance in material things, rather taking pride in caring for his family. His work clothes were ragged, patched up with various materials, but he always walked with pride. I have nothing but love and respect for my father. My relationship with him was profound. He was adamant that I be brought up with the correct values. He always told me, 'Words have power, so use them wisely. Dreams come true if you focus on completing each step until you get results.' I used that advice to lay the foundations for my life that now keep me steady, focussed and grounded on obtaining results

that improve my life and that of my family.

Maama, a Muganda woman, was born and raised in Nakasajja village, about twenty kilometres from Kampala. Her parents told her that she was born in 1938, but she believes that they were not certain about this. Her family was a large one of fifteen children and two mothers. Her birth mother bore four of the fifteen children, of which she was the oldest. I remember very little about her mother, my grandmother, who I last saw when I was fourteen when she visited us in the village. I remember her being a humble and soft-spoken old woman, with an incredibly good set of white teeth behind a welcoming smile. Luckily, good teeth run through Maama's side of the family, and I am lucky to be blessed with a good set. Sadly, my grandmother passed away in 1996. I was in South Africa at the time and I couldn't afford to attend the funeral. She was the only one of my grandparents who I knew, as the others had passed away when I was very young.

Maama had no formal education apart from two years of schooling, in which she learned the alphabet and how to spell her name. At the time, boys' education was prioritised over girls' education. Maama wishes, to this day, to be able to speak and read English. She always says this with sadness in her eyes. Girls were raised to get married, give birth, do housework, take care of the children, care for a husband, and work on the farm, while men were expected to provide for the family.

Things haven't changed in the rural areas of Uganda. These unequal gender relations are hidden under the cover of culture. Maama got married to my father when she was nineteen years old, young and full of life. She was my father's second wife. At that time, it was common for Baganda men to have more than one wife. Some men had up to five wives. In my village, most men had two wives, irrespective of their religious beliefs, whether they were Christian or Muslim.

In my eyes, Maama is a phenomenal woman. She has a big appetite for life. She never worked a paying job. She was always true to her beliefs, enthusiastic, and was able to recognise and adapt to change. She always wanted to lead, and often failed to follow. Despite

her petite figure, she was an imposing character. Maama thrived on being in power and controlling everyone, from my father to her children, and even at times people in the community. She ruled with an iron fist over her family. There was no room for mediocrity. If we did something wrong, we were punished so that we would not repeat the offence. No one dared challenge her. She questioned rhetorically, and always expected your answers to be wrong. If you spoke back, you were disrespectful, but if you kept quiet, you were being just as disrespectful, so you could never win.

I always tried to be obedient, but Maama found fault in the tiniest of detail. The physical punishments that Maama dispensed were hard, harsh and painful. The many beatings, delivered swiftly, became a part of our lives. I would receive a bad beating without any explanation. Sometimes it seemed to me as if she just enjoyed the idea of beating me. At one time, I believed that the only way Maama could show us love was through distributing pain. Anything we did would be seen as wrong one day, and right the next. We always tiptoed around her. It was difficult to bond with her. We were tasked with adult jobs, which we did the best we could, fearing what would happen if we failed. Through it all, I learned to not feel sorry for myself. Maama showed me that the person who looks back at you in the mirror is the person responsible for your destiny. You can overcome the obstacles in your path. You can't blame the world for your failures in life when it is you who influences outcomes. Although it was difficult to learn this lesson, I fully appreciate it now.

It took time to understand that Maama's method of parenting was the only way she knew how to raise her eleven children well. She always had our best interests at heart, despite her tough-love approach. She wanted her children to live a life different to hers, to at least be educated and have a chance at a good life without the threat of poverty hanging over their heads. Her dedication and commitment to her goal of educating all of her children defied many cultural rules. This made me who I am, and I remember this every time I feel like giving up. Her perseverance led to my academic successes. As her eldest, and female, I was the first to graduate from school and university. This wasn't the norm, as I had older brothers.

I was blessed to have her as a mother in those tough times, and now, in later life.

Mother would often say, 'You may not control your circumstances, but how you react defines your future.' She would use every opportunity to motivate me, be it through loving words or physical punishment. As the first born, I got to experience the fullness of Maama's heart, her appreciation of life, and her desire for her children to be educated. She made sure that I knew what was expected of me, so that I could do well at school and achieve something for myself, and set an example for my younger siblings. She always said, 'You will get a good education, a good office job, and live a life unlike mine, in which basics are normal and not luxuries.' I took that to heart and used the opportunities afforded to me by working hard. When the school year would come to an end, and we had been promoted to the next class, Maama couldn't contain her smile. Her pride in us kept her going, knowing that her hard work was paying off.

Often, my father would agree with Maama's decisions. She did not let the fact that we were poor stop us from achieving our goals. For instance, if we were sick with malaria and there was no money for medication, she would treat us with bitter leaves and home remedies. The little money that we had was always stretched to make sure that we got what we needed, but we always got through somehow. If we happened to be short on school fees, Maama banded us together so that we could find the money needed to pay the fees. She believed that as a unit we could overcome anything. Maama ensured that we all knew our roles and that we carried them out to the best of our abilities.

The physical and emotional harm she caused me affects how I interact with her and other people. Her authoritarian character made me subservient. I wouldn't question my teachers or people in positions of authority. I didn't defend myself in situations where I had done no wrong. I believed that silence could resolve a bad situation. Peace could be achieved by forgetting pain. However, the peace would only be temporary, as the problem remained. This timidity slowed my progress. I feared authority. I didn't expect those who had authority in my life – my friends, my husband, and even my

work colleagues – to respect me.

This cost me dearly. I still battle with that, deep within. Though I respected Maama, I detested her parenting style. The harsh, frequent beatings hurt not just physically, but emotionally, too. Then again, I understand that Maama was overwhelmed. The desperation and anxiety of her everyday situation caused her to be harsh on her children. Even at that very early age, I was quick to realise that Maama's means to an end were not right. I vowed to never raise my children in this way. There would be better ways of getting my message across to my children.

I found that I turned to my father often. Taata was always a source of comfort. He showed compassion that, even then, I wanted to come from Maama. The few times that she would show that side of her was usually when I was ill. She would treat me to cola drinks, sugar in my tea, rice, and other types of food that were luxuries. Those are the memories I treasure the most. When Maama showed that special side of herself, she showed me that she was a truly special soul, and I prayed that God bless her always in life.

As I grew older I began to see the value in Maama's dream that education would be my salvation. With scarce access to media, my knowledge of the outside world was limited. I fashioned a world in my head out of what I heard on the radio. I had an active imagination, and I still have one. This lack of media influences meant that the values my parents taught and instilled in me – that we are all equal in God's eyes – is what shaped the foundations of my early life.

We would learn lessons through storytelling in the community, and from our elders, and we took it all in as gospel truth. Maama drilled it into my head that every challenge builds character, and that there is a lesson in failure. That notion has always stayed with me. She always said that the difference between the rich and the poor was education, and that once you have education, you have it always, as it has no expiry date.

'Okusoma kwekujja okukugulila enzig, okusoma tekuvunda, bwokufuna, oba okufunnye, otekwa okusoma.' Loosely translated, this means, 'Education will open doors for you, education has no expiry date, once you have it, you have got it, and you have to get an education.'

Being the first born, Maama expected me to be perfect, and to serve as an example to my siblings. Maama trained me well to run a household. I was accountable and responsible for my siblings from a very young age. At four years old, I had to babysit my two-year-old brother while Maama worked on the farm. At seven, I could prepare a full family meal, the matooke dish, with the accompanying sauce. By ten, I could take care of all the household chores, from cooking to laundry and babysitting, and I was able to contribute with small tasks on the farm.

From a very early age, I observed how my parents lived and approached life. They taught me to dream big, work hard, stay focussed, love and care, and to believe with my whole heart in my dreams and goals. That culture grounds me as a functional citizen within society, but it does not define my abilities and dreams, and it does not limit my development or stop me from unleashing my potential. I will always pursue the best for my own children.

CHAPTER 3

The farm cradles my dreams

I admire much about my birth country, Uganda. It is blessed with an equatorial climate and beautiful green vegetation. The rainfall throughout the year is favourable for agriculture, the main source of income for most Ugandans. My family happened to be one of those who were solely dependent on agriculture. As a third-world country, Uganda lacks the systems to enable good agricultural practices to support the farmers.

There was no insurance for farmers against the heavy losses they would sustain due to environmental factors and bad management practices. My parents constantly battled to yield enough to sustain us. Yet, farming remained the only source of income to support my dreams and hopes of getting an education and escaping poverty.

Our family worked hard throughout the year, on weekends and during holidays, to raise money for food, school fees and basic living needs, only resting on the Easter and Christmas holidays. I started working on our farm at the age of six. Maama measured out areas, using a yardstick, for each of us to weed. If you were slow and unable to finish your apportioned work, you were left behind to finish while everyone else went home. We would grow, harvest, and sell a variety of seasonal crops such as soya, tomatoes and beans. Tomato harvest was a particularly tiresome task. The tomatoes had to be picked quickly to avoid spoilage. We would spend the whole day picking and transporting the tomatoes, and sort them at night, by lantern light. I would carry heavy boxes of tomatoes on my head, from the farm to the house, most days suffering from a stiff neck by the time I went to bed.

When we were not busy with seasonal crops, we were harvesting annual crops, such as coffee. Harvesting coffee is a slow and cumbersome process. Only the ripe coffee beans are picked, placed on a hard cloth, and sealed in twenty-litre tins that we would carry home on our heads. Work started at sunrise and ended at sunset. Each of us

carried ten to fifteen cans home from the farm. Most times, Maama would make one of us stay home to prepare lunch. That was the only break we were allowed. We would eat and go straight back to work. Before going to the farm to harvest the coffee, we had to place the beans out each morning to dry in the sun and pack them in bags for safe storage in the evenings. If all went well, and the crops were good, we would make enough money for school fees, and we would be able to get to school on time. The pain we endured to raise money for my education was a constant motivation for me to focus on my studies.

Every passing year, from January to November, we worked hard to keep healthy and stay in school. December was always different. Christmas was a very special occasion for us. We would start preparing for Christmas day and New Year's a week in advance, collecting enough wood for a week, water for at least two days, and enough food so that no one would have to go to the farm. Taata would slaughter one of his cows so that there would be enough meat for the family, though a big portion of it would be sold to support the family. The matooke was peeled the evening before, to make time for church the next day. I loved going to church. I got to worship the Lord with other people and give thanks to the Lord for taking care of my family and me. Even though we couldn't afford to buy new clothes, as most of our neighbours did, we enjoyed Christmas as a family, and that was what counted.

The food we ate at Christmas time was always a glorious treat. Rice was a delicacy. We never ate it before matooke, the main meal. Chicken was prepared for the males, to add to the rice. I always ate as much meat as I could stomach, often making myself sick in the process, so much so that I couldn't even handle the smell afterwards. We always managed to over-indulge on Christmas day, as it was one of the few days when we were allowed to eat delicacies to our hearts content.

If the budget allowed, Maama would buy batteries for the radio so that we had some entertainment on the day. All of us children would enjoy and dance to the music. I remember The Twist dance being in fashion at one stage. We danced to Chubby Checker's 'Let's Twist Again', a popular song at that time. I always looked forward

to Christmas. On that day, we didn't feel poor or disadvantaged. We only felt love and happiness. We would laugh, sing, eat, play and tell stories. Maama was even nice on the day, not punishing us if we made any mistakes. When Christmas day passed, everything went back to normal. Uncertainties and worries about money and school fees resurfaced. We all worked hard to harvest and grow more crops to create an income that would sustain us in the coming year. This was our year-in, year-out rhythm. The predictable routine was comforting in a way, because it helped me to realise my dreams of escaping poverty.

CHAPTER 4

A dream is launched

I would see only trees, farms, and a few houses as I ran to school on breezy mornings along a narrow dirt road. The lush green grass on the open fields allowed the cool morning breeze to caress my cheeks as I made my way along the road. Although my mind would be filled with the worry of being late for school, the journey remained a time of serenity for me, away from a congested home environment. It took my mind off of the hard work on the farm, and my mother's heavy hand of discipline.

I started school at the age of seven, in 1964. I attended Kamuli Primary School, situated in a rural village almost six kilometres from home. It was the nearest school to home, and luckily, it was considered the best school in the area. I don't remember much from my early schooling days except for the long walks to and from school, which I remember clearly. The walk was difficult. The path was overgrown with grass that collected the morning dew and wet our legs. Snakes hid in the long grass, waiting to attack. A tree lay over a part of the path, filled seasonally with large yellow-black caterpillars that would either fall from the tree while you passed, or would crawl over the path, leaving no way past but through them. When I reached the tree, I would pray that I didn't step on a caterpillar or have one fall on me. I would take a deep breath and run as if my life depended on it.

I remember the school clearly. The classrooms had bare, brick walls. The buildings stood in the middle of a plantain and coffee field, resembling an old fort, roofed with plain corrugated-iron sheets. It had no ceilings or windows. We could look out at the beautiful scenery in front of the school. Behind the buildings, there was an open field covered with a carpet of dark-green grass that remained green all year round and needed to be trimmed from time to time. The field was used for athletics and football. Beside it was a small netball field.

I wasn't bothered with the fields, because I didn't compete in sports, and rather focussed on my academics. When other children would partake in after-school activities, my siblings and I would run home so that we would have enough time to complete our daily work on the farm. Maama ordered us not to participate in any after-school activities and to get home as quickly as possible. She would always know when we didn't return immediately. To this day, I believe that she had spies who secretly monitored what I did at school.

Rain could be expected at any moment in the equatorial climate of Uganda, and it often rained while we walked to or from school. Come rain or sunshine, Maama expected us to get educated. I hated rainy days, on which I'd arrive at school soaking wet. If the rain was soft, I would use tender banana leaves as a makeshift umbrella. That though didn't stop me from constantly getting sick with malaria, and it didn't help against hailstones, too. Walking barefoot on the wet gravel was painful, as we couldn't avoid things on the path that were concealed by the rainwater puddles. The thought of wearing shoes to school at that point seemed to me a distant, unobtainable dream.

Despite the troubles, I was always excited to go to school. It was my personal ticket to freedom. Our morning chores made us late on most days. These ranged from collecting water from the well, and firewood from the farm, to sweeping the yard, or even working on the farm. The only time I was excused was during exams. It all depended on what the most important task was at the time. The younger children were spared the hard work, and had to sweep the yard, wash the dishes, or boil water for tea.

Maama always woke me up as the sun rose over the horizon. She would yell, 'Naava, *zukuka!*' ('Naava, wake up!') to which I would quickly and respectfully respond '*Nzukuse, Maama.*' ('I am awake, mother.') Maama could see me from her room. My room was barely lit by the outside light, but come sunrise or full moon, the light made its way in through holes in the rusted iron roof sheeting. The light was enough for me to make my way to my mother's bedside, where I knelt down and greeted my parents a good morning. It became a ritual that I performed every morning without fail. My parents always stressed the importance of greeting the people you share a home with first

thing every morning, as it is how you get to know if the people you live with are okay or not.

In the mornings, Maama would have a gentle and peaceful sound to her voice. She was most calm then, and would be soft-spoken. In fact, Baganda people speak incredibly slowly, as if they are evaluating what is being said. Their greetings are usually slow and affectionate. I liked mornings with Maama, as I felt an emotional connection with her when she spoke in those moments of calm.

Everything else in the house was rushed. Without a clock, we were forced to estimate time, trying to fit in the chores and still make it to school by 8.00 am. I always ended up being late for school, because there was too much for me to do. After completing my morning chores, I usually had a few minutes to clean up and get dressed. For breakfast, I would have a piece of cassava or sweet potatoes, left over from the previous night's supper. If I was lucky, I would have some time to wash down the dry cassava with some sugarless tea. Sugar was considered a luxury, as was bread, which we learned to live without.

Cleaning up in the morning was never easy. My parents couldn't afford the basics, and we had to be innovative in taking care of our hygiene. We resorted to traditional methods to keep clean. Our tooth brushes were fashioned from finger-sized fresh cuts of small coffee branches, which were smashed on one side to form bristles. For toothpaste we used ash from the previous night's wood fire. Despite these traditional ways, I can't remember any of our family suffering from dental problems. My teeth were in perfect condition throughout my youth, and they are still in really good shape. I take pride in my pearly white smile.

Combs and mirrors were also unaffordable luxuries. For a comb, we would use the hard, rough outer covering of the jack fruit, which proved more than sufficient, as our hair was always very short due to the school rules. As a mirror, we used the reflective surface of rainwater collected in the drum. Body lotion, on the other hand, was one thing that we couldn't improvise, and we had to go to school without it. We got used to it.

I couldn't wait to go to high school to become a full-time border in the hostel. The Ugandan education system is complicated but very

efficient. It starts with primary education, that takes seven years. The national Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) is written at the end of primary schooling to enable students to progress to secondary education. The six years of secondary education is divided into four years of lower-secondary and two years of higher-secondary. This is followed by post-secondary schooling, or tertiary education, which lasts from three to five years, depending on the degree or diploma chosen. At the end of any given level, there is a national examination that must be written to gain entry into the next level. I was only in primary school and had a long way to go.

I was constantly late during my early years of schooling, and I was punished regularly. I would have to clean the compound during lunch break, or collecting water for the teachers' domestic uses. This kept me busy all the time. I usually didn't have food for lunch. The only time I was given some lunch money was during harvests, and that would be fifty cents or a shilling, only if Maama was in a giving mood. Then I would look forward to buying snacks. The best was Kabalagala, a delightful deep-fried pancake made from a dough mixture of ripe bananas and cassava flour.

Between classes and carrying out punishments for late-coming, I barely had time to interact with other learners. But I was happy to participate in school. Being in school itself made me one of the privileged few in the village. Many children in the village did not go to school, for different reasons. I really appreciate my parents' efforts and support in getting me through school, despite the troubles that stood before them.

I managed a consistent place in the top three of my class. My favourite subjects were mathematics and science. With such good results, at least I would not get in trouble with Maama over poor school performance. Though Maama couldn't read, she used my report as the standard to measure my siblings' performances, despite them being in different grades. Anyone with bad grades was punished on the spot with a vicious hiding. With the threat of a hiding looming over my head, I always managed to stay focussed on my education.

No matter how tired I was from working on the farm, I always did my homework in the evenings. Maama would buy me English

books that most times I was too tired to read. Sometimes I didn't even understand what I was reading. Even back then, the exercise of reading every day gave me the motivation and focus to succeed in my education. I asked Maama how she selected the books that she brought home, as she could not read, and she replied that she asked people to help her to get the books for her daughter. I had no option but to succeed and not let Maama down. She was, and will always be, a hero in my eyes.

At the end of every day, our chores on the farm took priority over the preparation of food. On weekdays, Maama would prepare lunch while we were at school, and we would eat at around 5.00 pm. Boys and girls had to help to prepare the food in the evenings, and on weekends and public holidays. We got used to having just the one cooked meal in the day. In between, we would have fruits to help with the hunger.

Cooking in the village was not an easy task. The food required intense preparation. The starches, including cassava and sweet potatoes, were always freshly picked from the farm, peeled, and steamed on an open wood fire. We also spent plenty of time peeling beans and nuts to make a sauce for the dry foods. Those tough times kept me focussed on my goal. My Plan B was always my Plan A. I had to get an education.

At times when I was working on the farm, and all I could hear were the birds chirping and the wind whistling in the trees, I would daydream of the future and what it held for me. I would picture my children and the life they would lead – a life off the farm and away from poverty. My children wouldn't suffer for basic needs.

Maama was always looking for better opportunities to further my education. When my Uncle David visited in December 1964, he bore good news for my parents and I. There was an opportunity for me to study in Kampala, the capital city. My parents were overwhelmed with joy. It would be a chance for me to grow and experience life from a different view.

I was eight years old the first time I met my uncle David. He was tall, handsome and extremely well dressed. To us villagers, he definitely appeared to come from the city. I really admired the way

he presented himself. I believed that I could be like him, and have his confidence in self and sharpness in looks. My parents told me that he worked at a police station in Kampala. One of the benefits of his job allowed officers' children to study on subsidised fees at a fully equipped government school, Kampala Police Children's School. He offered to take me along with him, for me to study at the same school as his son studied at. I was extremely excited to study at this school, and it had been a dream of mine for a long time to go to the city. I always believed that if you know what you want, the how of getting it will work out. My dream of a better life was beginning to work out, and Uncle David would be my guardian angel.

The arrangement was for me to live with Uncle David's family during the school term and to return home during the holidays. Kampala Police Children's School was superior to Kamuli Primary School, and Maama jumped at the chance. At the time, I didn't know what it entailed, except that I was moving away from home to the city. The only thing I was sure about was that it was for the better. I would be studying in a good school. I'd be living in a city that had running water and electricity, and there would be lights on during the night. Added to that, I would own a pair of shoes and some dresses that were not riddled with holes. I'd also sleep in a nice bed with nice sheets. I could see that my life was slowly changing for the better, and it was all thanks to the education I was getting and that I was focussed on. My uncle was a Godsend. His help was going to make my primary leaving exams that much easier to pass, which would allow me the opportunity to get into high school.

In January 1965, when schools opened, I was excited to attend my first day at Kampala Police Children's School. I loved my uniform, a green tunic trimmed with a white collar. I still walked to school, but it was a shorter distance of only two kilometres, and I had comfortable shoes, which made it easier on me. What I loved most, though, was how the night was not as scary anymore, as the streetlights lit up the night. Although I missed my family, and the abundant love within our family, my uncle was always supportive of me.

My uncle and his wife had two sons who were roughly my age. I soon learned that, except for my uncle, the rest of the family were

not very welcoming of me. My aunty treated me differently from her sons. My bedroom, which was intended to be a store room, was situated at the back of the house. It was barely big enough to fit a single bed. There was only a small window to allow light and fresh air in. My suitcase was stored underneath the bed. During the hot days, I was unable to sit in my room due to the heat, and I usually sat outside in the shade by myself with my thoughts.

I was allowed to have meals inside the house along with my uncle's family, although mostly he was not present, as he came home late from work. My older cousin would hit me as he pleased, and I couldn't complain to my uncle or anyone, for when my uncle was not around, there would be more trouble. Though it was a traumatising experience, I had school to keep me sane, and the fact that I would return to my family in the village during holidays helped me through it all.

Even though I was only a child, my aunty didn't treat me like one. I dreaded doing laundry, especially my bed sheets, which were so big and I so small. I also ironed my clothes. My aunty would serve me very small portions of food, leaving me hungry. My stomach grumbled nearly every night when I slept. The only times I slept with a full stomach was when my uncle was around, as he used to give me some of his food. I so treasured my uncle being there, because he would treat me like he treated his own children.

From time to time, my father would come over from the village. He would bring food with him, and that was another time when I could eat to my heart's content. As soon as Taata left, I would feel lonely and helpless with my situation. When the time came to go home, I was always underweight. This wasn't the city life that I had imagined. I was old enough, though, to understand and tell myself that despite my situation, all that mattered was getting a good and solid education.

The arrangement with my uncle only lasted six months, as he got transferred to another district. I was left in the care of his brother, Uncle Patrick, a young man who was not married and who spent plenty of time at work or having a good time enjoying life. He had no children, and he didn't understand what went into taking care of a

child. He worked as a presenter at the national radio at night, which left him no time to take care of me. I was fine with the complications of my living arrangements, as long as I was able to continue to attend at Kampala Police Children's School. I was also glad to escape the torment by Uncle David's wife and children.

Even with the extra responsibilities of taking care of a household and all the housework, I was a lot happier with my living situation. I had to shop for groceries, cook for my uncle and I, as well as clean the house. But it was only a two-roomed flat. I slept in the sitting room. Every night I would make up my bed, and each morning I would pack it up. Although I was alone nearly every day, I was happy, and not afraid of anyone. Life at school was also good, because I had another guardian angel in my teacher, who was extremely kind to me, and helped me through school. He would give me money for food at break time. I was young and innocent, but luckily he was a genuinely nice person, and he didn't take advantage of me.

By the end of 1965, I was settled in well at school and looked forward to the school holidays, when I would return home to the village. In February 1966, in my second year in the city, everything changed. One night, when Uncle Patrick was at work, I was alone at home, and I was woken up by loud noises outside. I would find out later that this was the sound of gunshots, and people running past the house. At first, I thought that I was dreaming. Then I became terrified at the thought that it could be robbers being chased by police. Shivering with fear, I mustered up the confidence to peep through the window. Thankfully it was a full moon, and a clear night. I could make out figures with guns running uphill towards the nearby army base, the Nsambya army barracks.

I was frightened and certain that something horrible was happening. I proceeded to crawl into the corner of the sitting room, and then laid in a foetal position. I cannot remember how many times I recited the Lord's Prayer, asking that no one would break into the house. I didn't sleep much that night. Uncle Patrick didn't come home that night or in the morning. I awoke still curled in the corner where I had dozed off in the early morning hours. I was glad to be alive, and I wished that my father would come and pick me up.

Sometime before midday, I heard a knock on the door. It took me a while to respond, as I was terrified that it could be someone trying to hurt me. I went to open the door after a few more knocks. A man introduced himself, and said that my parents had sent him to take me home to the village. I gathered some of my clothes and went with him. I realise now that it was not the wisest decision, as he could have easily kidnapped me.

I followed him to a truck, and got into the open back along with other strangers. I trusted and hoped that the man would take me back to my parents, some 100 kilometres from the city. Sometime in the evening, I was delivered to my parents. I was filled with joy at the sight of them. I was so happy to be back in the village, safe with my family. My days of innocence, when the world was relatively safe, and people were trustworthy, were gone.

I later learned that the turmoil was due to political instability that had climaxed and boiled over at that time. Then-Prime Minister Milton Obote had suspended the Constitution and assumed all the leadership powers. The Ugandan Army had attacked the palace of the King of Baganda, the Kabaka Frederick Walugembe Mutesa II, who evaded capture, escaping into exile. The instability and fighting stopped about a month after my traumatic experience. My parents didn't really want to send me back, but then decided that I needed to complete my primary education in a good school. They were very brave to let me return. The year passed without any trouble, and when December came, I was glad to return to the village to my parents and family.

Come January 1967, I was excited to return to school when it reopened. I was saddened at the prospect of leaving my family again. Taata travelled with me to the city, as he always did, and on our arrival he bought me a cupcake and a soda from a small shop nearby. He got me settled in and immediately made his way back to the village before it got dark. I had to say goodbye, and that was always very emotional. I felt the loneliness creep in on me as soon as he was out of sight. The prospect of being alone again was heart-breaking. My only comfort was in returning to school.

After Taata left, I took a nap to rest my body of all the aches

and pains, which I believed were from all the hard work during the holidays, and from the long travel. I figured that if I rested, I would feel better, but that was not the case. When I woke up, I found that I was still in immense pain. Given the symptoms, I figured that I was suffering from malaria. Since I used to get attacks on a monthly basis, and was used to it, I thought that it was something that I could easily handle. Before long, I was suffering from a splitting headache, muscular fatigue, stomach nausea and continuous vomiting. I felt my skin chill, although my temperature was skyrocketing, and I was sweating profusely. All my joints ached, with my back and my knees being the worst affected. I was confident that it was malaria causing all my pain. I was getting weak very fast.

Maama had taught me how to take care of myself and to treat malaria, and I always carried tablets for just this type of situation. I took the anti-malarial tablets and went back to sleep with the knowledge that when I woke up the pain would have eased and I would be feeling better. When I awoke, the pain was worse. It threw me into a panic. It was getting dark, and I knew that Uncle Patrick would only return in the morning. My legs were too weak to carry my weight, so I couldn't walk. All that was left for me was to lay down and cry with the pain, and pray that I got better. I had no choice but to stay in bed and wait for my uncle or hope for a quick recovery.

Some time during the night, when I was half asleep and in deep, agonising pain, I heard a faint but persistent voice at the door calling my name. It felt like a dream, but eventually I woke up and the voice was real. The man repeatedly said that I should open up, or he would kick the door down. From the sound of his voice, all frantic, it was as if he had been at it for a while, and he seemed to know that I was in there. He was not going to leave until I opened up. With no energy to speak out and unable to walk, I crawled to the door. By the grace of God, I was able to get to the door and open it.

To my surprise, standing tall in front of me was my beloved Uncle David. He had come to Kampala for a visit, and he had decided to check in on me while he was in the city. I was surprised to see him, but more importantly, I was relieved that someone had come and now I could get some help. I gave a huge sigh of relief. I knew that

I was safe. The Lord had answered my prayers and sent an angel to take care of me. Uncle David saw immediately that I was extremely ill. My fever was high and my eyes were sunken in their sockets. If he had not shown up, I shudder to think what would have happened to me.

Uncle David picked me up in his strong arms and rushed me to the emergency rooms at Nsambya Hospital, which fortunately was right across the road. I was admitted and treated immediately. I was safe in the hospital. Uncle David sent a message to my parents to come up to the city to take care of me. His only way of getting a message to them was through a taxi driver who stayed in the area. Maama later told me that she was extremely worried, and had panicked, thinking that I would die. She was unable to sleep that night, anxiously waiting on daybreak to come and see me. Maama arrived at around 6.00 am, and had to wait until 7.00 am, which was the visiting time. To get to the hospital that early, Maama must have woken up in the early morning hours to walk the six kilometres from the village to the main road and catch a taxi to the city.

The first person I saw when I opened my eyes in the morning was Maama. My eyes filled with tears of joy. With Maama by my side, I was safe. My temperature had dropped, but I was still feeling sick and weak. I was extremely hungry. I had last eaten two days ago, as I couldn't keep anything down. Mamma went to get me some food. When she returned, more relaxed, she asked me about the barricades that were raised around my bed. The other mothers and nurses in the ward were quick to tell her that it was to protect me, as I was going crazy in the night. The doctor also told Maama that I was suffering from cerebral malaria and jaundice, both fatal diseases if not treated timely, and that I was lucky to have been brought in when I was.

This troubled Maama immensely. She imagined what would have happened if Uncle David had not come by when he did. Thanks to him, I had dodged death. On my discharge from the hospital, Maama decided that I would return to the farm permanently, as the risks were too high. There had to be better ways to receive a good education. I returned to Kamuli Primary School to complete my primary schooling. Maama continued with what she knew best, and

helped nourish my education by getting me books to read, hoping that I would improve my knowledge.

The two and half years that I was privileged to have spent in the city had helped me gain some insight into my future. I could visualise my goals much better than before, seeing them coming to fruition someday. The street lights of the city that lit up the night gave me a hope that I could walk at night unafraid of the dark; that one day I would be able to turn a tap and get water, and not have to carry a twenty-litre container for kilometres from a well from a spring to the house. In order to achieve my dream, I would need to focus on my studies, graduate, and get a job in the city. With this in mind, I always said a silent prayer that my parents would find a way to get the money needed for my school fees.

Through the first few months of returning to Kamuli Primary School, I continued to wear the shoes I had brought from the city. I was the only child in the whole school who had shoes. Although it was weird, it felt good, and I felt special. That feeling didn't last long, as the shoes were worn out and I had to return to walking barefooted, like everyone else in the school. The time when I still had those shoes served as a reminder of where I wanted to be – to have clean feet all the time. In the village, I was constantly dirty and I hated it. This motivated me to get myself out of poverty and into the city, where life was a bit easier. I would be able to buy lots and lots of shoes for myself.

With my return to the village being permanent, there were many changes to deal with in the house. I was ten years old. Maama had had another child, and now we were five. There was more work to do and more responsibilities in the household. Now that I was older – old enough to wash clothes – the task of washing the whole family's clothes fell on my shoulders. It was just one of the responsibilities that I had to deal with. I also had to help with the cooking and work on the farm, just like everyone else. I did the washing on Sundays. Although we were Christians, we prayed at home, never having time to go to church, which was a few kilometres from home.

With minimal resources, we could only do the washing on a single day, to save on soap and manpower. While I did laundry, my siblings

worked on the farm, ensuring that no time was wasted. The family grew bigger with time, and so did the load of washing. I was spending more hours doing laundry, which most times was from morning to evening. The dirt on the clothing, mixed with the morning dew from the grass, created a hard crust on the clothes that was a torture to clean. It was made that much more difficult with the limited soap available. By the time I had completed the washing, my back was sore, and my hands were cracked and wrinkled from the hard rubbing I had to do.

Maama would still give me a beating if she thought that the clothes were not thoroughly cleaned. We only ironed uniforms, which turned out to be a strenuous, undesirable task that needed to be done very attentively so that the garments didn't get burned. One would have to place hot coals in the iron and constantly check that the heat was regulated by running the iron over a wet cloth first, before actually ironing. Even then, the clothing was burned, and as usual, Mamma was on hand to deal out the deserved punishment with intent and love.

My days were much the same until I was about thirteen years old, when I hit puberty. I had absolutely no idea what was happening to my body. The Baganda culture excelled at keeping children in the dark when it came to sex. Everything, including valuable information that every child should be taught, was kept secret until it happened. Only then were you informed how to handle the problem. If you were lucky, you might just pick up a few bits of information by listening to the adults or through playground gossip.

Maama also did a great job of protecting her daughters from boys, for fear of us getting pregnant. I was not allowed to have any friends, even at school. If I tried to have a friend, my brother would report me, and I would receive a beating from Maama. So I was always on the outside with the other children. I didn't know what was happening, and I missed out on the information that they shared between themselves.

When I started my periods, it was a shock. I was unable to explain the fact that I was bleeding. Petrified, I didn't know how to tell Maama, because I thought it was my fault. I had never seen or

heard of a woman bleed in that way. I was confused, and felt sick. It was traumatising. I sat there for a few hours, crying and hoping that it would go away. It didn't, and I had no choice but to tell Maama. Trembling, I mustered up and told her. Surprisingly, I wasn't in trouble. She sat me down and told me about puberty and what comes along with it. She explained in as much detail as she knew, and told me that I should now be even more careful around boys. She proceeded to tell and warn me about sex and pregnancy, and the implications of that to me and to the family. During this talk, I was most happy about the fact that I was not in trouble, and that all was okay with me, but I took all she said very seriously.

I didn't know then that the management of this menstrual cycle, or period, would be hard to handle. For most of the girls in the village, being able to afford sanitary towels, which were considered a 'luxury', when going through a period was, and still is, a nightmare. Maama taught me how the situation was handled in the village. She gave me some pieces of cloth from her old, torn clothes and said that it was to be used as a sanitary towel. The catch came when she said that I had to wash them every time and reuse them. We could not afford to be throwing away pieces of clothing every month. There would be no clothes left at the end of it all.

The truth of it all slowly started to sink in after a few months. This was going to be a painful monthly experience forever. The worst days were when I had to go to school, and walking back was the worst. The piece of cloth was now soiled, hardened, and it felt like a sharp knife cutting at my inner thighs. It was such an unforgettable pain that cut deep down through my heart and flesh. Most times I got home in tears and unbearable pain. I would change immediately.

My period would last for three days, and Maama wouldn't let me take off school, so I had to endure the pain each month. Through it all, what kept me going was knowing that I was getting an education, and that many other girls were going through the same thing. Some girls didn't go to school during their periods, for various reasons. Some, because they couldn't afford the proper sanitation and chose to stay at home. Others, because they had to respect cultural reasons.

It is a traumatising experience for a girl to endure her period

without proper sanitary towels every month, but it gets better if you keep the faith and hope, and focus and work hard for your dreams. I got through it all, and was able to purchase sanitary towels with my hard-earned cash, thanks to education. Africa is still a man's world, and women are subjected to unfair treatment. At times, it feels like a curse to be born a girl. Unfair treatment towards women and girls only motivated me to reach even more for my goal of being educated. It was the only answer to my question, 'Who is going to free me? Who is going to free this African child?' I am so fortunate that Maama took it upon herself to go against the norm, and to send us girls to school. She saw a way around the abuse of women's rights, and took it.

In my final year of primary schooling, we were thirteen children in the family. It was extremely hard on my parents, as the finances are not enough to send everyone to school at once. We were totally dependent on the money that would flow in from the sale of the crops. With the quick progression that I had made through school, and having a better school record than my older siblings, my school fees were paid first. Even with all these odds on my side, I would still struggle with school essentials, such as school uniform, stationery, and other items. There were days when I would not be able to go to school, as there was no money. I would spend as long as a week at home, waiting for the money to buy a pencil or a book needed for my studies. It was on those days that I saw the motivation and determination most in Maama's eyes, as she worked to get the money to send me back to school. Seeing her doing all that she could despite the shortcomings gave me that extra push to keep going and be better than my best. All my hopes were pinned upon going to high school.

In 1970, I was due to write PLE exams in my final year of primary school. I was determined to pass with results that would allow me entry into high school. I considered PLE to be my first academic test against my peers. Maama had worked so hard to get me here, and now it was up to me to push the limits. Failing my PLE was not an option. I aimed to break the barriers of poverty and to be a role model to my siblings and other youth in my village. I put my applications for high school and boarding school in early, even before I had written

my exams.

My teacher at the time helped me with the application process, and advised me to apply to the top three schools in the country. Luckily, they were on the outskirts of Kampala, and not too far from home. Maama, on the other hand, had a different view of what constituted a good high school education. She was of the opinion that the further the institution was from home, the better the education would be and the more I would be able to concentrate on my studies. Maama's first choice was Lango College High School in the northern part of Uganda, about 400 kilometres from home, a long distance to travel by bus in those days. In the end, I went with Maama's choice. She was the one paying for my education. In any case, I was happy, as I would be furthering my education and getting closer to my goals, and any high school would have done it for me.

The application processes were a learning experience for me. I was made aware of a government bursary that was awarded to students who performed well, so that they could gain full access to university. This helped settle some of my fears that concerned my tertiary education fees. I could rest a little easier, knowing that if I worked really hard, I could be awarded a bursary to study for a degree, and that would lessen the burden on my parents.

The more knowledge I gathered, the more I realised that there was a whole world that I knew nothing about. To be awarded the scholarship to study at university, I had to start with good grades, and keep them going all the way through high school. It was such an encouraging notion to know that I had something to work towards. I realised that I was privileged to know what I knew – this was information not readily available in the village, and most didn't know anything about it. The trick was putting that knowledge to work, and that meant hard work.

Being in high school meant that I would incur additional expenses in the form of boarding fees, toiletries, and travel money. I was sceptical that my parents would be able to handle this extra financial burden, but they managed, as usual, to pull all the strings that they could. Taata talked to a trader in the town, and managed to come to an agreement for a loan that entailed the trader harvesting our

plantain until the amount owed was paid off. Repeating any academic years would be unaffordable and unacceptable.

Boarding school was an exciting move. I was enjoying perks that I had only dreamed of. I got two pairs of shoes, proper bedding, and some new dresses, among other things. I would have my own bed, meaning a proper night's rest. I would have proper lighting, and would be able to study well at night. I would have more time to study and concentrate overall, with no farm chores. But I would have to return during holidays and, like the rest of my siblings, I would have to work on the farm.

I passed my PLE and was accepted at Lango College. I was ecstatic, and overwhelmed that I would be going to high school. At the same time, I was making history as the first child, and a female, in my family, to go to high school. I would be holding the torch for the village and our community as a whole. Village children, more notably girls, would seldom make it into high school. So, along with all the pressures of school, came the expectations of the family and community. I was breaking cultural and poverty barriers in my village. Failure was not an option.

The belief and tenacity that Maama had shown in ensuring her children were educated was starting to bear fruit. That proactive and optimistic attitude that made up her brave, fearless character, had enabled her to push forward. Taata, though always quiet and behind the scenes, was ever-vigilant, always doing the best he could and making sure that his family got what he could provide. I can never forget his contribution in my life, and his role is always appreciated. I love him for his constant efforts in making it a life I can look forward to every day.

CHAPTER 5

Boarding school: a pivotal step towards achieving my dreams

In January 1971, the time had come for me to leave for high school. I was fourteen years old. I packed my few clothes, stationery, and toiletries. Maama always gave some grub, which I was highly appreciative of – roasted peanuts, peas, and hard corn, fried and mixed – that was all she could afford. Taata and I made our way to Kampala, where we would spend the night before boarding a bus to the town of Gulu. He always travelled with me. The bus left at 5.00 am, the only one for the day, so we had to sleep over in Kampala.

Come 5.00 am, we were on the bus. It was far from the most luxurious bus. It looked as if it wouldn't even be able to move. There was a carrier on top, where most of the luggage was stowed, but what couldn't fit on top was squeezed into the bus between the passengers, leaving no space to move. To make it worse, there was nothing that couldn't be transported, from live poultry to dry and fresh goods. It resembled some kind of great trek. We didn't know how long the journey would take. I didn't know what to expect when we arrived. I was so glad that Taata was available to hold my hand through the whole process of moving to a new venture in my life. It was the first time either Taata or I had travelled such a long distance. It was a learning experience for us both. I appreciated the bonding time with Taata.

Through the whole trip, I just kept imagining what it was going to be like at Lango College, and if I would like it or not, although I was determined and positive to do my best. We were lucky enough to have a bit of cash to buy some snacks during the long trip, the likes of roasted maize that was sold on the roadside at the various stops along the way. We spent most of the time sleeping. When my eyes were open, I took in the beautiful landscape that passed me by through the bus window. The further north we went, the more the landscape

changed, as it got flatter and the trees were replaced with shrubs, resembling more of a savannah landscape, though still quite green. The journey on the uncomfortable, dirty, noisy bus was rough. The engine rattled, and the passengers packed onto the bus were restless.

It took a whole day for us to arrive in Gulu around 6.00 pm. We got off the bus and had no idea where to go or what to do. We didn't speak the local language, Langi, and that complicated the situation. Thanks to the noticeable physical differences between the different tribes, my father stood out. Ugandans from the north of the country, known as the Nilotic people, or nomads, are normally tall, lean and pitch-black in complexion. A typical Muganda from the Bantu group would be fair in complexion, short, and stocky, with a broad nose. Most Baganda women are short, with distinct pear-shaped bodies. A Muganda man noticed Taata and helped us with directions. We were lucky that the taxi driver took us to Lango College, free of charge. The day was going well so far. We managed to run into some very nice and humble people that were willing to help us in a time of need.

My father left me at Lango College with his blessings for a safe time while I was away from my family. I was alone in a new environment, to begin a new and exciting chapter in my life. Education would remain my ultimate goal, and it was the key to a better life. Failure would mean letting my family and myself down. I couldn't do that, not with the amount of work that had been put in to getting me to high school. I was finally starting in lower-secondary at Lango College, and staying in the school's hostels. I was there, and ready to start.

My parents had bought me a silver, metallic suitcase. I was glad that it had survived that rough, gruelling bus trip. My whole life was packed away in that suitcase, from my clothes to the grub that Maama had packed for me, which I ate as sparingly as possible so that it would last as long as possible. My toiletries were on the bare side. I remember clearly what I had been given: a bottle of Vaseline, two bars of Lifebuoy soap for bathing, a small Colgate toothpaste tube, and a long bar of washing soap. This was to last me three months. Most times, it never did, even though I made certain to use everything sparingly. I had learned to appreciate even the smallest things and the generosity of people. My pocket money was just enough to send

a message home through the school if needed. The school's finance department kept the money that I would use to travel home.

I knew that times were going to be tough in hostel, but I never expected or imagined it to be so trying. There were nights I would wrap a cloth around my stomach to help ease the terrible hunger pains, or when I had to shower with no soap. The worst was not having any sanitary towels. It was depressing and traumatising, especially being among all the other girls in the hostel. I was always either the first or the last into the shower during that time of the month. I always thought that there must be other girls who were in the same situation as me, but no one ever discussed that topic, so you were on your own.

Through this persistent suffering, I always held onto the hope that it would all get better. I was poor, and I kept that secret to the best of my ability, mainly to avoid any discrimination, but also because I was embarrassed at the agonies that I had to endure due to being poor. I might not have known the other girls' situations, but from the outside they looked better off than I was.

I quickly and unexpectedly found myself homesick, longing for my family and familiar surroundings. At night, as I forced myself to sleep through the various pains I felt, I would think to myself that my children would not have to go through such horrid experiences. I vowed that their lives would be free of suffering. I would have to endure it, get a government scholarship to university, and then a job and a better life. A better life for me would mean a better life for my children, my grandchildren, and the generations thereafter. I would constantly give myself pep talks to get my spirits up.

There were many times that I wanted to quit and get a job. I always chose to carry on. But after two years of enduring Lango College, I was able to move closer to home, and it was a relief. I wouldn't have to endure those torturous bus trips, during which the bus would often break down. This always worried my parents when they heard the news three months later, after I arrived for holiday. They said that it compromised my safety. With these safety concerns, my parents supported my move to Wanyange Girls' School, conveniently located roughly 50 kilometres from home. I was to complete my last two

years of lower-secondary at Wanyange.

Life at Wanyange Girls' School was very different from Lango College. I glimpsed a different world. The difference in the students' lifestyles was noticeable. More affluent girls attended than those of the lower, poorer class. It didn't deter me from focussing on my goal. I got to eat cake in the hostel when my friends decided to share with me. They would get the cake from home, or when their parents came to visit on visiting day. My parents were unable to afford to see me on visiting day, so I would stay in the hostel and try to sleep. Sleep was always hard to come by, as I still suffered from some of the problems that I had suffered at the hostel in Lango College. I struggled to sleep due to hunger pains, even after meals. The portions of food were barely to enough survive on. The meals were mainly posho (a pulp made from maize flour) served with boiled beans. The portions were intended to fill your stomach and give you some nutrition. You just had to get by.

There were good and memorable days at Wanyange Girls' School. One was in my third year of lower-secondary, when I got summoned to the principal's office. That was unusual. I was never called to the principal's office, because I didn't get in trouble. I was worried, and wondered what was happening. When I got to the office, I was greeted with a pleasant surprise. The principal told me that I had a visitor, and took me to my brother Thomas Nnyanzi (who has since passed on, God bless his soul).

Seated attentively in the foyer, waiting for me, was Thomas. I was shocked. He was my first visitor while I was in boarding school, and he would be my last. When the initial excitement was over, I started asking myself the basic question of why he was there. What could be wrong at home? Was someone sick or dead? The expression on his face didn't spell trouble but rather happiness at seeing me. That's when I came to the conclusion that he was here to bring me money. I remembered the letter I had sent home a few weeks back requesting money to buy books that I needed to write notes in class. I knew it was a long shot, but I still asked, hoping that my family would be able to get something together and send it to me.

Thomas wore a pair of short pants that barely fitted him, and a

floral, short-sleeved shirt. He was barefoot. His legs had a powdery look to them that I knew all too well. It was from the dew on the long grass. He didn't seem bothered by his appearance at all. He was just happy to see me. When I saw his big smile directed at me, I ran to him and gave him the biggest hug that I could muster. It was the happiest I'd been in a while, but the school had strict visiting policies, and I had only ten minutes to talk to my brother.

We spent that time talking about the people back home, as well as how he had made his way to the school and what a hassle that had been. We laughed, and I relished those ten minutes. To me it felt like hours. The time came for him to leave and he gave me what he had brought. It was as I had expected. He had left it for last. Maama had sent him with money for the books. He had also brought a basket covered with a beautifully embroidered small tablecloth. I could smell that it had food in it. I waited for him to tell me what was in the basket, and acted surprised when he showed me. Inside was a green and white metallic dish containing rice with pieces of meat mixed in. It smelled even better when he opened it. I took what was brought for me and then said my goodbyes to Thomas.

I stored my food in the office and walked Thomas to the gate, gave him a hug, and said a final goodbye. I watched him walk off down the steep hill that was covered with rocks to prevent erosion. He struggled to get down with his bare feet. That sight broke my heart. The day would be imprinted in my mind. It was a good, and a bad, day. I was overwhelmed with emotions. I was happy for the visit and to see my brother, but at the same time I was sad to see the state in which he had to travel to see me. This was a moment in which my motivations for a better life were dug deeper into me. I would escape poverty, and my children would never endure such heartaches. When the term ended in December 1973, I returned home to work with the family on the farm. I only had one year left to complete my lower-secondary education.

CHAPTER 6

Dreams interrupted

In December 1973, the rhythm of growing and harvesting crops to create an income was interrupted with a disaster that caught us utterly unaware. This would bring about a realisation that didn't only change our course for that year, but it would also affect the following year too, threatening my only lifeline of escaping poverty.

It started out like any other day, as we made our way to the farm to start work. By midday the sun was blazing hot and work had intensified, proceeding as normal. The afternoon brought with it dark, lurking clouds as the weather started to change. The day had been productive. The sun abruptly disappeared, a clear indication that there was rain coming. Maama predicted a bad storm was on its way, and instructed us to make our way home quickly, as the rain in Uganda could be upon you suddenly.

We returned home quickly and put containers in place to collect rainwater beneath the roof edges. None of us could have imagined what was about to happen. It was so sudden and violent. As soon as the rain began, it was a heavy downpour, which turned just as quickly into a violent hailstorm that lasted what could easily have been more than half an hour. I had never experienced such a storm. The intensity and the size of the hailstones was such that it destroyed everything.

I could only imagine the feelings and thoughts that were running through my parents' minds as the hail fell. The silence that came from not just my parents but also the whole family was deafening. We all knew what this meant for our livelihood. You could see the fury and resentment in Maama's eyes – the wish that this fateful storm hadn't happened. Everyone shed a tear except for my father, because, culturally, men were not allowed to cry. But we could see the anguish in his face.

Maama finally broke the silence in the house, crying out and asking the Lord why, why did He have to do this to us? But even

though we had felt the wrath, we still had to assess the damage that the storm had caused to our crops. When it ended, we went outside and witnessed what nature could do in a blink of an eye. The ground was covered in a blanket of white.

We made our way to the farm to see the extent of the damage to the crops. As expected, the storm had mercilessly ravaged everything. It had left nothing of value to harvest or sell. We were faced with severe financial troubles. My parents knew that they had to come up with a plan for survival. We could see the dismay in their eyes. Maama's emotions swayed from confusion, to hurt, to bitterness and helplessness. I shared her hurt. They had to cover the cost of educating ten children, and paying for my boarding-school accommodation. I closed my eyes and prayed, hoping that when I opened them it would all just have been a bad dream. But that was just wishful thinking. Life had just shown us a harsh reality, and we needed to find a solution.

All that ran through my mind was that the storm had stolen my future – our future as a family. I only had to complete one more year of lower-secondary schooling, and another two years of upper-secondary, before university. I wept and wept. That's all I could do. Supper that day was quiet as we all contemplated what lay ahead for us. There had been many storms before this one, but this particular one was devastating. For me, the storm was a test of my faith, hope and determination towards achieving my dreams. I had to believe and hope it would be okay, and surrender to the higher powers.

The next day we picked ourselves up and started clearing the land to start planting new crops. Only Taata was not present as he made his way to the neighbouring villages to look for work to get food for the family. Farmers in the nearby villages hadn't been touched by the storm. We still had to eat, and we were reduced to begging for food on a daily basis. Taata worked hard and tried his best, but with so many mouths to feed, it was always going to be an uphill battle.

There were times when things were so tough that we ate food without any salt. Taata managed to negotiate with the trader who usually bought our harvests to get a cash advance on our banana harvest. It took six months to repair the damage caused to the farm.

During this time, even Christmas and New Year's were depressing. I stayed focussed, keeping the faith and hope. At the end of 1973, I passed my exams and was promoted to senior-four, which was the last year of lower-secondary.

I was looking forward to Christmas in 1974. The whole family was in good spirits. Hopefully the festive season would be a good one. The family had worked hard the past three months to ensure that we had a good crop to sell. In the month or so that I was home I would work equally hard to get money for next year's fees and for general living. Being home was always a joy. I would work hard every day, but the joy I felt around my family could never be taken away. The one thing I always looked forward to was the food. I wouldn't be eating the hostel food, and that was a relief. Though the food at home was nothing fancy, you could taste the love and compassion that went into making it. It made a world of difference to me. I felt the family spirit, and I took it all in every chance I had.

CHAPTER 7

My career choses me

Eleven years had passed since I had first set foot in a classroom to begin my education. I had only a couple of hurdles to jump before I could stop worrying about paying school fees. I had to complete two years of senior-secondary. I would need to pass the Higher School Certificate exams to earn my entry into university, and to be awarded a comprehensive government scholarship. It was an exciting and anxious time in my life. I could finally start to see the light at the end of the tunnel. I just needed to pass my East African Certificate of Education (EACE) exams and get into a good school to complete my senior-secondary.

Three months after I wrote my EACE exams, I was waiting anxiously for the results. Failing the exam would mean that I would have to drop out of school. I also wondered if my parents would be able to afford the school fees if I passed. Through my past schooling years, my parents had always come through. The postal system wasn't reliable, especially in the deep rural areas. There were times when we received post up to four months old, if we received it at all.

My fears were put to rest when my brother returned from school one day with a brown envelope, which to me screamed results. We were using the school's postal box for our mail, so my siblings would check every time they were at school. I took the envelope without hesitation and ripped it open, still careful of the contents. I pulled the paper out and unfolded it. It was my results.

I took a moment to read through them. I had passed incredibly well. I jumped for joy and shook my hands in the air in total excitement. Maama saw me so excited and figured that I had passed. I went over and told her how well I had passed. She too jumped up and started singing songs of jubilation and dancing about from pure joy. You could see in her eyes that she was proud of her daughter, and how far I had come, and how far I was going. She was always my number one fan. She would be the first to celebrate and tell the world of my

achievements. If she could have afforded it, she would have thrown a big feast. I was the first in the family to pass the EACE exams. My older siblings were not even close to getting to write the exams, and this made my achievement even greater in everyone's eyes. Now I had to wait and see if there was space in the high schools. The worries were constant and unavoidable. Many students who passed with a good mark could not be placed, due to the limited space in high schools.

Maama had been a steady hand and guide up until now, but her lack of education now became a hindrance. She didn't know how to access information on high schools. I would have to do it myself, using the education and knowledge I had at my disposal. I had applied to a few high schools, and I felt that it would serve me better to go to some of the schools to check on the progress. I was lucky that my parents were supportive and gave me some money to travel. I decided to go to Namagunga Girls' School, my first choice. Taata decided that I was old enough to travel alone. I knew that it was going to be a tough challenge, but I was up for it. My life was my responsibility, and I had to push to make it better. I proceeded to plan my trip and activities.

I planned to catch the first taxi travelling in the direction of Namagunga to give myself enough time to travel back. The taxis run as early as 05.00 am, so I would have to wake up at 03.00 am to walk the six kilometres to catch the first taxi out. My brother John Mukwaya, though only fifteen years old, walked with me. It was pitch-black outside when we left the house, but his presence helped ease my fears. Having someone to walk with in that darkness was consoling.

We were lucky to have batteries for the torch to light our way a little, avoiding potholes and mounds in the road. The sun started to rise just before we reached the main road. It was beautiful to watch. Fortunately, I didn't have to wait too long for a taxi to Jinja, my first destination en route to Namagunga. Before I knew it, I was standing in front of a sign on a dirt road that read 'Namagunga Girls' School'. Seeing the sign was a relief. I asked a person who was passing by how far it was to the school, and the person told me it was about one kilometre away. I walked to the school along the dirt road, with the scorching sun digging deep into my skin, although this didn't bother

me much, as I was used to the sun by now, from working on the farm.

My heart was pounding, and I had goose pimples from the anticipation of studying at such a prestigious school. I envisioned my name on the list for the 1975 senior-five class. I would be one of the privileged few. I would fly the flag high. I maintained the belief and faith that I could achieve anything I put my mind to. I was a winner. When I arrived at the school, the gates were closed. I suspected that everyone was still on holiday. I was distraught, and I sat down at the gates to regain my strength for the walk back to the main road. I was lucky to have sat down for a while, because when I read the board at the gate, I saw the after-hours phone number to contact the school. I took the number down on a piece of paper, gathered myself and walked to the main road to find a phone to make a call. It was important to exhaust all possibilities before returning home.

I was lucky to find a public phone in working condition at one of the roadside shops. The only problem was that I didn't know how to use a telephone. There were two people ahead of me, and I attentively watched what they did as they made their calls. When my turn came, I picked up the headset and pressed it to my ear. I dialled the numbers. The phone rang for what seemed like ages, and then the call went through.

A woman answered: Namagunga Girls' School, how could she help me? I responded by saying that I wanted to find out if I had made the list for the 1975 senior-five class. She asked for my name, and I told her. I was asked to wait as she checked. It felt like hours, but she returned a few minutes later and asked me to confirm my name. She said that Irene Bukirwa was on the list. I was so excited that I didn't know what to do. In disbelief, I asked her to repeat what she had said. She formally congratulated me on gaining entry for the following year, and gave me a student number that I could reference for any inquiries. She said that a letter was on the way. I thanked her and ended the call. I thanked God for getting me this far. I must have thanked him a hundred times. I would be studying at one of the top five schools in the country. Most girls would only dream of attending at Namagunga.

I was fortunate to be attending a school that was mostly for the children of the rich and politicians. I still had doubts about whether

my parents would be able to afford the school fees, although that was a hurdle for another day. I had to start thinking of getting home and telling my parents the good news. I had a long trip ahead of me. I was extremely hungry. Supper on the previous night had been my last meal. I used some of my travelling budget to buy a small queen cake and a soda. Sitting on a bench, I ate and celebrated by myself, wishing that I had someone to share in the excitement and joy that filled my heart. After eating, I rested for a few minutes, and then boarded a taxi.

On the way home, I began to think of the way forward, more especially how we would overcome the great financial hurdle of studying at Namagunga Girls' School. My expenses would be costlier, from uniforms, to books, travel fees and hostel accommodation. The government didn't subsidise secondary education. I knew that I would have to be strong emotionally, physically and mentally. Many thoughts ran through my mind on that long journey home, but my spirits were always high, as I was one step closer to university and a better life.

The taxi dropped me off and I walked home hurriedly. With all of those thoughts in my head, the six-kilometre walk home flashed by. Just when the sun was beginning to set, I turned into our yard, anxious to break the good news to everyone, especially my parents. Everyone was still at work as there was still daylight. I ran straight to the farm, and straight for Maama. When I glimpsed her in the distance, I started screaming with excitement at the top of my lungs, 'Maama, *bampade ekifo!*' ('Mother, I have been accepted!')

Maama saw me coming and screaming, and when she heard what I was saying, she dropped her hoe and sat down. When I got to her, I just saw happiness radiating from her eyes. My father was close by, and he heard me screaming. He ran to us and heard the news. They hugged me and congratulated me endlessly. 'Well done, well done, well done our daughter!' This was the best news my parents had received in a long time. I could see in their eyes that they were overwhelmed with joy and pride.

After a few minutes had passed and the news had sunk in, Maama started to celebrate with herself, shouting praises to the Lord, so

loudly that anyone who was in earshot would know that her child was going to higher-secondary. All this time, I was just overwhelmed with emotions and tears were rolling down my cheeks. After Maama had calmed down a bit, I relayed the rest of the story. The whole time, her smile didn't fade – it just filled up her face. Once she had absorbed everything, reality took hold and she started thinking about how to get the money needed to pay for my studies.

She assured me that I should not worry. She and Taata would take care of the finances. I should concentrate on my studies. Though soft-spoken, Taata was equally thrilled. His soft smile said it all. He too assured me that he would do all he could to ensure that I went to school. My siblings were over the moon as well. They saw me as a role model. I was saying to the poor African child that it could be done, irrespective of your circumstances. If you know what you want then the how will work out.

Now, every bit of money was to be saved for my schooling. It would be hard going at home, as money would be stretched. My siblings would have to sacrifice starting school on time, but they would get their chance eventually. When I succeeded, I would turn back to help them. There would still be necessities that I wouldn't be able to afford, such as deodorant. But I was so determined and focussed on my goal that no material things would deter me from getting through my studies. Health, and my family's belief and support, were all that I needed. My parents had demonstrated that parents don't need to be educated to help their children achieve academic success. You just need to be interested, and to be there to walk the journey with them. Even asking simple questions, such as how was your day? What can I help with? These could help your children. My mother's gesture of buying me books, even when she had to ask strangers for help, was commitment enough to inspire me and for me to see her as my role model.

For the next two years I travelled by bus to Namagunga Girls' School. The trips were troubling and hard on me, but it was cheap, and the bus dropped me off only a kilometre from the school. To catch the 06.00 am bus, I had to get up early in the dark and walk the six kilometres to be on time. Luckily my brother John would always

walk with me, helping to carry my luggage to the bus stop. I always appreciated his company and loved him for his caring heart. John would carry the luggage on a bicycle, when it was functional, and when the bicycle was not working we would carry the luggage on our heads. John only left the bus stop when I boarded and we were driving off, making sure that I was safe until that point.

When I got off the bus, I would pay a man with a wheelbarrow to transport my luggage to the school. All the rich parents drove past on their way to dropping off their children. It was depressing. When everyone had been dropped off, almost immediately we would form into groups, with the rich girls sticking together and the less-advantaged grouping by default. Even here, at school, I was reminded that I was poor. It hurt deeply. I had to turn the pain into motivation that would empower me fiercely to work hard.

During weekends at school we were allowed to wear casual clothes. It was a no-brainer as to which dress I would wear between the three that I owned. I saved the really nice one for special occasions, which happened to include visiting days, although in my two years at the school I never received any visitors. It hurt to see the rich children get visitors who brought them an assortment of stuff, from home-cooked food to new clothes and shoes. When the visitors had left I could smell the aromas of food that came from the rich children's rooms. The aromas only made the hunger pains I felt at night worse. Yet, through it all, I would never forget the sacrifices everyone back home was making to get me through it. There could have been no better motivation for me than having nothing.

The two years of higher-secondary were an immense struggle, although luckily it passed quickly. There were times when I returned to school late, after the opening date, due to being unable to dig up the funds. I didn't like being in this situation, but it helped me to improve my self-study skills. Thanks to self-motivation, I never fell behind. It is important to define your dreams as clearly as possible, as this will keep refocusing you on your true north whenever problems strike.

When the time came to write my final higher-secondary certificate exams in 1976, I was more than pleased to have made it that far. I would write exams in physics, chemistry and mathematics – the

subjects offered to me based on my EACE results. I had passed science subjects with better results than I had passed arts subjects, and my career had chosen me. I worked hard for the exams and gave it my all. I was confident that I would get through, but I would have to wait six months for the results to be issued. I only thought of passing, and how gratifying it would be for my family and me. I didn't even think about failure. I had to start looking forward, and to think about what the future held for me.

As I grew up, I gradually realised that the village was getting too small for me. I was growing accustomed to the bright night-lights of the city, the showers, and wearing shoes all the time, among other things. I was always searching for new opportunities to better and further myself. When I was done with higher-secondary, I returned home to the village, to check on my family, and to touch base with all my loved ones. The visit was brief. I then made my way to Jinja town, about 40 kilometres from home, to find a vacation job. I was lucky to find one as an assistant at a research laboratory in the Fisheries Department, and I was fortunate not to have to pay for accommodation, as I stayed by my uncle. That way, I was able to save my earnings for university, where I hoped to be accepted to study soon. I was very grateful to my uncle for the help he offered, as it assisted me in the long run.

My first pay cheque arrived after my first month of work. I was paid in cash! It was such an exhilarating feeling to be paid money for work I had done – an empowering, inspiring feeling that I will never forget. I looked forward to many more pay cheques. I was far from home, but I felt that I had to share this moment with Maama, the most devoted and deserving person in my life. I had had a dream for as long as I could remember to buy Maama a pair of shoes with my first pay cheque. This would be just to say thank you for all that she had done for me throughout the years. She hadn't owned a pair of shoes for a long time. She had shared her last pair with me when I had travelled, as I didn't have any to wear. She went everywhere without shoes, from work to town. As I walked around, looking for a pair of shoes for her, I felt a gratifying feeling come over me – a feeling of a better life ahead. I finally found something, and settled on

a sandal with dark-blue straps. It was affordable, and didn't put too much strain on me. I couldn't wait for the weekend to make my way back to the village and see my family. I would be able to give Maama her gift. I was eager to see the look on her face when she received it. I had longed to make life better for Maama and everyone within my family, and this was the beginning.

The weekend arrived. I made my way home, bubbling with excitement. I bought some sugar and meat along the way for the family. I had to find a way to share my current blessings with everyone, to show them that I appreciated all the work and sacrifices that had gotten me here. As always, I made the six-kilometre journey from the taxi drop-off to the house. It was a surprise visit, so I had to navigate the way carrying all that I had brought along, although it was worth it.

I arrived at the house in the morning. Everyone was working on the farm. I found Maama first, and she was excited to see me. She smiled warmly, with that little sparkle in her eye. I ran up to her and gave her a huge hug. I had not seen her for a while. It would always dawn on me every time I saw one of my family members how much I had missed them. Her arms, hands, legs, feet, and her clothes were covered in dirt, and I was reminded how grateful I was for her in my life, and for all that she had done. This was not the life I had envisioned for my parents, my family and me. It had to change. I still didn't completely understand how I would get us out, but the idea was there, and that was all that mattered.

After our greeting, I gave Maama her shoes. She was so thrilled at the thought and the sight of the shoes that she was speechless for a while. I told her that from now on she would not have to walk around barefoot. Her expression alone said it all.

She said, '*Webale nnyo*, Maama.' ('Thank you very much, mother.')

She gave me a hearty hug. Calling me mother was a sign of respect. It symbolised the changing of roles. I was now seen as the provider in the family. It was a very humbling yet gratifying experience that brought tears to both our eyes. I was, in Maama's eyes, becoming the woman she had imagined I would be from birth: a leader, and a provider for the family. We made our way back to the house, and on the way I conversed with my siblings as if I had never left. The love

was always felt. We got home and I presented the gifts I had brought. My family was grateful. We had a pleasant weekend, and I enjoyed the food and the company. It passed too quickly. Sunday came and I found myself making my way back to Jinja and to my work.

Before I knew it, it was time to get my results. I was in Jinja when I found out that the results had been released. I quickly made my way to Namagunga to get them. That journey was nerve-wrecking. I battled with my mind as to what the outcome would be. When I got my results, I saw I that had passed all of my three subjects, mathematics, physics and chemistry, incredibly well. I broke into tears of joy, and sat down for a while to take it all in. I had qualified for university entry, and the best part of it all was that I had qualified for a comprehensive government scholarship to study a Bachelor's degree in Science for Chemistry, Geology and Physics at Makerere University. It was the only university in the country, and so the competition to be accepted was immense. Nothing, except for myself, could hold me back now. I was in control of my ship, my future. All the hard work, and the family's dedication, had paid off. I just had to keep steady, and only good things would come.

When I broke the news to my parents, they were extremely emotional, and in disbelief. They could finally relax, and not have to worry about the financial burden of my education. My entire family was overly excited. The future looked bright for all of us. The shackles of poverty were weakening, slowly but surely. Maama had done her part. She had broken the cultural, gender, and poverty barriers. It was my job now to make sure that I graduated in three years, and secured a job after my studies.

Maama had always assured me that if I received an education, I would naturally get a job. I had dreamed of being a scientist one day, and I was now one step closer to realising that dream. After being educated, I would get a good job, marry, raise a family, and own a modern house in the city, where I could comfortably care for my family and accumulate wealth. All seemed to be in reach. My future was starting to take form, and I willingly obliged to take it on.

CHAPTER 8

Dreams entwined

In March 1978, I began my studies at Makerere University in Kampala, my first year of a Bachelor's degree in Chemistry, Geology and Physics. Chemistry is a subject I have loved since I was first introduced to it in high school. It became a passion of mine. The mysteries behind things, finding out how and why they work, fascinated me. I had spent my holidays working in Jinja, and caught a taxi from there to Kampala. I waved goodbye to my uncle, who had dropped me off at the taxi rank. My life would never be the same again.

During the journey, I focussed my thoughts on the opportunities that lay ahead. Within an hour, we arrived at the taxi rank in Kampala. I hired a metred taxi, and not a wheelbarrow, to take me to Makerere University. It felt gratifying. This would be my first time setting foot on the campus. The taxi drove me straight through the front gate. The scenery was breathtaking, and soft on the eyes. The sight of the gate sent shivers down my spine and gave me goose pimples. The buildings were tall and majestic. The taxi made its way to Mary Stuart Hall, the residence that I was assigned to.

The campus was spotless. It seemed as if it was cleaned daily, with nicely trimmed shrubs that bordered the paved roads. The lawns were an enchanting green, and looked lush to the touch. I fell in love with the campus just driving through. The driver pulled into the parking lot of a tall, square, nine-storey building: Mary Stuart Hall, nicknamed 'The Box' due to its shape. The driver helped offload my luggage and I was assigned to my room. The view from my room on the ninth floor was amazing – a panoramic one that had a calming effect. I could see the valleys and hills that rolled through the campus. I could see the houses, and the university buildings.

The coin had finally flipped on me. From a madhouse to a skyscraper, it just made me feel victorious. I committed to myself to work harder than I had worked on any blazing day on the farm. That first year of university went quite well, and it passed quickly. I only had

one supplementary exam to write, which was physics, and I passed. My bursary was safe, and I was able to proceed to my second year of study. I was to continue with chemistry and biochemistry.

When the holidays came along, I returned to Jinja in the hope of finding a vacation job. This would also allow me to catch up with friends in Jinja who I had not seen for the past year. On my first day back in Jinja, I ran into a friend who happened to study at Makerere University as well. We ended up going out that night to an Easter weekend party at her friend's house. The party was surprisingly good. A group of boys from the university had driven through to Jinja to party away the Easter weekend, and they had found their way over to the party.

As the party carried on, we got comfortable and started dancing more. I danced with a handsome young man named Edward. He was tall, dark-skinned, well-built and considerably good-looking. Edward and I got to talk more with each other as the night went along. I liked his conversation, and I seemed to bond more with him than anyone else. It got late and I decided that it was time to retire for the night. I was getting ready to walk home when Edward offered to walk with me until I was a safe distance from the house. He did just that. The night was so memorable for us both that we decided we would meet up again at university the coming semester. He would be the man I would have a relationship with that would last twenty years and would help word another chapter in my life.

I had been at university for a year, and I was enjoying it. Sometimes I worked late hours to complete the practical aspect of the science subjects. University life was fast and furious. There were parties all over, every weekend. I immediately came to the realisation that self-discipline was essential for me to stay on track. Everyone looked out for themselves, and I was on my own. My love life was also taking form. I thought that I had found myself a boyfriend. I was excited about it, but I would have to juggle my time well not to disadvantage my studies. I couldn't forget the main reason I was there.

On returning to university after the Easter holidays, Edward and I started dating and soon it turned into a steady relationship. We fell in love and started doing everything together, having fun hanging

out and going to parties. The relationship intensified and got serious very quickly, and within six months I was meeting his family. The relationship, though, proved to be a time-stealer as expected, but I made sure that I stayed focussed on my studies and made it a point to balance my school and love life.

When the final exams came along in my third year, I passed really well with an aggregate that qualified me to graduate with Honours. Tertiary education in Uganda is structured such that one can obtain a Bachelor's as well as an Honours degree within three years. The thirteen years of study before university, distributed between primary, lower-secondary, and higher-secondary, as opposed to the usual twelve years of schooling in other countries, compensate for the three-year Bachelor's and Honours degrees.

I now had my degree in my bag, and I was ready for the next step, to get a job. But first, I had to be awarded my degree at the graduation ceremony. I spent weeks preparing for my graduation, as it was a prestigious occasion, and I had been working towards it for many years. I bought myself a nice dress, a good pair of shoes, and got a new hairdo. I had to hire the academic regalia, as I was unable to afford to purchase it. That was not a problem though, because the feeling I got when I put on that academic attire was the same, whether bought or hired.

I had dreamed of this day for so long, but I couldn't have imagined the depth of emotion I would feel on the day. Words cannot begin to describe how I felt. Once I had collected all that I had needed for the graduation ceremony, I eagerly awaited the day. To add to the excitement, I found out that I was three months pregnant with my first child. That news was a blessing, and it seemed that my life couldn't get any better. It was a pivotal moment in my life. It marked the beginning of motherhood, being married to a man I loved, and starting a career I had always dreamed of. Edward and I had also just moved into a house together. Edward would be awarded an MBChB degree in medicine on the same day.

I had endured fifteen years of schooling for this day to arrive, and so had my mother and my family. Finally, graduation day came, and I was overjoyed. It was on 8 October 1981, a bright and sunny

day. Only six students graduated from my class, and of those, I was the only female. Gratitude penetrated the depths of my heart. I was grateful to the Lord Almighty, my parents, and my family for their unwavering faith in me. I was deeply humbled.

My parents, sister and two brothers hired a taxi and came down to attend my graduation. They arrived long before the ceremony began, and took their seats. I could only imagine their excitement at witnessing the first child from the village graduate from university. I had made the family proud of me, and also proud of themselves in the eyes of the clan and the village. They had been looking forward to this day almost as much as I had been. Everyone was seated well before the ceremony began. Degrees were awarded alphabetically and by order of faculty.

I waited patiently for my faculty to come up, and then for my name to be read. My family ululated and sang praises when my name was called. It all happened so fast, but it felt like a lifetime. Before we knew it, noon had arrived, and everything was over. I was officially a graduate, and I could start looking for a job as a qualified professional. Even though in reality jobs were scarce, I felt empowered, and I was enjoying it and taking in every moment.

Edward and I took photos together, and with friends and family. We then proceeded to our three-bedroom house in the suburb of Nakasero, in Kampala, to entertain our guests. My parents had to return home just after the meal. I saw them off. It was a joyous day that I will always remember.

On my parents' return to the village, they planned a big party to celebrate their daughter's success, and the family's success, with the rest of the village. The party was held two weeks after graduation day. I travelled home for it. Plenty of time and effort had been dedicated to the event. The venue was decorated two days in advance. All types of traditional Bagandan dishes were prepared, from peanut sauce flavoured with dry fish, to chicken, and smoked, steamed palatable beef cooked in banana leaves. The starches included matooke, sweet potatoes, and cassava, to name a few. The cooks had poured their hearts and souls into the preparation of this beautiful meal.

By 05.00 pm, all of the guests were seated underneath the tree

where we used to sit when I was a little girl. The evening was full of joy and laughter, and the mood was very festive. It would prove to be a memorable night. My father's speech left everyone breathless. He acknowledged my mother with very humbling words, along the lines of, 'Without my beloved wife Joyce, there would have been no graduation or party.' This summed up how influential Maama was in the family and the role Maama played in my education. After the speeches, the partying and the drinking began. There was more than enough traditional beer for the whole village to drown themselves in, and there was the Baganda drumming and singing to entertain them and allow them to dance until the early morning hours. Two months later, I formally introduced Edward to my family. My parents welcomed him into the family. We were blessed and married traditionally not long after that.

The months that followed were hard, and jobs were even harder to come by. Some graduates went unemployed for as long as five years. I was lucky, and after only three months of struggling, I managed to land a job at a laboratory as a scientist in the Geological Mines and Survey Department in Entebbe. This job had its own challenges in that it involved travelling. I travelled from Kampala to Entebbe and back every day, as I had a husband to care for. To add to the complications, I was six months pregnant, but I continued to work, as I needed the money.

With my own home in the city, and with an income, it was easy to see the difference in the quality of life compared to the village. The running water, electricity for cooking, and lighting indoors and outdoors, made life so much easier. I could see my life taking form. Although life was better, and Edward and I were both qualified and had jobs, the pay was not sufficient, and we were struggling. With inflation rising steeply, every day brought with it a host of problems that we had to sort through. The economy was poor and was not improving, due to the constant civil wars that had persisted for almost two decades. The country's security was all but non-existent. The buildings were dilapidated due to previous bombings and a lack of upkeep, and the streets were littered with filth. No one cared to attend to it.

The fallout was caused by the Uganda–Tanzania Civil War (referred to in Uganda as the Liberation War) fought between 1978 and 1979. This war led to the overthrowing of Idi Amin’s regime, but it left a legacy as well as a heavy economic burden. Many economic and social activities ceased, and AIDS rose prominently from the great lakes and spread deep into Uganda, contributing to the rot of the country. The costs inherited from the war were devastating, and the country seemed to be continually struggling to recover. Jobs were, and still are, hard to come by. The economy did not, and still does not, support job growth.

People were either killed on purpose, by order, or by stray bullets. Anyone in uniform could have a say over your life. People were being killed and robbed, homes were raided in the middle of the night, and whole families were killed. Life in the country was not safe, and Edward and I were worried for our security. We noticed that many graduates were fleeing the country in search of better jobs, better income and a safer environment in which to raise a family. Medical facilities were limited, and education was unaffordable to many. All this meant that Edward and I had to think very hard about our future. If we stayed in the country, we could easily end up in the village or worse, dead. It was something that I could not imagine. We started thinking about leaving the country to better our lives, especially with a child on the way.

The nine months during which I carried my first child went by fast, most probably due to the fact that our lives were so complicated. I was 23 years old, and I wasn’t worried about the prospect of taking care of a baby, as I had taken care of my siblings for so long. I was more worried about going into labour alone at the house. I was almost due, and Edward resided at the hospital during his internship. I was lucky to be at a check-up when I went into labour. I started to panic. The midwife assured me, calmed me down, and said that it would be a while before the baby came, as my labour was still in a very early stage. She allowed me to go back home and collect some utilities. I returned to the hospital, and it was some time before the pains intensified and I was admitted.

On 26 March 1981, just before midnight, I delivered a healthy baby

boy, our son, through a normal birth. The first time that I saw my son was a blessing. He was wrapped in a light, baby blue blanket when he was handed to me. His eyes were closed and he looked so vulnerable. He was a bouncy little boy with striking soft, silky black hair, and he weighed 3.2 kilograms. Through all the excitement, I couldn't help feel a little scared at the notion that I was now responsible for this helpless little boy. It was an overwhelming feeling to know that my journey through motherhood was starting. I was mesmerised at the thought, although I couldn't wait to experience and live motherhood to the fullest.

Edward heard the news of the birth when he called in to check on what was happening. He was excited at the birth of his son, but was unable to come by to check on us, as he was on duty, and he was not allowed to leave his post. He asked his father to stop by the hospital, and less than twelve hours after delivery, my father-in-law was by my bedside. He was over the moon at the sight of his grandson, and he couldn't hide the joy in his face. When Edward arrived at the hospital the next day, we named our son Edmond George Kamutanga Kamara. He was our first born, and the love of our lives. We couldn't have been happier. I was released 24 hours later, and went home with my new-born son. When the news reached my parents in the village, they sent my sister Harriet Nyanzi to help me in taking care of my child and me. My son was Maama's first grandchild, and for this Maama loved the little boy dearly.

Being new parents, Edward and I started really thinking about our future and about leaving the country for a safer and more stable environment. We were lucky, as it did not take long before we were put in contact with a doctor who worked in Bophuthatswana, in South Africa. We learned that there was a shortage of doctors and medical professionals in South Africa. This looked like an opportunity for us. Edward applied for a job immediately, and we awaited a response. Four months passed with no response, and we gave up hope on the application but continued to look elsewhere for opportunities. The situation also forced me to place my dreams of studying for my Master's and Doctoral degrees into hibernation.

When Edward completed his internship, he was able to get a job

at a surgery. One of his many duties was to work for the Ugandan National Football Team as a medical doctor. In September 1981, Edwards's job took him out of the country to Zambia for a week. He kept his eyes and ears open, hoping to catch an opportunity. And sure enough, he was lucky to hear of something, and he took some action while still in Zambia. On his return, you could see that he had some good news for me. It was the best news. He had been offered a job in Zambia at the University Teaching Hospital in Lusaka. The joy that I felt when I heard the news was just too much for words. Edward could see it written on my face. We were going to move our family from this uncertainty in Uganda to what would hopefully be a better quality of life.

Our prayers had been answered. God was surely at work. This reinforced the notion I had that if you believe and focus enough, you can achieve your dreams. We decided to grab the opportunity with both hands, and we set to raising the money to get Edward to Lusaka before he lost the job. The days that followed were very stressful. We were once again blessed when one of Edward's old friends agreed to lend us enough money for Edward's ticket to Zambia. The plan was for Edward to go by himself, and to raise my and our son's ticket, so that we could join him later. Edward travelled to Zambia, and within four months, he was able to send our tickets. It would be the first time I had left Uganda, and it was the beginning of a new chapter in my life. Edward and I believed that a good, stable environment, and good earnings, would enhance our marriage and our lives.

CHAPTER 9

Stepping towards a dreamed life

I was excited to be joining Edward, but also extremely nervous of the journey, as it was my first time on an aeroplane and leaving the country. I would also be travelling with a six-month-old baby. Edmond may have been a toddler, but he was very strong and heavy. I had no stroller for him, and my suitcase had no wheels. Between the luggage and carrying my child, I had my hands full. I managed by carrying my suitcase in one hand and the baby in the other, with his nappies, food and documents in a shoulder carry bag. Filling in the documents at the airport was daunting.

Because I had never flown before, I was worried about the connecting flight in Kenya. We had to sleep over a night. I didn't know if I would have enough money to pay for everything, including taxi fares and accommodation in Kenya. My sister and my brother escorted me to the airport. It turned out to be an emotional farewell. I wasn't sure when I would see them again. They too knew that it might be a while. We said our tearful goodbyes and I boarded the plane with my son, feeling relieved. I could start focussing on my immediate future, and the next stage of my journey.

On the aeroplane, I started a conversation with the lady that sat next to me, thanks to my chattiness. She helped me fill in the documents, and showed me how to get a taxi and accommodation in Kenya. I discovered that I didn't have enough money to cover the taxi fare and accommodation. I was afraid of spending the night at the airport with a child and my luggage. It would be impractical. When I told the lady that I would be unable to afford the costs of a taxi and accommodation, she offered to allow me to travel in the taxi that she would hire. Thanks to her offer, I was able to afford a place to stay the night. I was thankful and again acknowledged that the Lord works in mysterious ways. He will send angels to protect and help you when you are in a tough situation. We landed and took the taxi together. I was dropped off at a hotel.

The night we spent at the hotel is still fresh in my mind. I had rented a room on the second floor. It had a bird's eye view of Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. It was my first time sleeping in a hotel, and that is probably why it was memorable. The sheets were like white snow, incredibly soft under my touch. It was as lavish as I had ever experienced. The only downside was that I was hungry, and I was unable to buy food for myself. Luckily, my son was still breastfeeding, and he could go the night on that, although it was nowhere near enough. I supplemented it with water to fill his stomach.

I would have to survive the night on water, but that was no problem, as I had been through worse. I was fortunate to have a bed to sleep in with my son, and we were safe. I bathed Edmond, as he was restless from the day's travels in the humid equatorial climate. I then put him to sleep and I followed soon after. Before falling asleep, my mind wandered with thoughts of the future. The hunger made it more difficult to sleep. A feeling of loneliness overcame me. It hit me that I was leaving everything I had ever known for a different, new life. It was daunting, but I felt relieved at the same time. I hoped to leave poverty behind. I visualised a corridor of hope in my life. Awaiting the morning and my flight to Zambia, I finally fell asleep.

The receptionist woke us up as I had requested, and we made our way to the airport. The flight was scheduled to leave at 07.00 am, and I was determined not to miss it, so I was there extremely early. Since I had left home the day before, I had not been in contact with anyone, as I had no way to communicate with them. I assumed that they thought I was well and in good health, and I could only do the same, as worrying wouldn't help me.

I was lucky to pass through immigration without any problems. I went through the motions at the airport, and when I was finally seated, I let out a huge sigh of relief. I had made it, and we were on our way to Zambia. All that had to happen now was the aeroplane had to take off and carry us to Zambia and to my husband.

The flight felt long, as I was not used to flying, and I was relieved to land in Zambia. I could only thank God for getting me here safely. We made our way through immigration, and I spotted Edward waiting for us. He was dressed in a pair of khaki trousers and a striped navy

blue shirt. He looked just the same as when he had left. I was so happy to see him, but the first thing I did was hand Edmond over to him, as the child was extremely heavy and I was tired from carrying him around. I was hungry and exhausted, although I was content at the same time. It was time to write another chapter in my life in a new country.

Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, differed from Kampala. The roads were well-maintained, and the city was clean. The people were friendly and welcoming. It looked like there would be much to look forward to. I was anxious to get to the house, to eat and rest. As we drove, Edward warned me that we would be staying at the doctors' quarters, a two-roomed flat with communal ablution and kitchen facilities. The place was far from comfortable. It was very affordable because it was subsidised by the government. Living there, we would be able to save some money. Every cent counted towards getting the life we dreamed of. We had told ourselves that we would save up enough to return home in three years – at least that was the plan.

Edward shared what he knew about the Zambian culture and people with me. They ate mopane worms, dried caterpillars, as a delicacy. They also ate *nshima*, pap prepared from maize flour, a common food that I wasn't used to. This was all unfamiliar. I was taking it all in, but before I settled, I needed to let everyone back home know that I was safe and sound. They had not heard from me for almost two days. I was sure that they were worried, especially because I was travelling with a baby. When we arrived at the residence, Edward called his brother in Uganda to let him know that we had arrived safely, and to pass the message on to my family. My family didn't own a telephone. The only way of communicating was through letters, so we posted one right off, even though post was unreliable, as it might never reach the addressee, or it could take months to arrive.

Edward, Edmond and I made our home in a room just big enough to fit a double bed and a small corner closet that wasn't big enough to hold all our things. The rest stayed in suitcases and laundry baskets. The second room served a multitude of purposes, although it was mainly a sitting room. We also used it as a dining room and a storage area. It wasn't the ideal place to live, but it was a step up from where I

had come from. We were safe, and we didn't have to worry about our lives on a daily basis. We were content, and life could only get better. We settled in and made the best of what we had, and we started building our family life.

Things were starting to change in my life. I ate bacon and sausages for the first time. The likes of minced meat, cheese, and yogurt were all new to me, as these foods are too expensive for the poor in Uganda. Shopping at supermarkets was an experience on its own. Buying meat that was not hung in the open was a pleasure. I was used to meat being sold in the open market – the meat was hung on a hook, and the butcher would cut your desired piece. But there were similarities with the foods in that they were either sold fresh or sundried, from beans to cassava and fish. It seems that sundried foods were really popular in Zambia. My first meal was a dish of meat and rice, which I thoroughly enjoyed. I would have to say goodbye to matooke, a food that I had eaten for my formative 24 years on this Earth, but I was ready to experience different foods.

Living in Zambia, I could see and feel the differences from Uganda. We were able to walk freely in the streets during the day and night. There was discipline and security. The police were functioning. The laws were followed, and we had to follow suit, specifically with regards to one law, which required couples married outside of the country to register their marriages in the country and obtain a certificate. If this wasn't done within six months of entering the country, you would be deported. Edward and I had a customary marriage, and we didn't have a marriage certificate. So, on 22 April 1982, we were legally married in Zambia, with only one friend to witness the signing.

After six months of having moved to Zambia, I still couldn't get a job, although not due to a lack of trying. Jobs were scarce in Lusaka. Most jobs in the country were geared to the copper-mining industry. I continued to look for a job, not just in Lusaka, but in other cities and countries as well, preferably where Edward and I could both work. On Edward's salary alone, it was hard to provide for our basic needs and save money to return home and help support our families there.

In an effort to keep myself busy, I started to hand knit jerseys, since I couldn't afford a machine. I got really good at knitting and

made myself a warm yellow jersey and little boots for Edmond to keep his feet warm. Sometimes it was cold in the evenings. Despite being unemployed, taking care of Edmond was a nine-to-five job on its own and I enjoyed it. I got to see him achieve milestones. Edmond took his first steps in his twelfth month. I was overjoyed to witness those first steps. He was a healthy child, and he was growing extremely fast.

Even without a job, I felt proud of my achievements. I had come from an underprivileged background, and had fought past, at times, insurmountable odds. I had achieved an education. I had a healthy baby, and a husband. We had managed to escape political instability and violence within Uganda and were establishing ourselves in our new lives. We lived a simple but adequate life. We didn't own a car, as money was tight, so we made use of public transport. We worked with what we had to achieve what we had planned, even though it was incredibly tough. We managed to fall into a monthly routine that revolved around saving money. We had a stroke of luck when Edward was allowed to remit 20 per cent of his salary, which we willingly did. We opened an account and saved the money in a bank in London.

Although I still felt as if I was on the right path, it was tough living in another country without a job. I was just making it from day to day. My days would all melt into one and feel exactly the same. My life at that time was pretty much the life of a housewife – cleaning house and taking care of the child. Sitting around was starting to make me anxious. I had my own obligations to tend to. My parents were expecting me to help with my siblings' education by sending money back to Uganda. As good as God is, one evening everything changed for the better when Edward came back from work.

The sun was setting on our two-roomed apartment, and I had dinner ready for Edward's arrival. He appeared from around the corner and I could see he had something in his hands. He held his stethoscope in one hand, and some mail in the other. When Edmond saw his father, he ran to meet him halfway with nothing but joy on his face. I was happy to see my husband, but I was also eager to see the mail he had arrived with. Usually, mail from Uganda was from family asking for financial aid or letting you know that someone had

passed on, but those usually arrived in blue envelopes.

This was a worn, brown envelope that was reinforced with rubber bands to stop the contents from spilling out, as the packaging was falling apart. The envelope, addressed to Edward, was mailed to Uganda first and then was forwarded to him in Zambia by his family. I could see that Edward was as eager as I was to see what was in the package, and that only increased my anxiety. It looked important. We opened the envelope and inside was a job offer from Bophuthatswana in South Africa.

It was an amazing surprise. We were over the moon with excitement, as our fortunes were changing again for the better. With the state of the postal system in Uganda, we could easily not have received the mail. The excitement was short-lived. When we read on, we realised that we had missed the deadline to respond by a week. We were left to wonder why the people back home had not sent the mail down to us sooner.

The job was the one that Edward had applied for while we were still in Uganda. We had thought his application had been unsuccessful, as he didn't receive a reply within six months. The letter had been posted to Uganda two months after we had left, and it had arrived much later. We were gutted. What made it painful for me was that I believed that it would be easier for me to get a job in South Africa. We weren't prepared to just let it go. We came up with a plan for Edward to travel to South Africa and speak to the people who had offered him the job, and plead our case. The following weekend, Edward travelled to Bophuthatswana by train and arrived that Monday morning. He would meet the relevant people and see if there was still a chance that he could take the job. We had set aside a week for him to try and get the job. That is, if it was still available. If it was, he would resign from his current job and we would move to a new country, in which there were more job opportunities for me.

The week passed and Edward still hadn't returned. Then another week passed without any communication from him, and I started to worry and panic, so much so that I couldn't eat or sleep. I started wondering what could have happened to him. Was he safe? Would he come back to me and our child? Even more frightening was that

I had no job, and I was running out of money to support Edmond and myself. I couldn't even afford a ticket home. I had no family or relatives in Zambia. I was starting to really panic when, during the third week, one clear day, I heard a knock on the door. I rushed to open it, and there was Edward, standing tall in front of me. I was lost for words. He had returned healthy and with good news: he had got the job and we would be leaving for Bophuthatswana in the next 30 days. I was happy that Edward was back safely, and that I would have another opportunity at getting a job. I couldn't wait to start another chapter in my life. Things were looking up for me again.

On 20 April 1982, we landed at Jan Smuts International Airport in Johannesburg (now OR Tambo International Airport) with renewed hope for our future. On landing, I immediately envisioned opportunities, as the condition of the airport alone said that the country was stable and that the chances of finding a job would be good. South Africa's economy was far more advanced than other African countries. Their roads were really good. There were big supermarkets, and developed, clean cities, which was uncommon in Africa. The infrastructure seemed to be in place.

We followed the signs to the immigration desk. The signs were bilingual, in Afrikaans and English. Afrikaans was the dominant language in the country. This was evident in the signage, and in the number of Afrikaans people walking around the airport. At the immigration desk, we were worried by the fact that our passports were stamped in Uganda with a restriction: 'Entry valid for all countries except South Africa'. The Ugandan government was endeavouring to fight apartheid in South Africa. But, ironically, thanks to apartheid's system of separate development, we weren't entering South Africa. Instead, we were entering the homeland of Bophuthatswana, an area reserved for black people to live in. So, we ended up waiting in the lobby while the officials contacted Bophuthatswana to see if we were expected. It took a while, and we were exhausted both mentally and physically, especially because we had a one-year-old child that couldn't stop running around, as he was constantly full of energy.

Eventually, all the passengers passing through immigration control had been checked, and the attendant could finally attend to

us. He told us that we were okay to travel. We could either fly over South African soil or drive with a Bophuthatswana official, with the necessary documents, through South Africa into Bophuthatswana. He added that there was an official on the way, but the man had been delayed and could not get to the airport in time to clear us. The airport attendant had, however, arranged for overnight accommodation for us at the airport. We were relieved at the news, as we knew now that we weren't being deported. We were led to our accommodation, and I couldn't wait to put my head down, as it had been a very long day.

The Bophuthatswana official arrived the following day before 08.00 am with our permits. We managed to get breakfast in before we started the long drive to Mafikeng, which was the capital of Bophuthatswana, about 500 kilometres away. When we arrived in Bophuthatswana, the official was kind enough to show us where some other Ugandans lived. We welcomed and appreciated this. While we waited for our papers in Mafikeng, the Ugandans working there gave us tips on how to approach and live among the Tswana people, the dominant tribe in Bophuthatswana.

We spent two weeks in Mafikeng organising our documents before we left for ThabaNchu, where Edward would be stationed as a medical doctor at Moroka Hospital. This hospital serviced black South Africans in the area. ThabaNchu was one of the seven enclaves that made up Bophuthatswana, which was a homeland for the Tswana-speaking people in South Africa. We had to quickly adapt to the South African climate. South Africa has four seasons. We weren't ready for this. We bought some winter clothes. The mornings and the evenings were already starting to get cold. I had only learned about the four distinct seasons in school, but I had never thought that I would experience living through all of them.

It was May, and autumn was ending. You could see the leaves turning and falling from the trees. This would be my first winter. As we began our trip to ThabaNchu, I was very anxious as to what lay ahead. I sat back and enjoyed the scenery. The landscape was so different to Uganda. It was a flat, semi-arid savannah that stretched as far as the eye could see. The maize was dry and ready for harvest. There seemed to be acres upon acres of land that had been planted.

It was a peaceful drive, and the lack of gunshots and violence was welcome. I couldn't wait to sleep in my new home, where I wouldn't be woken up by gunshots.

Although the trip was peaceful, I got to experience what the black race was going through in South Africa, despite it being through the window of a moving car. About 200 kilometres into our trip, we stopped to use the restrooms, and we were greeted with various signs that showed where whites only were allowed and where blacks should go. Not knowing what the signs meant, as they were written in Afrikaans, we asked the driver to explain to us: did it mean that only whites were allowed to use certain facilities, and if so, what would the blacks do? The signs were placed on restrooms, benches, and even on some of the stores. The driver told us that we were not allowed to use the white facilities. If we needed to relieve ourselves, we would have to go around the corner and locate the place where blacks went.

This was our first real experience of apartheid, and it wasn't pleasant. I had read about apartheid, but I never thought that it was that bad. Even though I didn't know the depth of it, I appreciated the delicacy of the situation. We went to buy some food for the journey, only to find that there were two windows: one for whites and the other for blacks. The discrimination with the food had me asking myself how different it was – a question I had no answer for. Although I was a foreigner, I had to follow the rules of the country.

I couldn't see how one could call themselves religious and consider themselves to be the children of God while behaving this way. I saw that we would have to acclimatise very quickly, as things were different here. But I trusted that good things would still unfold for us. It took six hours to complete the journey, but the roads were smooth and a pleasure to drive on. When we arrived in ThabaNchu, I immediately saw the difference between the place and Johannesburg. ThabaNchu is a small, rural town, and it does not have the skyscrapers of the big city. The buildings are old but in reasonable condition. There is one main street and one traffic light.

On arrival, we were temporarily accommodated in the doctor's quarters for interns. We were housed there for six months while we waited for our permanent accommodation to be completed. Edward

started working the next day. He struggled in the beginning due to the language barriers, but he worked with a nurse translator. The winter came, and that was one of the challenges we faced in the beginning and that we had to get acclimatised to quickly. ThabaNchu is situated close to the Maluti Mountains of Lesotho, and thanks to the snowy mountains and the prevailing winds, it is one of the coldest areas in South Africa. The temperatures could, at times, drop to negative ten degrees Celsius – temperatures we had never experienced. I had never worn a jersey in all my years in Uganda, and now I had to dress in more than one. I still had plans to further myself. I wanted more children, a job, and a happy, peaceful marriage, in which my children grew up with love and happiness. But I needed to adapt first. I had a child to care for, and that was my first priority.

I settled in, and once I was fairly comfortable, I started looking for a job. I desperately needed to earn an income. To my surprise and disappointment, I found out that I was not eligible to work in South Africa. There was a clause in Edward's contract that stated that I was just to be his wife, accompanying him, meaning that I couldn't work. I was in total shock. To compound matters, I needed a work permit to be allowed to work in South Africa. Edward and I were devastated with all these discoveries. I wondered what I would do.

It seemed that being a woman and having to struggle to get ahead in life was not just a poverty and a small-country thing. This discrimination seemed to be a worldwide phenomenon. I was now starting to understand it. I would have to fight even harder than I had ever fought to realise my dreams and get what I had always wanted. I had to fight for my freedom. The fight was not over, and although I was scared, I was ready for the challenge. I might not have been shackled in chains, but this felt like freedom in chains: free, but not free, in the actual sense of the word. I was ready to meet the challenge as an African woman. Better yet, I was ready to meet the challenge as a foreign African woman. I would have to break racial, gender, and geographic barriers. The question I had asked myself long ago, when I started my long journey, was still present: 'Who will free the African child? Who will free the African girl?'

My philosophy for so long had been to look for the positive within

every situation. The only positive I could see here was that I had an education, and the degree I had seemed to be in need, as there was a demand for science teachers. I still hoped that I would get a job, be it in education or in industry. I believed that I had something to contribute and that I had potential. All I had learned from school about South Africa and apartheid seemed to be true, and now I was learning the parts we weren't told about.

Other fellow Ugandans that had come to the country before us cautioned us that life was easier for the educated, but it leaned towards propping up the white community. For a foreigner, especially a black foreigner, it was a hustle to get a work permit and a job, although it was easier if you were situated in the homelands. Most importantly, they told us to live a life of no trouble. One would have to abide by the law. They added that black people took it as an insult and disrespectful if you didn't understand their language.

South Africa has eleven official languages, including English. Luckily, we only had Tswana to deal with. Coming from Uganda, which was an English protectorate, we could communicate well in English. This wasn't the case for other foreigners from non-English-speaking nations. They struggled even more than we did. My heart went out to them. Some of these foreigners could not handle all the struggles, and ended up returning to their home countries. Even though Afrikaans was spoken widely, English was still spoken in the rural areas, which made life a little easier to navigate. As time passed, we tried to learn as much as we could of the local language.

When we arrived in Bophuthatswana in 1982, it was still at the height of apartheid. There was a shortage of doctors, and mathematics and science teachers in the black communities in the homelands. This had been an ongoing problem for years, and it was evident in the dismal grades, coupled with the poor medical care. Local doctors didn't fancy working in the rural areas, preferring to work in the big cities. This kept foreign doctors in employment. Foreign doctors didn't mind working in the rural areas. They were well-trained and provided a very good service for the communities.

Edward had managed to get a job in these circumstances. I was sure I could capitalise as well, especially in education. Teachers

weren't well paid, but this didn't deter me. At least I would be working, and earning a salary. I applied for a teaching job at a school within walking distance from where we stayed. I was taken in immediately to teach science on a temporary basis. That way, I didn't need to have a permit to work. This was excellent news. I had my first job since leaving Uganda. It was a step in the right direction.

I soon found out that the pay was very low and didn't even put a dent in our financial needs. The school had argued that due to my lack of a qualification in education, they couldn't raise my salary. My pay cheque was not worth the time and effort I needed to put in. I quit the job within a month and looked for something else. Edward's salary catered for our basic needs, including food, clothing, and rent. We still managed to send some money home, and made it a point to save the little bit we could afford every month. At this rate, our plans to return to Uganda felt like they would never materialise. I urgently needed to get a job or my siblings back home wouldn't have money for their education.

Soon after quitting the teaching job, I was fortunate to land another job. It was within the medical field, and it was at the same hospital that Edward worked at. The job entailed analysing medical samples – blood, bodily fluids and other samples – and it paid more than teaching. I was paid much less than my colleagues because I was a trainee, but I could at least make that work for me. I needed to write an exam to gain the necessary qualification and be paid more. While looking for a job, I had learned that I needed to have a Master's degree or, even better, a Doctorate, to put myself in a better standing. For the time being, though, I had to work as a medical technologist before furthering my studies. Moreover, I needed to raise my son, get used to the South African climate, culture and people, and grow my family.

Winter came about much quicker than I had expected and brought with it a miserable cold weather that I had never experienced before. The cold fronts that blew through the area were unbearable. They would make me question whether I had made the right choice in leaving home, but I couldn't let weather get me down. When I didn't have to go out for work or groceries, I would sit right by the heater.

All of our basic needs could be obtained right next to where we lived, even though ThabaNchu was a small town. Once a month, we would make the 65-kilometre trip to Bloemfontein, where we would do major shopping. Bloemfontein is one of the major cities in South Africa, in the middle of the country. The 40-minute drive was worthwhile, as we would get all that we needed to better our lives in the city. The only thing that was really hard to get over was the food. I couldn't find any of the staple foods of Uganda. It took me a very long time to get used to the local food, but I managed and made the best of what I had.

My three children that followed Edmond are truly a blessing, and I thank God for giving me such incredible gifts. My second child, my only daughter, was born on 13 January 1983. We named her Joyce Florence Kirijja Kamara. She was born a beautiful, healthy child, and unlike Edmond, who was born naturally, she was born by a caesarean section. She presented herself in a breach position at birth, and had to be cut out. It was the first time I was operated on, so I was terrified. The plus side was that I was out of the hospital within 24 hours.

The times when I had my children were very challenging, as I had no family to speak of to help me through the pregnancies and the births, only my husband, who was really occupied with work most times. Trying to hire a nanny was always a challenge, as we struggled to communicate with the local people, the majority of whom spoke the local language or Afrikaans, while only a few spoke a bit of English. I was left alone most of the time to take care of my two little babies, who were only two years apart. Even before the stitches from the caesarean section had been removed, I was doing all the housework, despite the pain.

Three years after the birth of my daughter, I was blessed with my third child. On 26 January 1986, my beautiful son was delivered, also by a caesarean section. We named him Edwin Samuel Byenkya Kamara. I now needed one more son to achieve my dream of birthing three sons and a daughter. As thoughts become things, my dream came true when God blessed us with our fourth and last child, a son, on 24 February 1988, also born through a caesarean section. We named him Edward Raymond Mukisa Kamara. He was a beautiful,

energetic boy resembling his brothers at birth.

I had my ovarian tubes permanently tied up during the same operation. I wondered whether the numbers and the gender ratio of my children was just a coincidence, or if it was a confirmation of the saying that, 'What you think eventually becomes reality.' I believe that one should always keep in mind that thoughts are things, and one should be careful of what one keeps their mind busy with. If you think poverty, you reap poverty, while thoughts of abundance will attract wealth.

During the births of my third and fourth child, I was fortunate to have the help of a nanny. Although the help was appreciated, as soon as the clock struck five, I was on my own, as the nannies only worked a seven-to-five shift. In the 24 hours that we are allocated every day, I had to juggle around the responsibilities of work, motherhood, and being a housewife. If the nanny didn't show up for work, I had no choice but to sign leave for the day and take care of the children. Similarly, when one of the children got sick, I had to take leave and take care of the children.

There was one time in particular I remember when all the children took ill with a cough virus that turned into an epidemic in the area. My youngest, Edward, was only four months old at the time, and he suffered badly. I had to take two weeks leave from work just to nurse my children back to health. It was a scary and draining experience. It was at times such as these when I really missed home, where I would have had a relative, be it my mother, an aunt or a sister, to lend a hand. But with God's blessings, I was able to get a stay-in nanny that would help the whole week and only go home on weekends. That was a huge relief, and I could give my career a bit more attention. I didn't have to worry constantly about my children's safety. It was long overdue and the help was appreciated to the fullest.

In an effort to augment my income, I started to sew for people for a fee. The income would be welcome. Sewing is a hobby I enjoy a lot. It has a calming effect on me similar to gardening. When I am sewing, I am totally at peace. So, I bought my first sewing and knitting machines on a hire-purchase. I started off making my own dresses and jerseys, while sharpening my sewing skills. I looked good

wearing my unique designs. The nurses at work would ask where I had bought the dresses. They immediately wanted to buy clothes from me, and it made sense to start selling the dresses and jerseys I made.

I became really good at dress-making. The dresses sold themselves through word of mouth. ThabaNchu is very cold in winter, and that made it easy to sell jerseys. In the beginning, I concentrated on children's jerseys, especially school-style jerseys. When the demand for adult-sized jerseys increased, I had to buy a motor-driven, design-embedded, electrical knitting machine to meet my orders. I found that my weekends were non-existent, as I had to devote many hours to the craft. It was profitable, but I couldn't keep up with the hours. Between my family, my job and my side income, I wouldn't survive for long. So I kept the amount of work I did to a minimum, and that didn't bring in the desired money.

Even though life was a bit easier with my extra income, I wasn't earning enough to satisfy my overall needs. This included sending money home to help in supporting my siblings' education. With the need for more money always there, I came up with another idea to generate income that had to do with transport. The profits that came from the knitting and sewing allowed me to purchase a new vehicle, a thirteen-seater, luxurious mini-bus, fitted with a music system, that I intended to use as a taxi. This was the first car I had owned personally, that I had bought with my own hard-earned money.

I was grateful, proud and happy. It showed what determination and belief could achieve. It didn't take long to realise that the taxi business wouldn't work, because it was a very competitive, and at times violent, industry. We used the mini-bus as a family vehicle, which helped us in the long run, as it made shopping for sewing and knitting materials and other errands much easier. But my husband made the mini-bus his, leaving me with our other car, a four-wheel drive single cab with miniature, foldout back seats. This was fine, because I was just grateful to have transport, and two cars made life a little easier.

I still had to find time to take care of my husband. That was the way in our African culture. He only ate freshly cooked meals, which

meant that I had to cook every meal, every day, without fail. The cooking took its toll on me, and I struggled to get through the day, to accomplish everything I had set out to do. Yet, with all of this happening, I was still able to focus on achieving my goals. I had to keep my dreams and hopes alive, stay on track, and not be distracted, even if I only thought and prayed about my dreams. It might take longer than I had planned, but sooner rather than later my patience would be rewarded.

CHAPTER 10

Cherished blessings

I had shifted my focus to my children, and I did everything I could to make their lives easier. If they were well educated, it would ensure that they would have a very good chance at a good life. In January 1987, it was time for Edmond to start school. We searched the area for the best schools. During apartheid, the good schools in the area were reserved for white children, and that left the ‘black’ schools. We registered Edmond in one of these. It was concerning that the school was Setswana-medium, because Edmond and we, his parents, couldn’t speak the language. Our son struggled to understand in class, and that hindered his development. I was angry at the fact that my child’s education had to suffer due to the colour of his skin, and because he was a foreign African. My friends and colleagues suffered with the same problem, which was devastating to most black foreigners. Our children’s education was one thing we were not going to compromise on.

We decided to take education into our own hands, and we started a pre-school called Tweety Bird Nursery School in one of the parent’s garage. We started out with only six children, two of whom were my own, Edmond and Joyce. Joyce, only two and a half years old, refused to stay at home and wanted to be with her brother and his friends, so we allowed her to join in the classes. Being the founders of the school, we could choose what the children learned, how the school was run, what the school fees cost, and who could attend. This allowed us to push the school in the direction we thought best, so that the children could move forward.

The following year, we admitted a few more children, thanks to a change of venue. We moved to an empty church and didn’t have to pay rent. We added another class, and increased the number of students. We hired a second teacher. Soon after that, South African parents were applying to the school, due to the quality of the education we offered, and this gave it legitimacy in everyone’s eyes. Our children

would be starting their education with a solid foundation. That was all we wanted.

As more parents got on board, we decided to set up a governing body that would meet once a week after school and work. We appointed a chairman, a vice-chairman, a secretary and a treasurer. Aside from the financial constraints we experienced, everything was going well. Our own finances couldn't support the school, with all its needs. The school's expenses included teachers' salaries, and stationery and books for the children. We decided to fundraise.

Fundraising was difficult in a community that didn't believe in an English-medium school. English-medium schools were seen as for the upper-class, English-speaking people, and were labelled model-C schools. We were viewed as pompous, thinking ourselves better than others, as we didn't want our children going to black schools. Despite this, we stayed focussed and continued to fundraise, knocking on doors of companies, shops, and anyone who would listen to us and support us. We sold raffle tickets, baked and sold cakes, and ran jumble sales of donated old clothes. We did everything we could think of. With this effort, we were able to gradually grow the school.

By the end of the first year, the children were progressing well, and were getting ready to progress to the next grade. We were left with no choice but to open another class. With resources being limited, we needed a plan to keep the school afloat. The governing body was decisive in agreeing to approach the government for help. We decided to ask for space to operate in, and to register the school as an English-medium primary school. To our surprise, the government supported our idea, and offered us space in a municipal building.

It offered to pay for an additional teacher, who we appointed. She was extremely good with the children, and they loved her. She was fully qualified, and could give our children the best chance to move forward. The school soon registered under the name Tlotlanang Primary School, a name chosen by the governing body. Tlotlanang was finally launched with just the one class and teacher in the municipal building. At the same time, Tweety Bird Nursery School was still operating from the abandoned church.

We were all very gratified with the progress. We were now

registered, and we could expand as we pleased. It had been a hard road to travel, but with faith and determination, we managed to achieve what some thought impossible. We could only move forward now. Our children would be getting a good education on a level comparable with the rest of the world.

Another challenge was school uniforms. The school had been registered at the height of apartheid, and there were rules governing the colours used in school uniforms. In black schools, girls had to wear white shirts, black tunics, white socks and black shoes. Boys had to wear white shirts, grey trousers or shorts, and black shoes. White schools, on the other hand, could choose their colours as they pleased, to match the school's colours. Black schools were stripped of identity. The inequality was unmistakable.

We didn't comply with these rules, mostly because we were semi-private. We wanted our children to feel special, and to feel as if they belong to something special. With that in mind, we chose a bright colour we felt projected hope and created a desirable image. The quality of the school should be reflected in the children's uniforms. At the same time, the uniforms shouldn't be too expensive for the parents. We landed on light-blue for the boys' shirts, with grey trousers or shorts, and black shoes. The girls would wear a white-collared, light-blue checked dress, with a belt. The school uniforms made the students stand out from the rest of the schools. One could see that the students and the parents were proud of the finished product.

The boys' uniforms were easy to buy from shops. However, the girls' dresses had to be tailored. With my knowledge of sewing, I could make the uniforms, with the help of another parent. It was tough, but we managed to complete all of the orders in the time we had. The parents saved on costs. Another benefit was the joy I got from helping our children out. I saw them all as my children. We also made some extra pocket money. For the first two years, we made the uniforms, but by then the school had grown such that we couldn't handle all the orders. The time had come for us to use the services of a store specialising in supplying school uniforms, and we sourced a supplier.

With the expansion of the school, the community began to appreciate the benefits of a good schooling foundation. The children's confidence was evident in manner in which they expressed themselves. Tlotlanang was doing very well for an English-medium school. More students applied for a place in the school, and we had to open another class. In our third year, we opened up two classes per grade to accommodate the increase in the number of students. We needed more space again, and we had to start looking for a new building.

Our prayers were once again answered, even though it didn't come about in the best way. A window of opportunity opened when a mass of black South Africans moved into ThabaNchu after Nelson Mandela's release from prison. This mass influx, presumably of people formerly living on farms in the area, meant that the white population of the town left promptly, fearing for their safety. Their absence was felt, especially by local businesses. Some schools were left empty. We felt that we could share one particular building that wasn't fully occupied.

We approached the government to ask if we could co-occupy the building in the interim, while we searched for an alternative. We weren't confident in our request, because the school had previously been a white school, but our request was granted. The agreement was that we would occupy one half of the school, while the original occupants would use the other half. But even before we could start moving in, the whites vacated the entire school. They were obviously not up to sharing the building or premises, and that suited us just right. By default, and a stroke of luck, the whole premises become the new site for Tlotlanang Primary School.

To improve matters, the government decided to pay the salaries of all the teachers and staff. Everything was falling into place. All of our hard work was paying off. Our children would be getting a good education, despite what was happening in the political arena. It seemed that the hardest part was getting up and actually completing the task at hand. We had to work hard and be patient in the knowledge that we were doing the best we could. This is a lesson that I hope to pass on to my own children and other children as well.

We were now the proud owners of beautiful premises, and we

could expand as necessary. The governing body also became more organised, as the responsibilities piled up. These included the employment of teachers, a principal and a secretary, defining their responsibilities, and developing a high-quality curriculum that would benefit the children. The governing body succeeded, and before long the school was running smoothly. In the beginning, the principal, the treasurer (myself), and the chairman, who was one of the parents, took care of the school funds on behalf of the governing body. Six months later, we decided to hire a company to handle the payment of salaries.

Facilities were well established and in good condition, including a library and laboratories. We stocked the library with books, and continued to add books. We saw reading as key in achieving a good education. We made it mandatory for every class to read in the first period of every school day. The laboratory only started being of use much later, when a high school was added.

With each passing year, we added a new class to the school, and in turn admitted more students to the primary school. Our next goal was to make the school one of higher-education excellence. Our pre-school was the primary feeder of children into the primary school, but children from other pre-schools were welcome to apply. With the help of the government, and through our fundraising initiatives, we managed to build new premises for Tweety Bird Nursery School. The building had a kitchen and ample storage space. The new premises also provided more space for the children to play in safely. It was amazing that five years after we had embarked on a journey to give our children a better education, we had English-medium schooling in both pre-primary and primary levels. The quality of education was on the same level as the more established schools. We would not be getting sub-standard education just because we were not of the right colour or station. We would allow our children the same opportunities as other so-called privileged children.

Starting a high school was a very long and arduous process that required many approvals. By then, my children were getting ready for high school. Edmond was twelve and Joyce was ten. Edmond needed a high school more urgently, and ours would not be ready in

time, so I had to look for one for him.

Finding a high school in the area was no easier than finding a primary school. There were some very good schools in Bloemfontein, some 65 kilometres from ThabaNchu, but they were reserved for white children under apartheid laws. I was left with one meaningful choice: to send my children to boarding school. I found a school called Mmabatho High School, 450 kilometres from home, in Mmabatho, one of the Bophuthatswana enclaves. It was a good school with a variety of cultures and people. I was not happy to send my children so far away. It hurt me so much when I had to see them go.

I had never been away from my children for the whole, long school term. They were growing up, but I didn't want them to, for they were my children. I was worried about how they would cope, and I was scared. The move was traumatising for Edmond, as he was the first to go away, and he was incredibly young. One could see the effect on him when he returned for the first holidays. He was so thin that I thought he was malnourished, or suffering from some sickness. He had lost weight due to stress. I started to wonder if I had done the right thing. Was I becoming like Maama and ignoring warning signs in the pursuit of a good education? I questioned myself, but as time passed they got used to the school, and they looked and felt better. I managed to not worry too much, as they appeared to be handling their situations with maturity far beyond their ages.

CHAPTER II

We outgrow each other

Love is a beautiful thing. I was meant to believe that love conquers all. Love had kept my family together when I was a child growing up in crippling poverty. At 23, when I married my husband, I truly loved him and knew that our marriage would withstand the test of time. I believed that he loved me the same way I loved him. We were students when we met, and we only had love to offer each other. After graduation, we started working, had children, and got really busy.

Our lives were frantic most of the time with working, and taking care of four children left only a little quality time for my husband and me. As a doctor, Edward worked odd hours, including night shift. When he was not on duty, he was socialising with his friends. Most days, I was at home with the helper, taking care of the children, making sure they ate and that they got their homework done.

With us hardly spending any quality time together, we started to slowly grow apart, and the gap between us just got bigger as time passed. To this day, I say that we failed to communicate, and that led to us being emotionally detached. We seemed to outgrow each other, and things changed between us.

When Edward and I met at Makerere University, I was only 21, and had just gained a bit of independence. I was no longer that little timid girl from the village, and I knew what I wanted from life and was on a path to get it. We got together two years before graduating. He was a charming man, and generally a nice person. I felt safe and comfortable around him. When we met, I knew that I had found the man of my dreams. The years before we graduated had helped to strengthen and solidify our relationship. I was head over heels for him. We saw each other every day, as we stayed within a few minutes' walking distance from each other on campus. We couldn't get enough of each other. Our families were supportive of the relationship, and we got traditional blessings from each of our respective parents after graduation. The white wedding was put on hold, as we had to save

money for it.

My husband was of the Banyoro tribe, which was his father's tribe. He was born in Kampala to the Kamara family. He lived all his life in Kampala, the capital city. He was the fourth of nine children all born to the same mother and father. Despite being from the Banyoro tribe, he cannot speak the tribe's language, Lunyoro. He was more inclined towards his mother's culture, which was the Baganda culture, my tribe. We therefore had no problem communicating, as we both spoke Luganda, the language of the Baganda tribe.

It was pretty obvious that our upbringings differed greatly. Edward was a boy from the city, and I was the girl from the village. He was an outspoken, confident person who possessed leadership qualities that commanded respect. His presence intimidated people. He was big and tall, and carried himself well. I, on the other hand, was raised culturally. I was expected to be subordinate to the male figure in my life, and not to talk back. I wasn't outspoken or overly confident, but I was confident in my abilities and myself.

Although we had different upbringings, we had much in common, and we were attracted to each other. We both loved to converse with people, and we liked to help people in need. I felt that I could spend the rest of my life with him by my side. He had all the qualities that I had looked for in a man, being a loving person, compassionate, friendly and educated. His tall build was a plus. His family was receptive of me, and having the family appreciate me was crucial, as they could make or break the relationship.

At this stage in my life, I was looking for a permanent partner to settle down with and start a family, and that person happened to be Edward. Getting married, especially at my age of 21, was a cultural milestone for Ugandan girls. For a girl in my situation who was educated, the next steps that were expected of me were to get married, have children, be a good mother to them, and be a respectful wife to my husband. There is an undefined pressure on a girl to find the right partner before leaving university – at least that was the view when I was at university.

In fact, most of my friends from university met their husbands at university. My life followed these milestones. It seemed as if all

was working out well for me until much later, when I came to realise that I didn't know myself anymore. When I reflect upon my marital journey, I struggle with numerous questions that I can't seem to answer. Questions such as: what role did I have in the disintegration of my marriage? Why did it take me twenty years to finally decide to end it? Did I unintentionally encourage or support my husband's conduct towards me, and mine towards him? Was I still walking the path of my dreams? And the question I grapple with the most is: did I even know what I wanted anymore from life?

I found myself lost, not knowing where I was going. I loved my children dearly, but at the age of 45, I wondered if I had made the right choices. The path to achieving my dream was hazy. I felt lonely and confused. It was difficult to conceive how I would return to the corridors of my hopes and dreams of freedom.

I thought that I had met the man of my dreams, and I believed that my marriage would be what I wanted in life, but that was not turning out to be the case. I needed to start facing reality and accept that my marriage wasn't where I wanted it to be. It had been unpleasant in many ways for me. I needed to do something to change the course my life had taken. I had no friends, as it caused too much friction between my husband and I. Everything just left me feeling as if I were on an island, all alone. The relationship had reached a point of no return. I had to start focussing on myself, to improve myself for my children and me. I had made choices I was no longer comfortable with.

I'm not sure how much my actions contributed to the breakdown of our marriage. I was always told, and had read that, 'We are the only ones who can allow people to treat us any way they please.' It felt as though my husband was wearing Maama's shoes in our relationship. He had an authoritarian attitude, where if you didn't listen to the rules, you were punished. As a grown woman, I was unable to take that kind of treatment. I wish I had spoken out. I wish that I had had the courage to speak out when I was unhappy, or when things felt as if they were going wrong. My upbringing had made me submissive, and I carried this into my marriage. Maybe that contributed to the fallout.

I acknowledged the fact that marriage was recognised as a blessing in Bagandan culture. It was sacred. A woman usually wasn't respected, unless she was married, and a man would be seen as incomplete if he failed to marry. In some cultures and religious beliefs, the more wives a man has, the more he is regarded as a man. This way of viewing marriage made it hard to talk about my challenges with friends, and family back home. It would be seen as me disrespecting my husband and a show of bad manners and upbringing. Most women who counselled with their family were usually advised to persist with the marriage and make it work despite the marriage being over. In fact, divorce didn't exist in Uganda at the time. I always felt that I was going to be judged by my peers, friends, family and society in general, so I kept every problem to myself to solve.

I wasn't taught how to handle the stresses, pressures, and the challenges that go along with being married. The emotional drain of admitting to a failed marriage – a marriage that I had been proud of – was extremely hurtful. And now I found myself faced with the choice about what to do, and the direction to take with my marriage, keeping in mind the impact it would have on my children and their future. How would I bring up four children alone, maybe in a foreign country? How would I be able to speak out for myself while still being kind, caring and compassionate? How would I handle having to change the habits I had formed over 40 years on this Earth? These and other hard questions fuelled my everyday thoughts. One thing that was clear was that I needed my sanity and freedom. I was alone with my children, as I didn't have any family to lean on in those times of need. I would have to rely on myself through it all, and listen to my heart and feelings to lead me in the right direction.

Edward and I had practically stopped talking to each other. For a long time, communication was almost non-existent. When we did talk, it revolved around the children or money issues. Our marriage had fallen apart, and my husband's personality had changed so much that I hardly recognised him. It was hard for him to show me appreciation. All he could do was treat me in a demeaning manner. I didn't want to believe that the challenges we had experienced since moving to South Africa could have ended our marriage.

I wasn't free within the walls of my own home, where I was supposed to feel safe. I was outright scared of my own husband. Everything got to the point that we started avoiding each other like the plague. I found myself walking on eggshells around Edward, making sure that I didn't place a foot wrong. I was asking myself questions such as, what will he say, think or feel if I perform any type of questionable act? Will he be, or is he, angry or happy with me? I felt that my opinions didn't matter at all. I was emotionally and physically exhausted with putting only my husband's needs first. It was draining and debilitating for me to act as if I was happy to make my husband happy.

I suppressed my feelings, not being able speak out, even when I was hurting, and the pain was increasing with each day that passed. I didn't feel good about myself anymore. I felt inferior, under-appreciated, dehumanised, and taken for granted. The more hurt I felt, the more I withdrew into myself. The more I tried to resist, the angrier I got, and with that I felt more imprisoned, miserable and despondent. My problems were weighing down on my shoulders. The constant fear and the heartache were becoming unbearable. I knew that I had failed to be true to myself. My inner and outer freedom was compromised.

I failed to get the balance right between respecting my husband and respecting myself, and knowing when to express my feelings and when not to. In being silent, I believe I naively gave him the platform to do as he pleased. I gave away my freedom. My husband knew of my weaknesses and he exploited them to his full advantage. He knew that I was frightened by these detestable actions and that I would struggle by myself when I divorced him. I was broken, depressed, frustrated, and very afraid of my husband. I was petrified of leaving him. By failing to find myself in those times, I allowed myself to be stepped on. I had compromised myself. I came to the realisation that I had fallen out of love with the man I had once loved dearly. My husband was just a stranger in my life. I didn't love him anymore. I had been married for nearly twenty years. It was finally time to let go.

I believed that both parents should raise their children, and I assumed that Edward would feel sympathy for me, and that he

would remember our love and how far we had come, but that ended up being wishful thinking. We had different interests and pursuits in life, and we were getting in each other's way. We had outgrown each other. Staying together wouldn't be good for anyone, especially the children.

There was no joy in the house for my children and myself. It hurt and cut deep. I couldn't remember the last time I was happy. The only happiness I got was from my children, knowing that they were healthy, had a roof over their heads, food to eat, and were safe. My children were my only hope in life. They were my driving force, and my reason for pushing on and to escape this marriage and start a better life for us. I was fortunate that my children were of the age that they could understand that my life was complicated, and that they could be there for each other emotionally for support.

It wasn't going to be easy, but with my children beside me, I believed I could make it through. The tension between my husband and I continued to build, and I could see it spilling over onto our children. It became abundantly clear to me that the children were being affected when our little girl couldn't sleep because she was worrying about me. When I went to the bathroom at night, she would wake up and come and check on me to make sure that I was okay. She even came to me and told me that she didn't want to go to boarding school because she was afraid that her mother would get hurt. That was confirmation that my children now had emotional scars from our broken marriage.

I started contemplating a separation. The time had come to get my freedom back, and to be able to sleep peacefully without the constant worry of some impetuous act happening. I once read somewhere that stubbornly fixating on a particular thing working can lead to your own demise. I would not allow that to happen to me.

There are two sides to the coin. My side told of a husband who hurt me. His side would no doubt play out a different story. I had seen this with my parents' marriage, in which Maama emotionally abused Taata with her authoritative character. Taata had chosen to stay silent and give Maama what she wanted. I once asked him why he just kept quiet. He responded, '*Atasasira muyombi yamukoza.*'

(‘If you don’t feel sorry for a quarrelsome person, you make them loose weight.’) He used silence to keep peace in the family.

I had danced the same dance for twenty years, and now I was ready to change it. I was finally done. The fear of not having the means to support my children crippled my thoughts. I believed that my faith and hope would lead me to an open door. I had surrendered my problems to the universe, as I always did. I started imagining my husband out of the picture and redesigning my life without him, asking myself questions such as: what is my vision? What do I really want in life? Who am I? These questions would refocus my thoughts, decisions and the actions I needed to take to move in the direction I wanted.

Even though I was hurting deeply, it was important to refocus and stay true to my dreams and myself. I needed to be brave, trust myself, and make a decision and act on it. I wanted my freedom back. I started to think about the separation, and believed it was real, although I was finding it hard to let go of the time and the emotions I had invested into the marriage. I hoped that I would get some type of return on investment on all I had contributed. I eventually I got to the point where I stopped worrying about what I would get out of it all. I was no longer scared of losing material possessions, or of the divorce. I decided that I would just leave it all, including the money we had saved all these years for a chance at freedom. I even contemplated flirting with the poverty line – to return to where I had come from, just to escape. But I couldn’t do that, not to my children. I would have to find a different way.

I only wanted one thing out of this marriage, and that was my precious children. I was scared of losing custody to their father. In the Banyoro culture, the children belong to the father’s family after divorce or the death of the father. That didn’t worry me too much, as we were not in Uganda, and it would be difficult to execute. The other thing that worried me was that I was still on temporary employment with a salary I couldn’t survive on with four children. The children’s security was my first priority. Their financial and medical needs had to be taken care of if I intended to survive through the divorce and past it.

I was very worried about surviving as a single parent with four children, and how the children would take me leaving their father. My emotions were beginning to cloud my logic. I was more worried about my children growing up without a father than I was about regaining my freedom. My unhappiness saddened them. They didn't want to see us fight. I believed for a while that the marriage would come right, and Edward and I would be as we were. But I knew that my world could change if I changed myself, so I focussed on that.

Though the marriage had taken its toll on me, and I was emotionally worn down, I had to set new goals for myself, for my children, and for our future. I was still married, but I could plan for a better life for when I wasn't married. My main goal was to earn a better income and to be able to support my children. I would be the sole support for them and I needed to be solid. I prayed for guidance and support through those lonely, tough times. Prayer and faith had gotten me through a lot, and now it was holding me up.

The church was constant in supporting me. When I lit a candle during mass, I was sure that God was listening to my prayers. Church was a safe haven that provided comfort, hope and relief, and it filled the role that my family far away in Uganda couldn't play. My husband didn't go to church, but he didn't object to the children and I going. He only went when it was necessary. For instance, he was at the children's baptism and confirmation ceremonies. I entrusted God with steering my ship.

All the praying made two things clear: that I needed to let go of my marriage, and that I needed to have financial independence. I needed a better-paying job, and that meant that I needed to improve my qualifications. I decided that I had to go back and study. Once again, I would have to turn to education to get me out of a tight situation. I explored the available opportunities to study again. I decided to study for a higher degree in chemistry, and to get a qualification in education. Chemistry is my academic love, and education is my passion.

I had to prepare for life after the anticipated divorce. I started by trying to make my temporary job a permanent position, which meant having to be registered with the South African Medical Council. My

chemistry degree didn't meet the registration requirements, and I had to add some courses to my qualification. I had a critical choice to make at that point, and truth be told, I hated my job. I asked myself if I really wanted to be a medical technologist for the rest of my life, and the answer was a resounding no. I decided to get a diploma in education, as that would enable me to get a permanent teaching job.

At the age of 35, with four children, I registered to study a long-distance, higher-education diploma (HED) at the University of South Africa (UNISA). This was the first step in freeing myself. It would be a very bumpy road ahead, but I had the confidence and faith that I would walk the distance. All these life-determining decisions were hard to make by myself. They were draining and daunting, but I had to be mentally strong and focussed to succeed. I had the most important people in my life, my children, looking to me as their rock and foundation for their future. They were at the delicate ages of fourteen, twelve, nine and seven. I just had to make it all happen. My children remained my big motivation. Sometimes, a good motivation is what you need to take that leap of faith and take action.

CHAPTER 12

Dreams revived

Even with the desire to study again, I had run out of self-motivation reserves. A few years before, in 1990, Nelson Mandela was released from prison. His story and accomplishments had a big impact in pushing me into action. Mandela had served eighteen of his 27 years within the walls of Robben Island maximum-security prison, fighting for the freedom of the South African people from the oppression of apartheid. He later became the first post-apartheid president of South Africa. From his inspiring story, I learned to trust that I could still achieve my dreams through hard work, faith, patience, belief, and determination. I have always believed that dreams don't die, they only go into hibernation. My dreams were just in hibernation.

In January 1995, the first study material for my education diploma arrived from UNISA. It had been fourteen years since I had opened a book to study, and now I had to start over. In the past fourteen years, my reading had been minimal, restricted to need-to-know information. My brain was slow to process the information, and I barely passed my first assignment. I was horrified at how bad I had become. I needed motivation to get through the assignments. The thought of it was at times overwhelming. There were contact sessions for the course at the university, but I couldn't attend them, as that would mean leaving the children unattended for too long. This meant that I had to get through it by myself. I was used to that, but it was still hard and burdensome at times.

I had to juggle my time between working, looking after the children, sewing for some extra income, and studying to get a better job. My sleep was reduced to around three hours a night. It was draining me. Many factors motivated me to get through, from hating my job, to letting go of my marriage, to being terrified of poverty, and fearing what the future held for my children and me. By studying again, I had put something in motion, but I still kept my ear to the ground for opportunities. About two months into studying for the education

diploma, an opportunity arose for me to study my Master's degree in chemistry. This was truly a blessing from the Lord. With a Master's in chemistry, I'd be able to get a good job and a better income.

I heard about the opportunity on a regular working day. I was performing my normal duties as a medical technologist when one of my colleagues was visited by her sister. We were working through our morning break to speed up test results for the patients and, in the small space we worked in, I overheard their conversation. They had spoken about studying a Bachelor of Science degree in chemistry at a university situated nearby, about 65 kilometres from home. I would never have envisioned the effect that overhearing this conversation would have on me.

I went to talk to my colleague's sister afterwards, asking about the post-graduate studies in particular. I asked whether it would be possible to study for a Master's in chemistry while working, with the high intensity that research work demanded. The reply was yes, it was possible, although it would be hard. Talking to my colleague's sister was a great help. She provided me with information on how and where to apply. She was an angel who had been sent down to help me on the start of a new journey.

This was the opportunity I had longed for, to obtain my Master's degree. I had always dreamed of being a professional scientist, and it now seemed that the long-lost dream would be revived. I first had to convince my husband that studying at a university for a better degree would benefit the family. Bearing in mind I had just started studying for an education diploma by correspondence, it would take some convincing. I would have to work twice as hard. The reward, though, would be great, and it would allow me the chance to gain financial freedom that would in turn grant me personal freedom. Education was lighting the way to a better, more empowering life. I just had to get my husband on board.

I thought it over the rest of the day at work, contemplating how to break the news to my husband. I decided to tell him as soon as I got home. I was extremely nervous. I told him that I wanted to study part-time for an MSc (Master's in Sciences) in chemistry. He surprised me, agreeing right off the bat. The fact that I would

do it part-time seemed to have worked in my favour. The night that followed was long, and I could barely sleep because I was so excited. My eyes were closed, but my mind was wide awake, working through various scenarios on how I was going to proceed.

My two youngest were not in boarding school, and had to be taken care of. That was just one of the problems. I had no idea how I was going to juggle all my responsibilities. I had last studied chemistry fourteen years ago, and I would have to try and remember what I had learned. I was anxious about the future, but I was willing and accepting of it. I always knew that it was going to be hard, but now that I was on the path, I had to see it through.

The day came for me to go the university to apply. I woke up early to do all my usual errands, including dropping the children off at school. Getting ready was a challenge, as I was lost for what to wear. I wasn't used to interviews. I wore a laboratory coat at work, or mom clothes almost every day, and I wasn't familiar with the dress code for academics. I wanted and needed to make a good impression, so I chose to wear a dress that I had made myself. It was a brown-and-black floral dress coupled with a black crop jacket and black shoes to finish it off. I had already gathered all the necessary documents – my degree certificates and immigration documents. Edward drove me to the university, as he did not trust that I would be safe driving in the city alone. We came from a small town with little or no traffic, so Bloemfontein was a different pot altogether, with more cars and traffic lights.

My heart skipped a beat and then sped up all at once when I laid eyes on the main gate of the University of the Free State. I was overflowing with excitement and nerves at the thought of being so close to achieving another step towards my goal. At the main gate, we asked for directions to the Chemistry Department. It was pretty straightforward, and easy to locate. The building was clearly marked 'Chemie', Afrikaans for 'Chemistry'. It is traditionally an Afrikaans university, and so all the roads, signage, and buildings were in Afrikaans. It was initially meant to cater for Afrikaans people, and it was called *Universiteit van die Vrystaat* (University of the Free State), but since the 1994, it was open to everyone and became dual

English-and-Afrikaans-medium.

We parked right in front of the department. I got out of the car, documents in hand, and made my way to the entrance. It was time to see what my future held. Walking through the entrance, I noticed a board that had staff members' names pinned to it. I read that the Head of the Department was a Professor Daneel Ferreira. He would be interviewing me, or so I thought. The board listed accomplishments beside the names, and he was a leading authority in his field, internationally recognised for his work in the specialised field of the study of plants. I found the way to his office, and waited.

I was more nervous than ever. Reading his accomplishments had made me anxious just to be in his presence. I might have been a nervous wreck, but it was crucial that I kept focussed and calm, remembering that this was my dream that would lead me to freedom. I wanted the professor, known to students as Prof, to see my potential as a researcher, although how I would prove that in an interview was beyond me. All I had were my instincts. The rest would take care of itself. Everything happens for a reason, and I truly believed that God would be with me all the way.

I didn't wait long outside Prof's office, although it felt like hours. He invited me in, and the first thing that I noticed was his commanding presence, as well as his really strong handshake. He introduced himself as Head of the Chemistry Department and Head of the Organic Chemistry Discipline. Despite his commanding presence, he projected a very friendly personality with a soft smile that was welcoming and calming. He had a certain polish to him. From the grey hairs starting to show and the light wrinkles on his face, I figured him to be in his mid-fifties. I felt really comfortable talking to him. I was just that little bit more confident about the rest of the interview. Before we sat down, he asked me what I was doing there, and what he could do for me. I quickly responded that I wanted to study for a Master's degree in chemistry at the university. He offered me a seat positioned directly opposite him.

The interview began with Prof asking me to tell him more about myself. I told him about my family, my current job, the last time I had studied, and my qualifications. This took about two minutes. I

could see the surprise on his face when I mentioned how long ago I had studied, and his follow-up question spoke to that. He asked what had made me want to study my MSc at that point in time. I had a feeling that this question would surface, and I was prepared for it. I quickly responded that I had always loved chemistry and dreamed of obtaining a PhD one day. I had left my birth country soon after graduating, and had been, and still was, raising my children. Now that the children were older, I felt I could resume my studies and pursue my passion. He listened very attentively and when I was done he took a long pause before responding. That pause was extremely long for me, I wondered what he was thinking.

He asked for my academic documents, which I presented to him. The documents were my degree certificates and my academic transcript from Makerere University, dated fourteen years ago. Technology had advanced so much since I had last studied, and I hoped this wouldn't count against me. I watched as Prof went through my documents, bracing myself for his response. He broke the silence by explaining his position within the Chemistry Department. There were four parts to the main structure, and he headed up Organic Chemistry. If I chose another discipline, I wouldn't work with him. Though, he added, if I chose his discipline, he would offer me the chance to study for my MSc degree.

This was the answer I had been waiting to hear. Those words were music to my ears. The interview was about 30 minutes in, and I looked at Prof Ferreira with pure joy in my eyes and told him that I wanted to study in his discipline and gladly accept the offer. My dream was coming true. I was going to study further, and Prof Ferreira had given me that opportunity. I thanked Prof from the bottom of my heart, and he could tell I was grateful. He ended the interview by saying he was looking forward to working with me. I left the office with the biggest smile ever.

I remembered the saying that thoughts are things – you have to be mindful of them. I had thought and dreamed of studying further, and now it was a reality. Before I left, I asked Prof about the registration and the timetable to study part-time. He was astonished at the fact that I wanted to study part-time, and asked why I would want to

do that. I told him about my situation. He was understanding, and granted me the permission to study part-time. He did warn me that it would be really tough to keep up, as it was a demanding course. If I was willing and hardworking, I could do it.

I knew he was right. It would be an uphill battle, but I had to work so that I could afford to pay for my studies. I would also have to make time to see and take care of my family, especially my children. I thought it over, and talked to Prof Ferreira. He believed I had potential, and he had a plan for me, which was that I resign my job, and he would pay for my tuition and all that came with it, including my accommodation at the university and pocket money for my basic needs and to be able to travel home every weekend to see my family.

I was stunned. How could this be true? What was the catch? I kept asking myself. No one I had ever met had been this kind to someone they barely knew. There had to be something else behind this gesture. I had just met the man, and he was offering me such an incredible opportunity. I couldn't say no. I was humbled. I looked at him and I happily said yes. I would figure out the rest later.

I was going to back to study after a long break of fourteen years. I could give my studies full attention and not have to worry about work. I asked Prof when he wanted me to start, and his response was that I could start at any time, as soon as I was registered and in the system. Everything from his side would be ready and waiting for me. He recommended that I register before I leave to speed up the admission process. I thanked him profusely and had the biggest smile on my face as I left. I went straight to the admissions office and registered.

I registered for a Master's degree that would take two years. I was to start on 2 July 1995, a day I wouldn't easily forget. I left the university with a sense of purpose and much to take care of. I told Edward what had transpired, and he was happy for me. He, too, couldn't believe I was to be a student again. We drove home. I took the next month to wrap up all of the things that needed to be taken care of before I could start my studies. I resigned my job and looked for and hired a reliable nanny to take care of the children, especially the two youngest. Resigning from my job wasn't easy, as I had to

swap a work permit for a study permit. I had struggled to get a work permit, and now I had to change it so easily. It was a hard choice, but necessary, as I would be improving my life.

The day came closer for me to start my studies. Edmond and Joyce were at that time still at boarding school some 450 kilometres away, and they would only be returning to school two days after I started with university. This would be the first time they had returned to boarding school without me there to send them off. It hurt that I wouldn't be there for them – I was always there for them. I still took all the necessary actions to make sure they had what they needed when they left.

The Sunday of 1 July 1995 came very quickly. I remember it well, as it was an emotional day for my children and I. The children were thrilled that their mother was going back to school. I had explained to them why I had to study and they understood. They are good children, and they fully supported me in my new venture. Sam and Edward were scared that they wouldn't be seeing their mother every day after school to sort any problems they ran into. I was more worried as to who would help them with their homework, or ask them how their days was. The one consolation was that I would see them on weekends, and I called every day. That seemed to be just enough to tide everyone over. I had created a vacuum in their lives, and I only hoped it would all be worth it.

The tension between my husband and I had worsened when he realised how much I would be away – at least, that's how I saw it. He would have to take care of the children and be more involved, and I think that scared him a little, because I had been taking care of that role for many years. We hardly spoke in the weeks before I left to study. I had to be confident and pull through. If I stayed, it would mean selling my freedom. I packed bags before going to bed. I would have to wake up early the next day. I hardly slept that night for different reasons, fearing a surprise reaction from Edward, who might have second thoughts about me leaving home. I trusted that everything would be alright.

CHAPTER 13

A time to hope again

Monday 2 July 1995 was an incredibly special day in my life. I woke up at the crack of dawn to get ready to travel to the university and a new start. Like a child, I was overjoyed for my first day of school, although the weather was not the most pleasant. It was pitch-black outside, freezing cold, and not-human friendly. It was in the middle of winter, and to be expected. The children made sure to wake up to see their mother off, and it was the sweetest sight ever. They struggled to keep their eyes open, but managed to say goodbye. I had to drive about 65 kilometres to the university. I had my own car, thankfully, which was our Nissan 4x4 pick-up. It was a bulky car that didn't have power steering and was hard to drive. I packed the car with my luggage, kissed the children goodbye, and started off.

I was incredibly emotional while driving away. I was going to miss my children, and the distance would test us all. I had never been away from home for a long period of time. Aside from my two oldest being in boarding school, the family had always been together. It seemed as we grew older, we took different paths to realising our potential. I cried most of the drive, and the journey felt longer this time around. I was worried how my children would cope without me. I had to place my trust in God that He would watch over my children and keep them safe, while their mother tried to make their lives and her life better.

I arrived at the university around 07.00 am and parked outside the Chemistry Department. I was early, so I waited in the car for Prof Ferreira to arrive and show me where to go. I was eager to start. As I sat in the car, I watched all kinds of students walk and run past, going to their lectures. The atmosphere was so vibrant so early in the morning. It excited me so much that I was getting goose pimples. I waited for about half an hour, and then Prof Ferreira arrived. I got out the car and greeted him, and we went to his office. He was excited to see me, as I was excited to see him. He was the only person I knew on campus. He briefed me, and then we went to meet my direct

supervisor, who would be Prof Brandt. Prof Ferreira would be my co-supervisor.

My first impression of Prof Brandt was one of a mature, soft-spoken and humble man. He made me feel at ease, just as Prof Ferreira had. I was lucky to have such humble people to guide me through my MSc. Prof Brandt showed me around the department and the laboratory where I would be stationed. There were two other male students in the laboratory, busy with post-graduate work. They would become good friends of mine, especially Johan Coetzee, who later played an important role in my life. Prof Brandt and I returned to his office and he briefed me on the content of my project.

The project I was to tackle would be based in the field of plants. It was to establish the medicinal value of a plant indigenous to South Africa called Honeybush tea. The research would investigate the medicinal benefits of the tea, and the results would be used to market Honeybush tea nationally and internationally. This sounded like a very important project, and it was overwhelming, as I hadn't the faintest idea where to start, let alone what I was doing. This was the first time that I would be doing this type of chemistry, which complicated matters. But I didn't show Prof that I was flustered. I just told myself that I could and would do it. I was ready to do anything to improve my situation.

The world of chemistry that used to be so familiar to me was now so foreign. I spent the rest of the day learning to negotiate my new surroundings. I ended up in the library, and started to read up on my new field. I wanted to climb back on the chemistry horse as soon as possible. While familiarising myself with the department, I realised that everyone spoke Afrikaans. It seemed like it was still the old days. I struggled to grasp anything, and that is how I ended up in the library, where most of the articles and papers relating to my field were written in English. I quickly realised that I couldn't easily draw from our departmental research and theses, as almost all of it was written in Afrikaans. I was lucky, though, that the underlying principles in the subject are all the same, regardless of language choice. I would have to work twice as hard just to keep up.

As the sun set, I made my way to the hostel I would be staying in,

President Steyn. I was glad to be able to locate it easily. I was cold, tired, and exhausted from the day's emotions and pressures. The building was lovely, with an old-fashioned design. When I entered, I was greeted with a deafening silence, and an odd coldness. I made my way to my room, and it was even colder than the foyer. I couldn't believe how cold it was. My room was just big enough to fit a single bed and a small desk in the corner. It was not five-star accommodation, but it was adequate for sleeping and studying, and I was grateful.

It was strange to be surrounded by young women. I felt so old. I was lonely, and missed my children. I had no one to talk to. The only thing that I had in common with the people I stayed with was that we were students. I unpacked, settled in, laid down on my bed and reflected on the day's events, and on life at large. The bed was small and cold. Luckily I had my thoughts to keep me company. The main thing that ran through my head that night was that I couldn't fail. I had to be the best I could be.

I was emotional, thinking about where I had come from, and where I was now. It had been a hard and torturous journey at times, but I was still here and going strong. I had risen from poverty, left my country, bore and raised my children on my own, started a school and a small sewing business, and now I found myself taking another step forward. It had been a journey of dreams and hope. I broke into tears, but they were tears of joy, as I was truly grateful for the opportunity.

I wiped the tears away and sat up. It was time to start with my assignments. I was still pursuing my education diploma through correspondence with UNISA. I was determined to make the best of my chances. I decided to dedicate some time to it every night. Writing out my assignments was torture, as my fingers were practically frozen. I couldn't afford a heater, and I had left the heater at home for the boys, who needed it more than I did. My only choice was to wrap myself in a big, warm blanket, relying on body heat to keep warm. But the cold was incredibly persistent, and it worked its way through the blankets into my body. I dreamed of warmer weather. It would make life so much easier. Despite the cold, I stayed focussed on the task at hand. I juggled chemistry during the day and education

studies at night.

When Fridays came, I was the happiest woman on campus. I would be going home to see my children. I talked to them every day to ensure that they stuck to their usual tasks of homework, and that they were being good. Hearing their voices every day was a much-needed motivation. It was always that much more special to see them and hold them in my arms. I could see the joy in their eyes as they ran to me and hugged me with all they had. They were just little boys, aged seven and nine, who missed their mother and her love. Before I left for home, I always did my best to buy meat pies for them with the little money I had, which they loved. I always tried to save some money from my weekly meal allowance to have enough to bring them something.

My weekends were usually very busy. I would make sure that there would be clean clothes for the next week. I ensured that different foods were cooked and refrigerated or frozen for the coming weekdays. The nanny would prepare sauces to accompany the meals when they would be eaten during the week. When it was time for the children to go to sleep, I put them to bed and started on my assignments for the education diploma, which took up most of my nights. As time usually does when you want it to stand still, it passes much faster. I would leave on Monday mornings instead of Sundays, so that I could maximise the time I spent with my children. Every Monday, it felt as if I was abandoning them all over again. Their eyes said it all. They wished I could stay. I had to make a better life for us, and so I kissed them goodbye and drove off for the week.

Back on campus, I was finding the chemistry difficult. The fourteen-year break had blunted my knowledge tremendously. I could only remember the basics. Everything had advanced so much, from the developed processes to the sophisticated equipment. Prof Ferreira had gifted me with an opportunity, and I was determined not to disappoint him. He soon became a very good and close friend. His friendship helped me through the tough times of my studies. I slowly began to interact with the other students. They were continuing their studies, doing Honours, Master's or PhDs, while I was trying to revive my studies at the age of 35. We were at different stages in our lives,

but we had the same purpose, and that was to improve ourselves for a better life.

When I arrived on campus the main medium of lecturing was Afrikaans, in spite of the power shift in the country after 1994. I sat, clueless, in the meetings, not understanding or being able to communicate in Afrikaans. Those research meetings were torture. Luckily, Prof Ferreira saw that I was struggling, and he instructed the group to start presenting in English. I was truly lucky to have him in my corner. He helped in ways that are so hard to express. With time, though, English was spoken more frequently in the department. In fact, at undergraduate level, it was mandatory to offer classes in English and Afrikaans for all subjects. For post-graduates, though, lectures are few and far apart. Communication was limited to meetings and emails, and was predominantly in Afrikaans. This language barrier was an everyday battle I had to engage with. It didn't help complaining. I just had to get on with it.

Four weeks into my studies, my turn came up to present at a research meeting. I was terrified. I still wasn't confident in my chemistry knowledge, at least not confident enough to present to my experienced peers. I had to make time for questions afterwards. I had half an hour to present and answer questions. It gave me sleepless nights. The preparation and rehearsals just made it worse. Preparing for the meeting took ages. But on the day, I arrived at the venue early to gather myself.

It was finally time to stand in front of everyone and present. My legs were wobbly, and nerves seemed to be getting the better of me. Being the minority didn't help at all. I was the only black student and English-speaker in the group. I started, and everyone listened attentively – too attentively, actually. I was questioned throughout the presentation, yet the questions seemed to be aimed at exposing my poor chemistry knowledge. I couldn't answer quite a few of the questions, and I felt embarrassed and disappointed afterwards. It was a tough experience, but a learning one as well. I was glad it was over. It would be another six weeks before I was to present again. It was obvious from the presentation that I had to up the level of my game. The rest of the day, my confidence was down. That didn't last

long, though, as I realised that feeling sorry for myself wouldn't help anyone. So I picked my head up, and was even more motivated to succeed.

After the presentation, I realised that all the work was taking a toll on me. I calculated that on average I slept two to three hours a night, and worked nonstop during the day. I had to take better care of myself, so I made my way to the cafeteria to buy something to eat for dinner. I got myself a coffee to drink later, to keep me awake. I decided to pass by the gym and signup. I started to do an hour of gym a day for my health. For now, coffee would be my best friend, and would be my companion on those long and lonely nights.

With renewed drive, I was working in another gear, and was accumulating knowledge at a fast rate. The progress I had made in six months astounded both Prof Brandt and Prof Ferreira. Their respect for me grew with each passing day as they saw the dedication I was giving to my discipline. This trust only made me believe in myself much more, as I grew in confidence, knowing my supervisors had faith in me to be a capable scientist. To have Prof Ferreira's trust was incredible, because he was a man with pedigree, having been a researcher, a lecturer, and someone who had published in various journals for over 30 years. I admired him for his knowledge, accomplishments, as well as how he treated people.

For the next few months, I fell into a routine that consisted of working hard on my degree and diploma and going home every weekend to see my boys. Meanwhile, Edmond and Joyce, at boarding school, were not coping with boarding life. I could see this when they returned from the holidays. They were just so thin and fragile. I had to do something to remedy the situation, and I decided to bring them closer to me. Times had changed since they had started boarding school, and they could now be placed in a good school closer to me.

It had been just more than a year since the election of Nelson Mandela as the country's first black president. Those elections were the first in which black people could vote and have their voices heard. Opportunities opened up, and blacks could now freely interact with whites. Schools became integrated. Black children could now attend white schools. Whites didn't easily accept the change. But it was hard

for blacks, too. In the beginning, blacks were the minority in formerly white schools. The wounds of apartheid were still fresh in everyone's mind.

The black population showed a sense of entitlement as compensation for the wounds inflicted on them during apartheid. These were troubled times, and Edward and I worried about our children, Edmond and Joyce, at boarding school. We decided to apply to the best schools in the area. We applied for Edmond to study at Grey College Boys Bloemfontein. It is one of the best schools in the country. It was a battle to have him accepted, but it was worthwhile. We enrolled Joyce at Eunice High School, next door to Grey College. The university was located just behind both schools, and this made transport easier. We were delighted to have them both in excellent schools.

Both schools had boarding facilities, but space was limited, and we had to enrol our children as day scholars. This worked out well, as I rented a flat just outside the university, an unfurnished three-bedroom apartment that was very affordable. I could drop off the children at school in the mornings, and I would be more of an influence in their lives. I could mould them and make sure that someone was there to help shape their morals and their development. Having them closer put my heart at ease. I could concentrate more on other matters.

Furnishing the apartment was difficult. At the time, Edward was the only one who was working, and money was hard to come by. In the beginning, we sat on mats, as we couldn't afford chairs. Everything that we had was from home. Some were extras, while others were old. Our possessions included three beds, a very old television, curtains, a portable two-plate stove, and some cutlery and crockery. We improvised with everything else.

Because we had no fridge, we kept perishable foods for a maximum of one day. I brought ice from the laboratory home every night to use in keeping some of our food cool – that and a cooler bag acted as our fridge. The children had to sit on the floor when they did their homework. I had no pocket money, as I wasn't receiving money from Prof Ferreira anymore. This was due to the fact that I was doing so

well that he had managed to get me a government bursary, which was much less, and only came twice a year. It couldn't sustain our livelihood. Even then, I would use my grant to purchase day-to-day items and furniture, when we could afford it. Things got better, but it took a long time to get to a stage where we were comfortable with our living conditions. The children were happier, though, as they were with their mother, and they enjoyed the schools they were attending.

I still went home every Friday. Edmond and Joyce would come with me. The weekends were always great, with the family together, and I was content. The sad part came when I had to leave my two children, Sam (short for Samuel) and Edward. We would have to leave on Sunday afternoons because Edmond and Joyce had to be at school on Monday. What astounded and impressed me, though, was that Sam, who was nine years old, displayed a remarkable maturity and responsibility for his age. He took care of the youngest, Edward, by making sure that he ate, was clean, dressed for school, did his homework, and slept on time. Sam took care of Edward when the maid couldn't return in time after the weekend, and he did so much for so long without complaining.

In 1996, in February, we were home for a weekend when I had a conversation with my second-youngest child Sam that was heart-breaking. He wanted to know if I still loved Edward and him, to which I quickly responded that I did. But his next question just made me cry inside. He asked why I didn't want them to come with us to Bloemfontein. I explained that I loved them always, and with everything that I am. I told him that I would get them into School in Grey College Boys Primary, and they could come and stay with me.

That conversation with Sam sunk my heart. It was the confirmation I needed that they were not coping. I had to change that, and quickly. In the week that followed, I thought of what to do. I had to find a way to bring them to Bloemfontein. I decided to try and get them into Grey College Boys Primary, and so I discussed the matter with my husband. All that he had to say was that he had no problem with it if I got them into a good school. The ball was back in my court, and I had to find a solution. It would be hard to get them into any school, let alone Grey College. It was March already, and the first

term was nearing an end. My chances were slim, but I had to try.

When it comes to my children, I will move mountains to keep them safe and happy. The following week I went to Grey College Boys Primary to meet with the principal. I arrived really early, and waited at the school before it opened for the day. Grey College is a big school. There is a pre-primary, a primary and a high school, which feed into each other, making it difficult for outsiders to be admitted. The school opened and the children started to arrive, creating commotion as they came in. I waited for things to calm down, and for the classes to start, and then I made my way to the primary school offices.

I met with the principal and he told me what I had anticipated: classes were full. My heart sunk, but I still hoped that he would accept them in the school. I decided to go next door to ask for advice on my predicament from the head of Grey College. He had helped me to get Edmond into the high school. Luckily, he was able to see me. I left feeling encouraged to return the next day and appeal my case.

I did the very same thing the next day, arriving nice and early. The response, unfortunately, was exactly the same. I was gutted. I believed that the secretary saw the despair in my eyes and body language. She advised me to return at the beginning of the following term with my boys and sit outside the principal's office until I got a positive response. She encouraged me to be persistent. There were a few weeks before the term ended, and I wouldn't have to wait too long, so I listened to her advice, keeping my faith. I would go home and get ready to return with my children at the beginning of the second term.

The first day of the second term came around, and I was at the school with my two boys before 07.00 am. We went straight to the principal's office and waited for him patiently outside his door. The secretary, then the principal, arrived and greeted, asking kindly if I didn't mind waiting for a while. I waited while they went into his office. They were there for a while. At around 09.00 am, when the secretary emerged from the principal's office, she gave me the good news that my children could commence studies immediately.

As I tried to grasp what was happening, the secretary instructed the boys to their respective classes. They said their goodbyes, and

off they went to start learning, just like that. Edward would join the second grade and Sam the fourth. I was very relieved, and enthusiastically thanked the secretary and left. When I got to the car I was ecstatic and couldn't contain myself. I shed tears of joy.

I couldn't believe the turn of events. My boys would be coming to stay with me in Bloemfontein. We would all be living under one roof. It was a small apartment, but it had three rooms and would, for now, be sufficient for our needs. I felt whole. I could care for my children in the way a mother should. I called my husband as soon as I left the school to tell him the good news. He was happy to hear about it. He needed to send the money for the fees and school uniforms immediately. We had a tight budget, so we purchased their uniforms from the second-hand store at the school. That would be the norm while we struggled with money. Only towards the end of their schooling careers would we be able to afford new uniforms.

With all of the children now with me, it became difficult to juggle all of my responsibilities. I had to make time for my studies – both my degree and my diploma – and take care of the children without help. My typical day began as early as 04.00 am when I woke up. By 05.00 am, I was in the laboratory, setting up experiments. I called the children just before 06.00 am to wake them up so that they could get ready for school. The eldest two would prepare all of their lunch boxes. Just before 07.00 am, I collected them from the apartment to drop them off at school. With school traffic, I was able to make it back to the laboratory by about 08.00 am. I would pick the children up at 1.30 pm and return to the laboratory at around 2.30 pm. On the days that they had afterschool activities, I navigated my time around that. At about 5.00 pm, I returned home to check on the children and make sure that everything was in order. I would prepare supper and lunch for the next day, check that their homework was done, and spend some time with them before returning to the laboratory.

Each child was assigned household chores, as I couldn't take care of everything. The chores were usually done on the weekends, as the children needed time during the week to study. In addition to cleaning the house, Edmond and Joyce had to do the laundry, while the younger ones would hang the clothes up to dry. Each was responsible

for ironing his or her clothes. Dishes were done on a rotation basis, and that way the house was kept clean. The two youngest washed dishes together. It was a good system, and it worked for us. They knew that they had to be responsible for themselves as well as for others around them. They learned to respect the people they lived with. They might have been young, but they handled everything admirably.

Two years went by, and my MSc degree and education diploma were going well. My marriage, though, was not looking up, and I still had no financial power. Times were tough, but we seemed to be hanging on. There never seemed to be enough money to go around, even with the intense budgeting I did. So long as we had food on the table, and the children were in school and healthy, I was happy. I stopped channelling energy into my marriage, and instead I focussed on my goals and my children.

In December 1996, I sat for my education diploma final exams. By the time I wrote the exams, I was functioning on two to three hours of sleep a day. I was exhausted but managed to get through it with pure grit and determination. I wasn't going to fail, having come so far. With the diploma exams out of the way, I was able to concentrate more on my MSc, and the writing of my thesis. The thought of writing my thesis was daunting. We didn't have a computer, and to make matters worse, I couldn't type. My husband was kind enough to buy a computer, and that helped me with the writing up of my thesis. The children could use it for their studies as well.

I could type from home, and this made life easier. I typed every night when I got home, and during the day on weekends. It was a long process typing my thesis letter by letter, but I got it done, and in May 1997 I completed my thesis and handed it in for assessment. I felt a great sense of relief. I had come a long way, and had conquered many challenges. And as always, my family, especially my children, were by my side to give me their unwavering support. I can never take that for granted. It is priceless. In that same month when I handed in my thesis, I got my education diploma results back. I had passed very well. I had even managed to bag a few distinctions, and the feeling was great. Now I had only three months to wait for my MSc results. I

was anxious, but I was confident that I had done extremely well.

In the three months that followed, Prof Ferreira convinced me to continue with my PhD studies. He said that I would be stupid not to continue with my PhD, and that was all the motivation I needed. He had so much confidence in me that he allowed me to start while I waited for my MSc results. It was an unmissable opportunity, and another dream of mine. Studying again meant another three years of hard work and no income, but I decided to do it. Prof Ferreira applied for funding from a government foundation for South African citizens, and it was approved. This was a surprise, as I wasn't a South African citizen. I once again thanked Prof for affording me the means to reach my goals.

The day I received the results for my MSc degree was memorable. Prof Brandt invited me to his office to receive the news. With a firm handshake, he congratulated me on achieving my MSc degree, saying it with so much pride and a big smile on his face. I couldn't believe I had passed. I thanked him profusely, with tears in my eyes. I briefly had a flashback to the moment I had knocked on Prof Ferreira's door, asking for an opportunity to study chemistry to improve my qualifications, after a fourteen-year break from academics.

I thanked Prof Brandt again, and made my way out of the office. I couldn't wait to tell my children when I got home. I called my husband to let him know as well. The news was testimony to the fact that if you put your mind to something, you can achieve it, with belief and hard work. I could now register officially and continue with my PhD. I would try to complete it in record time, a challenge I was sure I could rise to. In July 1997, I registered for my doctoral studies in Organic Chemistry at the University of the Free State.

During the following two and a half years, I put my head down and worked as hard as I could to complete my PhD studies. One year in, during winter, I was swamped with work, and those months were really hard on me, but I told myself that it would be worth it, and that I would get through it. I worked fifteen-hour stretches at the laboratory every day. The only plus point was that I generated a lot of data. By June 1999, I had compiled enough data to write up my thesis, which I handed in for examination at the end of August 1999.

I managed to complete my PhD in two and a half years.

I received my results in December, and again I was overjoyed at passing. Once again, I had passed very well. It was the same as before: Prof Brandt called me into his office and shook my hand to congratulate me. He told me, with a brilliant smile on his face, 'Congratulations, Doctor Kamara. You have made it. You have passed.' When he said 'Doctor' I felt over the moon. To be called Doctor was something I couldn't comprehend. I had finally achieved one of my life-long goals. Words cannot begin to describe how I felt. I thanked him, and thanked him some more. Prof Brandt had been my MSc and PhD promoter, and I was grateful to him for his guidance. When I left his office, I jumped for joy and broke into tears. I couldn't believe it, once again.

It was the beginning of a new chapter in my life. I couldn't wait to see where it would lead. I felt deep gratitude to many people for getting me here. I was grateful to God, my family, and Prof Ferreira for the financial, academic and emotional support. Prof had taken a chance on me, and now I was a doctor. I was thrilled and overjoyed at my achievements, but now I had to start thinking about getting a job.

First, I would enjoy my graduation. I was going to walk across stage in a red gown. I couldn't wait for that exultant feeling of being crowned with a doctorate. I couldn't afford to buy a gown, so I hired one from the university. When I got it, I tried it on a few times, and walked around in it for a while. I scratched together some money to buy a two-piece maroon suit that looked really good when paired with the gown.

Come December 1999, one summer morning, my graduation day arrived. I was up early and felt really good. Today was not a day to be late, and I woke the children up early as well to get ready. My husband came with us. Even though we weren't on good terms at the time, he was happy for me. We drove to the university from the apartment. Throughout the campus there were many cars and smiling faces. It was a good day for many people, who were being rewarded for everything they had worked so hard for. The atmosphere was lively, and the happiness was contagious.

Everyone made their way into the building and took their seats.

Doctorate graduates sat in the front row in their eye-catching red gowns, followed by the Master's graduates in the row behind, followed by the Honours graduates, then the Bachelor's graduates, and finally the guests. Guests were from different cultures, which was evident in their clothing – from flamboyant traditional wear to normal, Westernised clothing. As I took my seat, I took a moment to reflect on my journey. It had taken a long time to get to where I wanted to be, but I had finally arrived. I was now a doctor. I had a dream, and though it took a while, I never gave up on it. With determination, dedication and self-discipline, I was able to achieve it. I learned to never give up in the face of adversity.

The event started with a procession of academics down the middle of the hall, led by the Vice Chancellor. They were all dressed in their respective academic gowns. The sight was beautiful, but disturbing, as the undertones of apartheid could still be seen – there were only a few black professors in the group. Once the procession was seated, and the speeches were made, the degrees were awarded. The time came for my name to be read. It was announced by initial and surname. 'I. Kamara'. I stood up. Butterflies fluttered in my stomach. I made my way to the stage and up the stairs, careful not to trip up in front of the whole hall. When I got to the top of the stairs, I had an adrenaline rush. I walked towards the centre of the stage, to where Prof Brandt stood. When I got to his side, he started to read my biography, including what I had worked on, with all the technical terms that only a few in the crowd would have understood, which was pretty impressive, scientifically speaking. I stood there and listened to him speak, and it felt like I was watching myself graduating from above. It was like an out-of-body experience.

It was one of the most memorable experiences for me. After my short biography was read, I made my way to the Vice Chancellor, who awarded me the degree, sashed and capped me, after which he shook my hand and congratulated me. I looked at my children in the audience and saw pride brighten their faces. I made my way off the stage with such indescribable pride. It was official. I was now a doctoral graduate. By 10.00 am, the graduation was history. We made our way out to take photos. My husband, children and I went

out for a celebratory lunch. Another chapter had been written the book of my life, and I was now looking forward to the next chapter in my ever-changing and growing journey.

CHAPTER 14

Faith in adversity

When I began to study, I had to swap my work permit for a study permit, as the laws didn't permit me to have both. When I finished my studies, I reapplied for the work permit. It was a lot harder to get the second time around. I had thought that it would be a little easier, especially after the end of apartheid.

I had completed one of the hardest courses at university, and I had a doctorate degree, but getting a job was still as difficult as ever. There were more opportunities in business and education – spheres that promoted equality among different races. Although everyone was meant to be equal in South Africa, foreigners from other countries were still discriminated against in many ways. It was still a battle to settle in the country.

Xenophobia caused the most distress. Black South Africans targeted and attacked black people from other African countries. Xenophobia was apparent everywhere, although it was done very subtly. It didn't matter if you were educated or not, the underlying notion was that foreigners were stealing jobs that South African citizens should have got. Similar to most African countries, South Africa struggles with unemployment. Xenophobic South Africans believed that if South Africa was rid of all foreigners, their lives would be much better, and they would find jobs. This would explain why it was so hard for me to get a work permit.

Foreigners are called '*makwerekwere*', which means foreigner from North Africa. Foreign women are called '*manchu*', and men are called '*ranchu*', due to our dark complexions. It was hurtful to be treated in such a manner just because you were from a different place, or because of your complexion. Like every other black foreigner residing in South Africa, we were reminded on a daily basis that we didn't belong. But some South Africans would see foreigners as brothers and sisters, and were just as gutted at the treatment handed out to us, which made our stay in the country a little easier. God

bless their souls. With all of these beliefs, my hope for getting a work permit seemed distant, but I still kept the faith.

With four children and no income, I was struggling. I was under tremendous pressure to get a job. I hardly slept at night, as I was tormented by nightmares of failing my children. I prayed for a miracle from the Lord and didn't lose my faith, as he hadn't let me down in the past. I knocked on the doors of countless businesses, looking for some kind of luck. Every time, I fell flat. My faith was being tested. I still trusted that one day everything would fall into place, although there were days when I could barely put food on the table for the children.

They mostly ate bread and black tea. I tried my best to scrap something together for Sunday meals. Scraping, at times, meant a two-kilogram mixed chicken pack. I would make a stew served with rice or chapatti (roti), and spinach or cabbage. I would buy a two-litre bottle of cool drink that they shared equally. We looked forward to Sundays, as it was a family occasion, and I was happy to see my children together enjoying the meal, no matter what was placed before them. I admired my children for how they supported me during hard times. It is thanks to them that I still found myself fighting to go forward.

I continued to search for a work permit, permanent residence, as well as employment of some sort, but all was rolling into a dead end. Nearly everywhere I turned, I was reminded that I wasn't a citizen, and it would be hard for me to get a job ahead of South African citizens. I can understand the argument, after apartheid, during a time when South Africa had to cater for their disadvantaged citizens. But in the same breath, I am a skilled worker, and my skills, rare and much needed, would contribute to the country's development.

I was getting depressed. I would cry myself to sleep most nights after a battering day. It came to a point when I was scared to go to bed. When I did finally sleep, I was scared to wake up in the morning, as the problems would still be there. I started to spend more time at the church. It became my safe haven from the unforgiving outside world. Here, in the church, I could offload my problems and rest my shoulders from the load I carried every day. I felt free, and I had God

to listen to me. This was the time I would feel as I was being heard and respected as a human being. After my prayers, I would leave the church feeling better, feeling as if it would all turn around soon.

Months piled on top of each other, and I still found myself sitting without a job. It was frustrating that a few pieces of paper could dictate my life to such an extent. My search went beyond the South African borders to countries such as Botswana, and even to the United Nations. I still believed God would surely send me an angel to settle my problems, as is written in Exodus 23:20, 'Behold, I am going to send an angel before you to guard you along the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared.' I learned to trust my intuition and to be on the lookout for my guardian angels, as they could take on any form and appear at any time.

I also learned that everything in life happens for a reason. If I didn't get my heart's desires, that was God protecting me from danger, and I should accept the outcome. The past had proved that all I needed to do was to keep believing and work at it. I would be blessed in time, as the Lord is always looking out for us and He won't let us walk alone. It is written in Exodus 14:14, 'The Lord will fight for you, you need only to be still.' With those words, my heart eased up a little. My eyes remained open for those hidden messages, and I knew that it would only be a matter of time before life would be better.

A year passed with no luck. I had tried everything and talked to everyone in an effort to get a work permit. The situation heightened my worry. Despite not having a work permit, I applied for jobs, in hopes that I could get a contract job, especially with the qualifications I had. At most interviews, I was a competitive candidate, and employers wanted to take me on, but the lack of a work permit worked against me, even on contract jobs. When I wasn't at interviews, I was knocking on doors or talking to Home Affairs officials, trying everything in my power to get a permit or a permanent residence. If it weren't for my children, I probably would have given up. My desire to give them a good life kept me going, even on the days when I had no energy to get out of bed.

I relied on menial, temporary jobs that were mostly a month long at most to earn a little bit of money to get by. There was a time when

I was lucky to work four months in a row as a substitute teacher at a school. That was a blessing. One of the professors from the university was kind enough to allow me to be a laboratory assistant for him. I was paid a very minimal fee, barely enough to cover rent, let alone support my family, but I was still grateful to be earning something. I worked hard at small jobs. I couldn't help but wonder how long I would be able to hang in there, working as hard as I was, and not earning enough to support my children.

I was stressed, afraid, and devastated. It was draining on me, physically and emotionally. To make matters worse, my marriage had reached a heightened stage of hate and fear. My husband, who lived and worked in ThabaNchu, was only paying for the children's school fees. We had to fend for ourselves. At times, I had to choose between paying accounts such as electricity and rent, or feeding the children and myself. The time eventually came when I worried every day if we would be evicted.

This carried on for quite a while until one day, when I was working at the university laboratory I received a disturbing call from my son. He told me that the municipality council had come to the apartment and confiscated our furniture, due to our rent being in arrears. They took the television, stove, fridge, and the sofa set. We had to pay the arrears plus the extra charges before our furniture would be returned. What hurt even more was when I returned home and found the food from the fridge lying on the floor. They had just thrown everything out, with no regard for my belongings.

I was confused, and I didn't know what to do, or who to turn to. My husband point blank refused to help me. It is said that trouble comes in bundles, and yes, more trouble was yet to happen. While I looked for money to reclaim our furniture, the electricity was disconnected. I was behind on that as well. I could only cry to ease my hurt and anger, and pray for a miracle, anything to help me. I trusted God to show me a way out, or send someone to help me – anyone, I desperately needed help. And then I thought of asking a good friend who lived on the same block. Still in tears, I went and explained my situation to him.

I asked to borrow just enough money to reconnect the lights. I

couldn't let my children be without electricity. If electricity was sorted, I would make a plan for the furniture later. He and his wife were kind enough to open their hearts to me and paid for the electricity. I was lucky to have such caring friends around. It hurt to see my husband refuse outright to help his children, even when they were in darkness. He must have disliked me zealously – at least that's what I thought.

I realised that I needed good friends who I could trust to walk with me in desperate as well as good times. Some friends are in our lives during times of need, others are lifelong friends, but all come into our lives for a reason, and I am grateful for mine. With the electricity sorted out, I turned my attention to the recovery of our furniture. I had one asset to my name, and that was a life-insurance policy. I sold it to get enough money to claim the furniture back at the end of the month.

A big chunk of my time was spent praying and thinking of solutions to my problems. Often I would walk around the flat muttering to myself about my challenges. I was terrified of tomorrow, and wondered what it would bring. I had to mentally gear up for battle every day just to make it through the day. When I found my mind wondering, I would read Psalm 121:7, which says, 'The Lord will keep you from all harm, He will watch over your life.' I could only surrender our lives to the Lord and keep praying while working hard to keep us alive and steady.

There was a prayer that I always recited to myself, and it went like this:

Dear Lord,

I have done whatever is humanly possible. You entrusted me with your children to nurture and guide in this world. Lord, I am only a guardian. Please give me the wisdom, courage, resources and health to fulfil my duty. I know that you have taken care of my children and me this far, and that you will not let us down, now or in the future. Lord, please protect us from all danger. I ask this in the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen

I remember a time when we had no food in the house. I had no way to provide for my children, and I wasn't going to let them go hungry. I went to the one place I was always able to find refuge. I went to my church to ask for help. There was one priest in particular who was of immense help to me during my down times. He was a caring and loving man. I told him my struggles. He responded by opening up the church food storage, where they kept the food for the homeless. He got a box and filled it with canned and dry food for us. The kindness in his heart was humbling. He went further and gave me some money to buy milk for the children. I was so grateful to him and the church. We survived on that while I continued with my menial jobs. Once again, at my lowest hour, the Lord was there to help me in miraculous and mysterious ways.

I had found it hard to understand what was going wrong in my life and my marriage. I had no idea what the future held. I was educated, but couldn't get a job, even though jobs were available. The only reason I was jobless was because I didn't have a work permit and wasn't a South African citizen. I was failing to get over the thought that I didn't belong. I was being marginalised because of who I was and where I came from. I was baffled at the lack of humanity and kindness from my fellow man, simply because we had crossed the borders of South Africa. We are all God's children, and we deserve some level of respect and freedom. We were made in His image, and we are all alike. We are all Africans. I prayed for the day when I would look back on all of this and smile, while appreciating my journey and the challenges along the way.

The priest also introduced me to a parishioner he believed might be able to help me to obtain my permanent residence. The parishioner turned out to be another angel in my tumultuous life. In the past, he had helped foreign church officials to obtain permanent residence in the country. He was a Godsend. His presence injected the energy into my life that I so needed. It felt incredibly good to have somebody hold my hand and give me hope, even though it was just for a short time.

He accompanied me in the coming weeks to different places that he thought might help me in obtaining a work permit. He even came

with me to job interviews to assure prospective employers that if they offered me a job I would definitely get a work permit. Even with all the time and work spent helping me, he didn't expect to be paid. He was just a Good Samaritan. Even with the parishioner by my side, I was unable to get a job or a work permit, having exhausted all the places he could think of. I was weary. I was running in circles, or better said, I was being made to run in circles. Times were tough. Employers wanted me to have a work permit before they offered me a job, while the Department of Home Affairs required me to have a job before they would grant me a work permit. It was a battle I couldn't win. I was heartbroken, but I had to continue looking for a way out.

The rejection I had endured had inflicted wounds on my heart. Crying seemed to ease the pain, just a bit. Many people told me to go back to Uganda, my home country. And yes, I had the choice to return to Uganda, but I chose to stay here in South Africa. Why would I do that? I knew that if I returned to Uganda, I would be returning to poverty. In South Africa I was faced with discrimination and xenophobia. I chose discrimination over poverty. South Africa had more opportunities, irrespective of the challenges. You can avoid and escape discrimination in your home, but poverty is hard to avoid. It is forever in your face. I took to writing my thoughts and feelings down, and it helped me offload and to liberate my thinking. I continued to write, as it turned out to be therapeutic.

Most days, the work permit issue kept me occupied and distracted me from my marriage, which had fallen apart. My husband and I had acknowledged it was over, but we hadn't discussed it between ourselves or with the children. I had a new purpose, which was to get a job, have financial freedom, and be able to take care of my children on my own steam. Something surely had to give in my marriage, and one Saturday afternoon in August, I heard the children shout out from outside. They were playing in the passage of the apartment on the second floor with their friends from the apartment block. They shouted out to me that daddy was here.

From our flat on the second floor, you could see the car coming down the road from quite a distance. My stomach turned and my heart sank when I heard those words. I still hadn't gotten used to

the uneasy feeling I got when he came over. It had been a while since we last communicated with or saw each other. I wondered what he was coming for. Was he coming to live with us, or worse yet, take the children? That was one of my worst fears. I was never at ease when he was around. I hoped he was visiting for a good reason and not to pick a fight. My imagination can be my own worst enemy. The few minutes it took for him to arrive at the flat seemed like a lifetime. I was hoping he would say what he wanted to say and quickly leave. The boys greeted him outside the door in the passage and I knew that he had arrived. I was terrified as I waited inside for him. As he walked into the house, I sensed bad vibes. This wasn't going to be a pleasant visit. Little did I know, his visit would impact on my life and the choices I was to make going forward in my already turbulent life.

I could feel the tension as soon as he entered the room. We greeted each other very casually. I couldn't comprehend the lack of emotion between two people who had lived with each other for more than twenty years. We quickly ran out of things to say, and it was quiet. He broke the silence by asking for a big glass of cold water. He loved to drink water, and took it in litres. He gulped down the water and looked satisfied. He said that he had resigned from his job, and would be moving back to Uganda. He said all of this with a very calm voice. I couldn't believe what I was hearing, so I asked him to confirm what I had heard. He repeated what he had said and added that he had served notice. His service would end next April. He would be winding up his business transactions until November, organising his finances and making travel arrangements, and he would be leaving the country in December.

As those words left his mouth, he was puffing away at the pipe that he always had with him. The smoke bellowed from his nostrils and mouth. He looked content with what he had said. I, on the other hand, was gutted at the news. I didn't have the means to support my children. He had refused to help me with many things, but at least he paid the children's school fees. What was I going to do? It was a pregnant question that flew around in my head.

I told my husband that there were two things I wouldn't budge

on. I wasn't going to return with him to Uganda, and the children would be staying in South Africa with me. I had promised myself that my children would not live in poverty, and that would be a real possibility in Uganda. He was silent for a while and then replied that I could keep the children, but only if I paid for their education and medical care. I told him confidently that I would get a job, although I honestly had no idea of how I would get one.

It was official, from now on I was on my own. It would be my children and me, and we would have to look out for each other. I couldn't ignore the fact that the children were going to need a lot to get by. Edmond and Joyce were both in university, and the two younger boys were in high school, and their financial needs were great. Edward sat for a while and then left without saying more. He probably believed I wouldn't get a job and that I would return to Uganda with the children. He knew that I couldn't afford the immigration fees for papers to stay in the country without a job. He figured that I would realise that I couldn't survive without his help. He left the apartment for ThabaNchu without asking about my plans or showing any concern.

The children had heard all that their father had to say, and they were very worried. They questioned me after their father had left as to what was going to happen. They were intelligent enough to realise this was a problem. My youngest, Edward, even asked where we were going to get money as I had no job. My heart broke. I still had to take in and process the news, but first I had to console my children. I had no answers for them, and I could only tell them that I was going to get us on the right path. I assured them that everything would be alright. They took me on my word, and I loved them for believing in me. They knew I was working extremely hard to find a job and to support them. They trusted me and I couldn't let them down.

Later that evening, I went outside for some fresh air and decided to take a walk around the apartment block. I needed some time alone to take in everything and cry without the children around. They had to see me strong. I was their rock. I ended up at the playground just behind the apartment block. I sat on one of the swings, swinging

for at least an hour, and I allowed myself to cry, but not for long. I had to think of a way forward. I returned to the apartment deflated and exhausted from all the thinking and stressing. I comforted the children and reassured them that we would be okay. They were calm and trusted in me.

In bed, I did what I was accustomed to: I prayed and cried out to God for help. I wondered why challenges were just piling on me every day. Trouble was piling in bundles. I couldn't conceive how I would escape this situation. I had run out of ideas. All that was left for me was to surrender and keep the faith. The coming nights, I slept in a curled-up ball, mentally battered and physically exhausted. Even then, I still had to get up every morning and figure out a way to make a life for my four children and me. I didn't even want to think what would happen if I didn't have a job within four months. In the months that followed, I focussed on getting a job and being strong. I applied for every job advertised, from professional to casual. I was ready to work as a shop attendant to take care of my children.

Some time during those months, I met another person I believed was also an angel sent to help me in my time of need. He was a foreigner, Pastor Osei Kwadwo Abunyewa, who was from Ghana. He was studying for his Master's degree in chemistry at the University of the Free State. He was a preacher with an extremely big heart. He lived on the same block as us. Osei had kept me positive when times were tough, yet he had his fair share of challenges.

Osei's wife, Akua, suffered from sickle-cell disease and diabetes, and her kidneys had failed. He knew and understood what it was to suffer, and to not have enough resources to take care of your loved ones. His wife couldn't be put on dialysis without payment, because she was a foreigner, and dialysis is deemed costly. Most of her time was spent in hospital or in bed at home. I remember she once fell incredibly ill and ended up being hospitalised. I went by to see how she was faring. Coincidentally, Osei was there when I arrived. She was in bed, with sunken eyes, looking feeble and tired. She had lost so much weight, and seemed to disappear in the bed. It was a very difficult time for Osei and his family, and my heart went out to him. Standing there, I thought that I was still lucky that my children were

in good health. Akua passed away in 2005. God bless her soul.

Even with all this turmoil in Osei's life, he took the time to ask me how I was doing and what was happening in my life. I gave him a short brief on my husband's resignation and the progress on the work permit. We talked and he sympathised with my situation, after which he reached for his wallet and pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to me. I looked at it curiously. The paper had a telephone number and address written down on it. He told me it was a South African Home Affairs number that had been broadcast on the radio. It was for a top official that had acknowledged that permanent residence applications had been mishandled.

Osei suggested that I call the number and inquire about the status of my papers, and also tell my story of how long I had been in the country and the challenges I had faced with my application for permanent residence. He added that I should write a letter to promote my case. It was a long shot, but I was desperate and I would have tried anything. I decided to go for it. When I got home, I wrote a letter, stating my qualifications, and adding a detailed account of the value I had brought to the community, highlighting the school we had started in ThabaNchu. I felt it right to include my future plans if I was granted permanent residence, and that I would work to better the country with my skills. I posted it and eagerly waited for a response.

Searching for a job was still priority number one, and it took up most of my days. I hit the same brick wall at every interview, revolving around my lack of a work permit or permanent residence. I was still confident that I would get a job. My daughter commented once that I am too positive for this life, and that I find positivity in everything I do. There are times when I see my positivity as a weakness, but there are also times I see it as a valued asset in my arsenal against life. I believe that positivity has the power to pull you out of the dark and into the light.

In August 2000, a job opportunity presented itself at the university. Dr Johan Coetzee, who I had studied with, and who was now a junior lecturer in the Chemistry Department, had left for a better-paying job in industry. There was a vacancy for a lecturer in the Chemistry Department, and I knew I was suited for the post and

applied. I figured my chances were quite good, as I had graduated from the university, and the academic staff knew my capabilities and work ethic. I fancied my chances. I was shortlisted for an interview and contacted soon after I sent in my application. Johan, who was my good friend, assisted me with preparing for the interview. I spent time going over what we had prepared, as I was determined to give this chance the best I had. It probably wouldn't come around again anytime soon.

I was up early on the day of the interview to drop off the children and return to the apartment to practise one more time before facing the interview panel. My choice of outfit uplifted me. I wore a light-purple suit with a white shirt. By 09.00 am, I was at the department. My interview was scheduled for 10.00 am. The two candidates before me finished on time, and I was immediately invited into the interview room by the Head of Department (HoD). A panel of nine people, all white, eight men and one woman, sat at a round table. I would later find out that they were all heads of departments within the science faculty. The odd one out was the dean, who I knew.

I felt uneasy as I sat down for the interview. For some reason, I felt intimidated. Most of the questions fielded were technical in nature, and I figured I answered them to the panel's satisfaction. There was a question, though, that caused me concern. To make it worse, it had been asked by two different panel members. I was asked if I would be able to cope with Afrikaans, especially in a practical lesson with an Afrikaans-speaking student. I knew my answer was a make-it-or-break it one, so I responded as honestly as I could. I replied that I would explain in English, as everyone understands English, and I added that I wouldn't just be delivering knowledge but I would be working with my students to make sure that they understood what was taught. The interview finished, and I left the room with a feeling that I had just thrown away my only opportunity at a job. It would be about two weeks before I got feedback.

I still thought I had a chance. It was post-1994, and being a black female could just swing things in my favour. The government was pressurising universities to employ more black lecturers. Black female lecturers with a PhD in chemistry were very rare. I just hoped that my

usual problems didn't return to foil my chances. I believed that my time as a student would help. I had been a diligent, hardworking, focussed and reliable person. I didn't shy away from challenges, was technically good, and had a good work ethic. I just hoped that my values would be recognised, and that someone would put in a good word for me. It would be a long wait for the results.

After two weeks, the HoD contacted me to inform me that management wanted to offer me the job. However, he added that I needed a work permit. I went from the happiest woman in the world to the saddest and most broken woman you could find, in seconds. I asked God, why? Was this all just a horrible joke being played on me? How long would I be able to hold on? How long could I keep motivated with all the negative things happening?

Management was willing to offer me a contract job in light of my problems. The offer was not official, so I waited for their deliberation. The HoD had told management of my work ethics, the type of person I was, and that I would be a worthy addition to the team. I was extremely delighted at the news. They believed in me, and they were trying to keep the door open for me in case my situation changed in any way. I was excited at the opportunity. My faith strengthened. I believed that this was the beginning of good things to come.

Then, one fine Tuesday while I was working at my temporary job at the university, my luck resurfaced. That day changed my life. My enthusiasm was down, and I was struggling to get on with my daily activities. It was school holidays, and my daughter, who was sixteen at the time, was with me at work. She always accompanied me to look for jobs or do food shopping. She was very supportive over that period, and very mature for her age. I appreciated her support, as she could have been relaxing with friends.

The work permit issue had trampled over my life. It had stripped me of my dignity and my human rights. At around 10.00 am, I was in the laboratory running an experiment, dressed in an old pair of jeans and a white t-shirt with a lab coat on when I received the news. A student came rushing into the laboratory to tell me I had a telephone call in the booth in the corridor outside the lab. I never received calls, but I rushed to it, as it could have been a job interview.

I answered, and a woman spoke. She didn't even greet me. She just asked if I had a chair to sit on before she told me the news. I recognised the voice. It was a lady from Home Affairs. I immediately thought of the worst, specifically deportation, as my immigration papers were a few weeks from expiring. I couldn't think about anything good they would have to tell me. I was so used to receiving bad news. My daughter had followed me to the telephone booth, and was standing right by my side. She was very curious, listening to me talk.

I sensed the excitement in the lady's voice, and she finally said, 'Dr Kamara, you and your children have been granted permanent residence in South Africa!' I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My heart skipped a beat. I was speechless for a few seconds, not knowing what to say. I looked to my side. My daughter's eye's, like mine, were welling with tears. I repeated what I had just heard to my daughter, while pondering an appropriate response. My daughter broke down in tears. Seeing her cry, I couldn't hold my tears back. I thanked the lady again and again. She told me what I had to do, and the process to follow to get my papers, after which I asked her to send me a fax of the documents. I would make a plan to pick up the original documents at a later date. I was anxious to have the documents as soon as possible so that I could secure the job at the University of the Free State. When I put the phone down, I burst into more tears and thanked God over and over while hugging my daughter. She had been through the turmoil with me, and truly understood the joy I was experiencing. I was lucky to have her by my side when I received the news.

I picked up the documents from the fax machine straight away, and went to the HoD's office. Luckily, I ran into the HoD in the passage and told him the good news. He was pleased for me, as he was aware of my issues in obtaining a work permit. He took the papers from me, looked them over and congratulated me again. We talked about the way forward. He promised to have an answer for me that Friday. I was grateful, but I told him I had an appointment for a job interview in Johannesburg scheduled for the same Friday. I couldn't wait that long. I added that I had confirmed my attendance and booked my

ticket to travel. I had a little more courage now with a permanent residence, and spoke a bit for my case. I also reminded him that I was valuable, and that they needed me. I was a highly qualified black woman, and it would be hard to find someone of my calibre. I concluded by telling him that if I was I offered a job in Johannesburg I would take it, although I would have preferred to work with him. He took some time to think and then responded that he would contact me before Friday to let me know if I had the job or not.

After my conversation with the HoD, I went back to the laboratory where my daughter was waiting, and reflected on what had just happened. It was an indescribable feeling, one that I still find hard to explain. It was as if my dignity had been restored. I now had the knowledge and peace of mind that I would be able to take care of my children. I would be able to compete on a level plane with my colleagues. My children's lifestyles would change as well, and opportunities would open up for them in the country. I packed up my workspace for the day and left for home with my daughter. We couldn't wait to share the news with the boys. It was the first thing we told them when we got home, and they jumped for joy. They couldn't believe it, until they saw the papers. We had no money to celebrate, but our biggest prayer had been answered, and that was good enough for us. We could now chase our dreams without the hassle of filling in forms and attending endless meetings. That night I slept peacefully for the first time in a very long time, without nightmares. I could dream of new goals that were now within my reach.

Wow! The journey to obtaining permanent residence in South Africa had been long and traumatising. It had been a constant, torturous battle that had taken more than twenty years of suffering. With permanent residence, I now realised how costly being temporary residents had been. We had paid taxes, just like everyone else. But we also had to pay for study permits for the children. We needed a letter from the principal of the school stating that our children wouldn't be taking up the place of any South African children. This always felt wrong, because aside from my first-born child, who was born in Uganda, the other three were all born in South Africa, making them citizens by birth. That didn't matter, as they were still considered

foreigners, as we, their parents, were foreigners. Even trying to buy a house or car was an uphill battle and nearly impossible, with all the loops we had to jump through. Half the time it just wasn't worth the hassle. I couldn't have received this news at a better time. I had got a job two days after receiving the work permit.

The very next day, a Wednesday and barely half a day since I had received my permanent residence papers, I made my way to the Dean of the Science Faculty to let him know of my changed residential status. I was still waiting for an answer from the HoD. With confidence, the dean told me that I would be offered a position as a lecturer. The head of my department had apparently scheduled an urgent, important managerial meeting for the same day to discuss my employment. The dean promised to let me know the outcome by the next day.

I couldn't afford to wait any longer, after all the suffering I had been through. Thursday came about, and I was incredibly anxious as I waited for the results. The waiting was daunting. I got to work early. During the morning hours, the HoD approached me while I was on my way to the library. He stopped me and extended his arm, as if to greet me, but it turned out to be totally different. He shook my hand and congratulated me on getting the job. As the words left his mouth, he smiled a brilliant, broad smile. I couldn't believe what he had told me.

I was filled with mixed emotions. I was stunned, happy, excited, and proud of myself. I felt a sense of freedom. Maama was right: education opens doors. I was now a lecturer at the University of the Free State. I finally had a permanent job, and again my prayers had been answered. I was the first black female student to obtain a PhD in chemistry at that university, and now I was the first black lecturer in the Chemistry Department at the University of the Free State. It was a historical moment for me to be employed as an academic scientist, lecturer and researcher. I had dreamed of being a scientist since high school. It had been a hard journey, but I had received help along the way. Various angels had guided me, but I was the captain of my ship. Prof Ferreira had taken a chance on me, and it had paid off. Without him, I wouldn't have made it this far, and I was truly grateful for his

guidance.

I now had to collect the documents from Home Affairs. Under normal circumstances, these documents would have cost R10 000 per person. In our case, my children and I were granted full exemption. We didn't have to pay anything for the documents. The Lord surely works in mysterious ways. He had blessed me with so much in such a short space of time. I was relieved, grateful, and humbled at the blessings I was receiving.

I was now able to secure student loans for the children from the bank. I was able to buy a house close to school and university, which enabled the children to get to classes easily. The children needed to return to the comfort and safety of a home every day, to be able to run around and enjoy their own space. They had lived in a three-bedroom flat for more than two years. The space was constricted, and everyone was stepping on each other's toes. The two older ones now had their own rooms, and the younger two shared a room. I stayed in the master bedroom with an en-suite bathroom. The living room was extremely spacious, allowing ample space to move around. The kitchen was enormous as well. I loved my new house, and was thankful that I had been able to afford it.

This chapter of my life had been a hard one. I had learned many difficult lessons. There were ups and downs, and I had lost a lot, only to gain in the end. I learned that without my faith I would have failed. My faith had been tested on many occasions, and at times I thought I wouldn't succeed. I would forever be grateful and humbled, while never forgetting what I had achieved, how I achieved it, and who had helped me. I was ready to start the next chapter in my life.

CHAPTER 15

As I am blessed, I will be a blessing to others

I started lecturing on 2 January 2000. I was familiar with the staff, and they knew that I was capable. I would be lecturing an English class parallel to an Afrikaans class taught by a professor. To make sure everyone went along at the same pace, notes were prepared in both languages for each class to follow. I was early for my first class, and the students were already in the lecture hall. It was packed with more than 200 students. It was nerve-wrecking to see so many students seated before me, waiting to be guided.

They were all non-Afrikaans-speaking first-year chemistry students. This meant that my class was diverse, with students of different nationalities, including Africans, Chinese, Indians, and English-speakers. As I stood in front of the class, looking at the students, I couldn't help but think to myself: here was a woman who was once a very poor farm girl from a rural village in Uganda, who used to walk to school with no shoes, who was now standing in front of international students awaiting guidance in chemistry, a difficult academic subject. I was gratified and humbled. I told myself that I couldn't let the students down. I would do all I could to assist them as their lecturer and as their guide through their university years.

In the beginning, lecturing was very challenging, as I had no one to show me the ropes. I had no mentor. I could get a lot of technical knowledge from books, but I couldn't depend on that alone. I decided to use my instincts and love for teaching. I would develop my own lecturing methods. I was going to use the lecturer's room as it should be used, as a platform to help others and make a difference in their lives. Making a difference in people's lives resonates with who I am. I was confident that I would be able to make it work. By staying true to myself, I was able to be a teacher, a caregiver, and a mother to my students. This was my space in the universe, and I was at home with my lecturing task. I am fortunate in that I am a people person, and in being able to listen to my students, I was able to help them, empower

them, develop them and energise them for their betterment.

I may have been lecturing in English, but all the support systems were in Afrikaans. All the meetings, the communication between departments, and even the emails, were in Afrikaans. I had to ask colleagues to translate for me to keep abreast of the happenings. I missed important information due to the language barrier. I figured that I should try to learn the language. I took up classes offered by the university. It was an extremely hard language to learn for a woman my age, and I didn't have time to dedicate to it. I had to forget learning it and handle the problem best I could, while making sure I delivered on my job to the best of my abilities. I could only make sure that my students succeeded. As for management and my colleagues, they would probably change with time. I couldn't afford to worry about something that I couldn't easily change. I was fortunate to be where I was, and I was going to make it work.

I noticed that there was a stigma attached to one of the modules I lectured. Students believed that they would fail this chemistry course at least once before passing. I couldn't wrap my head around it. I couldn't see how you could go into something with that mentality and expect to win. Many students had failed this course in previous years, and this had resulted in them failing the first year as a whole as well as losing their scholarships. My task was going to be challenging, but I was familiar with challenges. I couldn't wait to tackle this one. I was going to try and change the perceptions around this course from understanding it to loving it and passing it. Chemistry is a beautiful subject, and I just had to get them to see that. I had a big role to play, and I was ready.

I wanted to establish myself as a good lecturer, and I knew that it would be difficult. I already knew the protocols and the environment, and at least I didn't have to learn that afresh. It was also hard to adjust from being a student to a colleague – some lecturers were friendly towards me while others weren't. The meetings were the worst. I was totally ignored, as colleagues communicated in Afrikaans, their mother tongue. I hoped that they would change in the long run. For the time being though, I was a prisoner to the language. It shut doors and excluded me without even breaking into a sweat.

By the end of the first six-month-long semester, my students were performing very well. This reflected on my lecturing abilities. Word spread of how well the students were doing, and before long there was migration of students to my class in numbers. I was being pinned up as a dynamic and caring lecturer, one who cared if her students passed or not. I had motivated my students by showing them that I cared, and they showed it right back by studying and passing. I knew that I was on the right track, as my classes were so full that some students had to sit on the stairs. Management took note of this and assigned me to a bigger lecturer hall, the biggest they could get. It was so big that I had to speak on a microphone so that the students at the back of the class could hear. The whole experience was humbling. Who would have thought I would be in such a position? History was in the making.

At the end of the year, the pass rate had increased, and many in my class achieved distinctions. This hadn't happened before. I was awarded the best lecturer of the year award in the Science Faculty at the university. I was humbled, and felt gratified that my hard work was being noticed. Even my students acknowledged me. One afternoon, while I sat in my office working, three of my students walked in and asked to talk to me. I had an open-door policy. They said that they had something to confess. They felt bad about it. I couldn't wait to hear what they would say.

They explained that when I had first walked into the class, they thought that they were destined to fail. They had thought that the university's management hated black people so much that they had hired a black woman with a funny accent to teach them chemistry. They had assumed that I didn't know my chemistry. Now they were grateful because they had passed, so they had come to apologise for judging me before they had even given me a chance.

I should have been offended, but I was more humbled than anything else. I had managed to make a difference in their lives, and their opinion of the subject had changed – that was what I had set out to do in the first place. I made a difference in many students' lives. Some went on to study for medical degrees after achieving distinctions in chemistry. Before long, it was said that if you wanted

to pass chemistry, you had to attend the black lady's class. I had parents come to my office from various backgrounds to thank me for helping their children to pass chemistry, as it was a subject their children had always struggled with. It was a fulfilling experience, and I could see my calling in teaching. It gave me a sense of achievement that I had long since felt, and it felt good.

Many of the students I taught were from impoverished backgrounds, and I was able to relate to them well. I understood the hardships they might have had to endure to get to where they were, often having little to nothing. I wasn't just a lecturer. I was also a role model to them. I was able to listen to them and advise them on the way forward. I was there to guide them, not dictate to them. I shared my life stories freely, as they served as motivation, knowing that other people had suffered like them. They learned that there is a silver lining if you look hard enough. And most importantly, they could see that I genuinely had an interest in making a difference in their lives. By telling them about my background, I wanted them to know that you shape your destiny with your thoughts and choices.

A lecturer's salary was not an attractive one, but I lectured because of the passion I had for it. I believed that if you care about other people, God will assume responsibility for your problems. It is written in Genesis 12:2 that, 'I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.' I motivated my students to work hard. They were so devoted that they would work into the early hours of the morning on their Master's degrees. At times, I worked with them in the laboratory, and they became my friends. I treated them like my own children, offering them support when needed.

There was a young man I taught named Sonopo Mohlatheli, a gentle soul who I helped and will never forget. Sonopo was in my practical Organic Chemistry Honour's class. It was a small group comprised of sixteen students, which made it easier for me to give more one-on-one attention to the students. They would often come to my office to ask for help regarding their work. For some reason, Sonopo caught my eye. He was humble and soft-spoken, but very intelligent. Every time I saw him in class, he looked exhausted, but

he still put forward a friendly face.

One day he came to my office with tears in his eyes and told me that he was going to quit his studies and return home, but he didn't give a reason. I sat him down and asked him for an explanation for his decision. He told me about his challenges, which made my jaw drop. I learned of his immense financial challenges. He literally didn't have any financial support. He lived with his aunt, and had to walk on average twenty kilometres a day to and from campus. Most days he had nothing to eat, as there was no food in the house.

He had had enough and wanted to go back home to his grandmother where he would at least feel like a human being. His mother had passed away when he was young, and his father had abandoned him. His grandmother had brought him up, and he felt safe there. He had nothing: no food, money, books or transport. I felt his pain. He hungered for education, but he had no support structure. He had potential to succeed, and I was proud of him because of the dedication he had shown even with all the insurmountable odds.

It felt as though he was telling my story. I knew how it was to battle forward with nothing and no one to help. I couldn't let him quit. If I did, he would become just another statistic of a child dropped out due to poverty. I didn't know how I was going to do it, but I was going to find a way to help him. I gave him some money to buy food, and asked him to see me the following day. I sought guidance from God, as I always do when I feel lost, and I realised that there was a message in this situation. God had sent me to be Sonopo's guardian angel. Like all the angels that had helped me along the way, I would be his.

Sonopo returned the next day with a friend in a similar situation. I now had two students counting on me to save their future. I knocked on many doors, and I was lucky enough to have one open, so I managed to secure national bursaries for both of them to complete their Honour's studies. I was able to organise accommodation for Sonopo just a five-minute walk from campus. Whenever I could, I would supplement his groceries.

There was a reason this particular story stuck with me, and why I tell it now. People give up too easily on their dreams at the first sign

of trouble. Life is challenging, and you will run into trouble from time to time. It boils down to how you handle those challenges, and how much faith you have in your dream. You just have to have the courage to look and ask for help. There is someone out there who is willing to help. You might not receive the help you need immediately, but if you are patient and believe, you will be blessed in time.

Sonopo had a dream to specialise in chemistry and he nearly gave up due to the hardships he faced. He spoke to someone about his problems and got help. He went on to complete his PhD, got married, and has a good job. I still keep in touch with him, and I am proud of him for taking the opportunity placed before him with both hands. Sonopo always told me that I was like a mother to him, to all the students, as I cared for them as if they were my own. He would forever be grateful for the opportunity to chase his dreams. By caring for the students, I allowed them to have courage, confidence, and hope in themselves. All my students were very special to me, and even after they graduated, many stayed in contact to tell me about their lives.

I believe that I am gifted in the way that I relate to people. Humbled by my upbringing and background, I connect freely to others. I delight in giving and receiving information. As a lecturer, I saw my classroom as a platform to share information, educate, and make a difference in people's lives, contributing to the betterment of the world we live in. When I am in the lecture hall, I don't only lecture the students, but I also counsel, motivate, and care for them. I am not only a lecturer, but I am also a mother, a friend and a guardian. I believe students search for knowledge and skills to assist them in their future endeavours. I had a responsibility as their lecturer, and the feeling I got from helping them face and conquer desperate situations will always be my pride.

In addition to lecturing, I also had to engage in research coupled to supervising MSc and PhD students. Lecturers were also required to produce a minimum of one publication a year, and source our own funding for research. I had much more to conquer than just these requirements. Being black and female was a challenge in itself. During my first two years of doing research, I was affiliated to the supervisor of my post-graduate studies. He had a well-established

research group, with sufficient funding to support me. We were both credited for the MSc and PhDs that we supervised.

To publish independently and work on my own, I needed to find funding for my own research. Through persistent writing of many funding proposals, I eventually received funding from the government during my third year of lecturing. I was now able to sponsor my first MSc student, who passed with distinction. This served as motivation for me, and boosted my confidence as a researcher. My research group grew, and the number of MSc students increased. I started to publish in international peer-reviewed journals. I had always wanted to be published and set my name in the history books. My achievements were empowering, and I was happy to achieve another one of my dreams.

CHAPTER 16

A reunion after thirteen years

My family back home has always been close to my heart. The unfortunate truth, though, was that my financial situation didn't allow me to visit Uganda with my children for a very long time. I didn't even speak to my parents and siblings during that period, as they didn't own a telephone. I lived in my own world. All that time away made me miss my family more. Worse still, my children didn't know their grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. If anything was to happen to me, my children would be alone in this world, with no one to turn to, and that haunted me profoundly, even though I had ensured that they had received a good education. I decided to make a long-overdue visit home. Given my financial situation, I took out a loan from a bank to purchase our aeroplane tickets.

The children were over the moon. In December 2005, we flew from OR Tambo, Johannesburg, to Entebbe Airport, Uganda, landing at around 7.00 pm after a four-hour flight. The children were amazed at how small Entebbe Airport was compared to the huge OR Tambo Airport. The air was humid, and we started sweating almost immediately, but at least there was a cool breeze from Lake Victoria. My brother and Edward were waiting at arrivals. Edward hadn't seen or spoken to his children in five years, and he was shocked at how much they had grown. I had travelled with just the boys, as my daughter had moved to London after university to experience life, and she would be joining us later, at around midnight. The reunion was very emotional, but filled with happiness. The boys wasted no time jumping in their father's jeep while I drove home with my brother.

The trip from the airport was long and depressing. In the thirteen years since I'd last been in Uganda, nothing had changed. The roads were still narrow and worn. Traffic was congested. The towns we passed along the way were densely populated. Kiosks popped up on the roadside, selling various goods, from food to clothes. The boys, however, were excited, and everything fascinated them. Even with

the confusion I felt, visiting home was a great, intoxicating feeling, and I was happy. More importantly, the children were happy.

Irrespective of the problems Uganda has, it is always a pleasure to be back there. I love visiting Maama, who I always miss. I am pampered and cared for unconditionally. The atmosphere, most times, is not judgemental. But since Maama got sick, I worry about her health. She left the farm and moved to Kampala. She stays in a small place owned by one of my brothers. All of her children support her with her basic survival needs, and we do our best to make her life comfortable. She insists on doing most of the work in the house by herself, from cooking to tending her little vegetable garden. I believe all the activity and the knowledge that her children have the time to support her keep her going. That, I am sure, warms her heart.

Our trip home was scheduled to last ten days. Every one would be action-packed. We drove down with one of my nephews to visit my parents in the village. The six-kilometre dirt road was incredibly narrow, and there were deep potholes all over. At times, we had to walk to avoid damaging the car. It was a nightmare, but we arrived in one piece. The children were fascinated by all the farm life. They weren't used to seeing live animals running loose. When night came, it was so dark that they couldn't see past their noses. They had never experienced anything like that. They had grown up with electricity, and even during blackouts it was never that dark. They enjoyed going out to the farm and picking fresh fruit and vegetables. For the two nights we stayed there, we all sat in one room and had dinner by candlelight. That time was full of old memories for me, and for the children it was an adventure, as they made new memories.

In the city, the children got to interact with many of their cousins and family. They even went out to a dance club, ending up at a karaoke session they thoroughly enjoyed. While in the city, the children and their father were able to talk about the separation, in an emotional family meeting. There were still some hurt feelings being harboured and hidden. I had never discussed what had happened in detail with the children. It was far too painful for me, and them, at that time. At the time of the separation, they were old enough to know that we weren't getting along, and we couldn't live together anymore.

They talked for a long time. Tears were shed, and people were forgiven for past mistakes. Everyone left that family meeting feeling a bit better about themselves and the separation. The trip was a success, and I got more from it than I had expected. The children had benefitted from it. They now had an idea of their roots. They also mended their relationship with their father – to a point. The ten days passed incredibly quickly, and before we knew it, we were back in South Africa.

Edward, my youngest, was just starting with his engineering degree at the University of Cape Town. He had been awarded a comprehensive bursary that covered all costs, just like his brother, Sam. I would be driving Edward down to Cape Town, and I only had a week to prepare. When I returned, I went straight back to work.

My research work was going well, and my mentor, Prof Ferreira, continued to give me advice on my research, for which I was truly grateful. Having his help was good, but I found that I was just following in his footsteps. I needed to do something different. I decided to add a new element to my research that would increase my publication rate. I would focus on determining of the medicinal value of plants. This field was new to me, and I needed a crash course. Once again, my mentor and guardian angel, Prof Ferreira, was on hand.

Prof had emigrated to Mississippi in 1998, and was doing research in the same field. He invited me over for a month to gain the experience I needed for my work. He offered to pay for my living expenses. All I had to do was organise some money from my grant to pay for my travel. In August 2007, I flew to Mississippi, and under Prof Ferreira's guidance, I gained valuable knowledge. It was a very fruitful month, and one I am grateful to have had. When I returned, I applied for funds from the South African government to set up a laboratory for my extra research. The university agreed to offer me a laboratory to use. It looked like everything was going in the right direction, but my financial status was still a pricking pain in my life. I was struggling to make ends meet. I was drowning in debt, and I needed to change that.

In 2001, I got a bit of relief when Edmond and Joyce completed their Bachelor's degrees. I didn't have the money to keep buying

books or pay for their studies. Joyce promptly moved to London to work there temporarily while Edmond started an internship in Bloemfontein. Sam and Edward were full-time students at the University of Cape Town. I was living alone in a huge house, and it was way too big for me. I contemplated selling it and buying a smaller place, but that would be hard. The house wasn't in a good condition. It would need to be revamped to make sure that it sold for a higher price, so that I could settle my mortgage. I decided to gradually renovate, in such a way that I could make some money with all the extra space while I stayed there.

I added self-contained bachelor flats to the house. Edmond, who had studied architecture, drew up the plans and had them approved. The house would, in the end, have three bedrooms and three attached, self-contained bachelor flats. I was lucky that the bank extended my loan, and I started to build in August 2006 after I returned from a week's conference in San Francisco. I had been travelling overseas for work and research. I got to see the world, thanks to education. On the way back from San Francisco, while I flew the last leg of the trip, from France to South Africa, I reflected deeply on my future.

The lecturing and research work was going well, but the prospect for growth was limited. My career had stagnated, and my future was bleak. Tired of living on a month-to-month basis, I contemplated changing my job. Besides, at work, the Afrikaans was starting to annoy me. I was constantly excluded in communications. I loved to teach, but I needed a change in my whole lifestyle, from work to finances and the environment at home. The time had come for me to start a new chapter in my life.

Though physically and mentally exhausted on my return from San Francisco, I returned to work the very next day. With a limited budget, and unable to use a contractor for the renovations, I hired a builder and purchased the building material myself. Purchasing materials turned out to be very time-consuming and physically taxing. There were days that I thought I had made a mistake in starting the project, but I soldiered on. I also intensified my search for a fresh opportunity.

In the same week, I received a call from an old friend who I had not spoken to in two years. Little did I know, this call would be the answer

to my prayers and would change my life. We caught up on our lives and work, and I believed it to be a friendly call. I was thrilled to hear from him, and I told him all that was going on in my life, including the trips to academic conferences I had been on. From our conversation, he figured I was doing well, but he told me that there was an opportunity at the place he worked at, and he thought I would be suited for the position. He advised me to apply. I was shocked and humbled that he had thought of me. The job paid way more than my current job, and with that extra money I could manage my finances better. I had less than a day to decide if I was going to apply. I had always been a hard worker, which had shown in my work, and someone had noticed. I confirmed the belief that thoughts are things, so be careful what you think and what you ask for.

I was astounded for the rest of the day. I couldn't wait to tell my children. I battled with thoughts of abandoning my students. Academia has always lost professional and competent scientists to industry, an unfortunate situation and one that cannot be curbed. With the low salaries common in universities, the lure of money is too great. I told Sonopo that there was a chance I, his MSc supervisor, would be leaving, and that he would have to finish his thesis in the next four months. We worked straight through many nights to get his thesis done and submitted it before I handed in my resignation.

Two weeks after I had sent my CV to the company, I received a call inviting me to an interview. The interview went incredibly well. Six weeks later, the company phoned with a job offer, and I accepted. I knew that my life would be changing for the better. My children were delighted at my decision to take the job. They had always nagged me to leave academics and join industry, where I could earn a good salary. My children worried about my situation and were more relieved than I was.

Getting a new job was great news, but the renovations of my home were incomplete. With only two weeks left until I started my new job, and on a thinned budget, the panic started to set in. I began to explore ways to speed up the process. I used the little money I had gotten from my pension to prop up my building budget. The plan was to complete the building and use the rent money to pay off the

bond. Edmond was working and studying at the time, and I asked him to stay in the house and supervise. I drove 350 kilometres every weekend to check on the progress.

The building was just one of my problems. I also had to wrap up my university responsibilities. I hoped that the university would find a suitable replacement to take over my research and my post-graduate students. I was lucky that a professor agreed to take over my post-graduate students. With my students taken care of, I now had to go to the HoD and the dean to inform them of my resignation. Both weren't happy with my decision. They made a counter offer in an attempt to retain me. It was still lower than the new salary, and I couldn't pass up the money, so I declined the university's offer. Besides, I had, at times, felt undervalued and under supported. I couldn't be in that environment for much longer, despite my love for teaching.

I would start my new job and life in Sasolburg on the afternoon of 31 December 2006. Accompanied by my two youngest, Sam and Edward, I drove down to Sasolburg from Bloemfontein, a distance of about 350 kilometres. I had to find myself permanent accommodation, which was a tedious process. It would be the third time that I had moved house in ten years. I was lucky, though, that I was able to stay at a friend's house for the first three months in Sasolburg. While settling in, I continued to travel to Bloemfontein for the building project for a solid seven months and that was physically, mentally, and financially exhausting. Everything from the petrol to the phone bills and the purchase of building material was paid for with hard cash and I was getting more into debt with every passing weekend. The building had taken over my budget, weekends, and social life. I seemed to be thinking about it with every spare moment I had.

On the other hand, the pressure of acclimatising to my new job and learning new research just added to the stress. Working in industry, compared to the educational arena, was a total shift in thinking. I was moving from studying plants to working with fuel. It was all new, and at first I struggled with the different structures, but I enjoyed my new job, and it was a substantial increase in remuneration.

The house was finally completed in July 2007, and immediately

a huge burden was off my shoulders. Finding tenants was difficult. I only had two tenants instead of five. I couldn't raise the money I had hoped for to pay for the bond on the house. Running a property business by myself from 350 kilometres away was going to be an uphill battle. My health was not handling all the stress well, and everything was an enormous strain on me. I had recently gotten another bond on a house in Vanderbijlpark, where I now lived. I had two bonds to pay off on my salary, and that left me in arrears and in debt every month. The bank had, on several occasions, tried to repossess the Bloemfontein house. These stresses went on for a year, and my health suffered, causing my blood pressure to rise to the extent that I had to medicate.

In mid-2008, I found out the extent of the damage that years of stress had caused. I went for a check-up, and the doctor told me that I was suffering from hypothyroidism and severe anaemia due to severe uterine bleeding from fibroids. My thyroid was visibly swollen, and my red-blood cell levels were significantly lower than normal range. The doctor immediately scheduled a thyroidectomy to remove my thyroid for fear of it being cancerous or it causing problems with swallowing. Being anaemic, I had to receive a blood transfusion to raise my red-blood cell levels prior to the operation. I stayed alone at that time, and I had to drive myself to the hospital to get transfused overnight. I drove home the next morning. To add to my worries, I had to juggle a work trip to Beijing, in China, in five days' time. I was able to attend the conference before I was scheduled to go in for the operation.

My youngest, Edward, would drive me to and from hospital. He was studying in Cape Town at the time, and luckily he was able to be there for me. The operation went ahead, and I was discharged 24 hours after the operation. Edward picked me up and took me home. The next day, Edward returned to his studies. I drove him to the airport, with my day-old wound. On my way home from the airport, I started to feel dizzy, and I had to pull over for a while until I was stable enough to drive.

It was a complication due to the excessive bleeding from uterine fibroids that my doctor had previously diagnosed. As soon as I felt

better, I drove straight to the hospital. The doctor booked me in immediately for an emergency operation. This time, a gynaecologist would perform a hysterectomy. All of this left me frightened and devastated. At times such as these, I really missed my children and my family back in Uganda. I was alone and the only thing I could do was call my children and let them know I had been readmitted for an emergency operation.

Sam was staying in Johannesburg, and he could come and check on me, but he needed transport. I arranged for one of my friends to deliver my car to him. I had lost a lot of blood and had to be transfused again to be in a condition to be operated on. It was hard for me to grasp that I was back in for another operation just two days after the first one. Even the nurses commented on that. I remember breaking down in tears before getting anaesthetised, and praying to God that I would come out of it alive. I still had so much to give and so much to teach and show my children, as they still needed me.

When the anaesthesia from the operation wore off, I was grateful to open my eyes, though still drowsy and in an awful lot of pain. Surely, the Lord was giving me another shot at life after all I had endured. I had asked the nurses to call my children as soon as I was out of theatre. They hadn't, and so I contacted Sam. I sent him a message to let him know that the operation had been a success, and that he should inform his siblings. Sam checked in on me daily until I was discharged, four days later. When the day came for Sam to pick me up, I was happy to be going home. I was granted eight weeks leave to heal from the two operations.

I stayed alone at home, as Sam had to work and couldn't drive that distance every day, but he made it his duty to call daily and to check in on me when he could. Joyce, Edmond and Edward also called. When I was alone, I was forced to reflect on my choices and journey, and what the future held for me. There were times when I was so weak, but my will to live always pulled me through. I was very lonely. I missed Maama most, as I remembered how she used to nurse me back to health. She would make me a cup of tea, tuck me in, and care for me until I was well. I found myself having to do it all, from making tea to food and my bed.

Television became a welcome friend. I had always liked to watch *Oprah*, and now I was watching her show every day at 04.00 pm. The way that Oprah related to people, and how she treated them, inspired me greatly. Her approach to life resonated with my beliefs. She inspired people all around the world with her actions, and that was what I aspired to. She seemed to guide my thoughts, and she inspired me. At the same time, I began to understand the reality of my life, growing the hope and faith I needed to move on. Like her, I wanted to teach the world. I wanted to use teaching to inspire hope and purpose. I wanted people to understand that they exist in this world for a reason, and that, I believed, could be achieved through education.

There was one show in particular I remember that revolved around the notion of 'The Secret', and the law of attraction. It was one of those moments of realisation – an aha moment for me. I had been leading my life according to the principles of 'The Secret' and didn't even know it. I watched a video and read a book about it. On going through them, I was more convinced that I was unknowingly leading this life, which was the law of attraction. When I had applied positive thinking to aspects of my life, I had reaped rewarding results. There were times, though, when I had doubted myself, and I hadn't gained anything. With this realisation, I saw that I needed to listen to my instincts and establish what felt right and truthful. It also dawned on me that my thoughts revolving around money were always negative. It was no wonder I had such horrible luck with finances. I needed to change my thinking around my dealings with money. I needed to start slowly and carefully getting rid of negative thoughts.

I realised that I had lived my life with many negative thoughts. I had to be open to seeing other views and expanding myself. I had to begin to appreciate that thoughts are not just thoughts; they mould and manipulate you into the person that you are in life. I chose to be focussed, and to think positively about situations in my life. I would do my best to live that positive lifestyle by practising it. I wanted people to look at me and see positivity, and take that with them to improve their lives. If people could see what positivity was bringing to my life, maybe I could get a few people to see and live life in a

positive manner.

Weeks after the show, I still thought about it. I chose to think positively about my finances. I had become so inspired by Oprah's show, and what she said and did, that I preached her words at work to my colleagues. I did it so often and with such passion and vigour that they started to call me Oprah.

Around the same time I attended a motivational workshop by Robin Banks. Coincidentally, he spoke about the power of positive thinking. He was promoting the book *Mind Power* by John Kehoe. The workshop was incredibly moving. It spoke to the frame of mind that I was in at that time, and what I wanted to be in the future. I had encountered two different books, written by two different people, and yet they had both talked about the same concept, and how it could improve one's life. Though it was a lot harder to implement than I thought, I had to keep at it if I expected a change in my life. There is truth in the saying that rich people think abundance, while poor people think only of their demise.

I returned to work. I was working well, but I was starting to miss the education arena. I missed the students and the chance to motivate, teach, educate, and guide the next generation. I figured that it was time to start looking for something more fulfilling. To my surprise, the company I worked for opened up a new division that concentrated on education. They were looking for a researcher who would work in education. I applied for the position and was lucky to be given the job.

It entailed working with universities. We would be helping students by offering them financial, social, and academic support. This was the job I had been thinking about for the past few months. The job would give me the satisfaction that I hoped for and needed in a job. I hoped to help the South African youth in the best ways I could before I had to retire. It seemed as if, through the power of positive thinking, I would be adding a new chapter to my life.

CHAPTER 17

Reflection and words of wisdom

I am proud of the decision that we made to move to South Africa in 1982. The country has offered my children and I better opportunities in life. I am sad that my children didn't have the chance to learn Ugandan languages or cultures and experience the unconditional love of their relatives and grandparents. I spoke Luganda to them, but the environment was not supportive of learning it. Whenever circumstances allowed, I took the children to visit their relatives, as I believe that everyone deserves to understand their roots, which gives one identity and a sense of belonging.

Sam once asked me how they, my children, could call themselves Ugandans when they couldn't speak any Ugandan languages or even understand the culture. That question made me realise that not identifying with the culture of their home country will remain a concern to them. Many other Ugandan families living outside Uganda are in the same predicament.

In the Baganda culture, who you are is strongly linked to where you come from. I am a Muganda woman, and I am expected to follow our customs and culture when I go home. My children, on the other hand, grew up in South Africa, and they predominantly speak English, as they attended English-medium schools. I may not have afforded my children the opportunities to know their roots better, but I taught them values that are fundamental to their lives. I am content that my children had the chance to grow with the knowledge that they held their future in their hands, and that they had the opportunity to mould their lives, with the education they received. South Africa afforded them the opportunity to grow, and to be better versions of themselves. The families I left behind in Uganda are still struggling to get educated, as Uganda has limited opportunities for personal growth. Every day ends up being a constant battle to survive.

With every successful step I have taken along my life journey, I

have gained a bit of freedom. This is the freedom to have access to life's basics, freedom to education, and freedom within, and from, a failed marriage. This freedom has enabled me to be the person I am: an independent, responsible and caring human being, and the best mother I could be to my children through nurturing, teaching, guiding and loving them.

My four children are responsible, educated adults who are contributing to the societies they live in. Raising them has been the real joy of my life. It has been a gratifying experience I would never change, from giving birth to them through the amazing experience of nurturing them to maturity. I love my children, and will always care for them. In my eyes, they will always be my little ones.

I dedicate the following poem to them. I believe in telling someone that you love them, and this is just a fraction of what I feel.

To the joys of my life,
My children Edmond, Joyce, Sam and Edward,
The source of my strength, frustration, happiness, insanity,
sanity and irritations, even.

You are the most important things in my life.
You motivate me to get up every morning.
I love you dearly, and wish that you will remain responsible adults.
The relationship that I have with you is my definition of
unconditional love.

Who you have become as leaders, friends, and parents, is gratifying.
How you care for others,
Contribute to the well-being of society,
Will bring you joy and happiness.

I cherish you, my beloved children, my best friends.
You truly bring joy, love and happiness in my life.
Without you, I wouldn't be who I am today.
The love I have for you is unfathomable.
I am honoured to be your mother and friend.

Mom – Bukirwa Irene Kamara
Growing up on the farm taught me endurance as well as the ability

to keep the faith, despite how hard my troubles were. I relied heavily on those qualities to forge ahead in life. My persistence, and the education I acquired as I progressed, coupled with my natural charismatic character, helped me to get jobs and earn an income to better care for my children. I had wanted them to grow up in better conditions than I had, and I achieved that. They were educated in good schools, and had electricity and running water, but most importantly, they didn't grow up in extreme poverty.

I am blessed to be able to communicate well with my children and that we are able to rely on each other for support. As a family with no relatives in South Africa, we have to look out for ourselves. We have family rules that help us get along and overcome difficult situations. One of these is that we don't say, 'I told you so' when someone does something wrong. We prefer to solve the problem as a family. Mistakes are inevitable. Another forbidden phrase is, 'I can't do it'. I always wanted my children to know they can do anything they put their minds to. I prefer that they learn from their past mistakes and successes, and draw strength, motivation, and courage from that. I let them appreciate that optimism surpasses pessimism, and that loving overshadows hating. I try to make our home a loving and caring environment.

I am lucky that my children look up to me and come to me for guidance, support, comfort, and love. I remember how Edward, at the age of twelve, would ask me to wake him up in the early hours to do extra studying for exams. And when Sam would come home and complete his school assignments before he had even changed out of his school clothes. I think they picked that up from me, from the way I worked hard at my studies. It is said that children emulate their parents. I am blessed that my actions didn't damage my children, or that I didn't show them bad habits that could harm them.

I am blessed that my children, like me, are compassionate to others, and that they strive to make a difference in people's lives. I have always encouraged my children to respect their fellow man, irrespective of colour, creed, or culture. They learned and understood what it means to help a friend in need. While Edmond and Joyce studied at university, they lived at home, and there were times when

we would share our food and money with friends in need. I taught them to love and care for others above all, as it costs nothing and yet it is priceless, and it could easily change someone's life. Most of all, I have taught and shown my children that forgiveness is key to freedom and happiness.

My parenting style was different from Maama's. I often wondered why some of my siblings had not turned out like me. Perhaps they didn't handle the pressures of poverty or the way Maama administered discipline, like I did. With that thought, I chose not to hit my children when they made a mistake, or rule with fear, and instead I helped them understand what they had done and the implications of their actions. I chose to be a friend they could talk to, while handling each child's needs on their own merits.

I guided them along a Roman Catholic path, as I am religious, although I didn't force them to follow religion. I taught them about religion as best as I could, and I took them to church on Sundays. When they were old enough, they were able to make their own choices regarding their religious beliefs. I had at least given them a foundation they could work from. The transparency in the family, and the responsibility they learned through the roles they played and their decision-making in life, empowered them and developed their confidence, providing them with a foundation to forge ahead.

My children were by my side through all of the turmoil I experienced. They helped in deciding what to prioritise with the limited money we had. It was difficult to get my boys into Grey College, one of the best schools in the country, and the school fees were even harder on me. I was lucky that the school's management subsidised my boys' school fees and the costs for the sports they participated in. Sam and Edward repaid this by being real ambassadors for the school. They made prefects, acting as role models for the younger students. Edmond was also lucky to study at Grey College, a school my sons are truly proud to have attended.

I will always remain in debt to the school's management for giving my sons the opportunity, and for helping me to mould them into the fine gentlemen they are. My daughter was moulded into a fine lady by Eunice High School, which also rated among the top ten schools in

the country. I was fortunate that Sam and Edward had comprehensive bursaries to study at university. The university I worked for paid for Joyce and Edmond's school fees, but I had to pay for their study materials, which was expensive. I am just plain appreciative of my children for all that they have done, and that they stayed by their mother through the ups and downs. I love my children.

Often I am asked, how did you do it? How did you raise your children alone to be healthy, responsible, educated and respectable people? I am told how blessed I am to have my children turn out the way they have. I think about those questions often when I am alone. If I had to attempt to answer them, my response would go along these lines: my children were my friends, they were, in fact, my best friends, and my love for them is unconditional. I let them know this every day. We supported each other through the bad and the good times, and we tried our best not to judge each other until we understood the whole story. I listened to them and they listened to me. Being able to listen and understand was key. If I was wrong, I apologised sincerely, and vice versa.

Along with the help and guidance of my Lord God, we all banded together to create a strong union between parent, children and God. As much as I have taught my children, I have learned just as much. As they grew and matured, I learned more from each of them as individuals. They left home one by one, but I remain their mentor. We speak every day. They are confident enough to pick up the phone and call me for advice. They know that through anything I will be the one right behind them, cheering them on or giving them whatever support they need.

It is often said that if you don't decide what you want in life, someone else will decide for you. I have made choices that have made a positive difference in my life. The journey I have travelled over half a century on this Earth has made me a more resilient, confident, patient and forgiving person. I have learned to embrace fear. The fear of the unknown that haunted me would diminish with every step I took.

Although I was born into extreme poverty, there was much love and compassion in my family. Love made me understand how to

survive on the bare minimum, and that material possessions don't define one's existence. My parents, and those who came before them, didn't have the benefit of a good education, or any education at all, and they had to accept that they would live in poverty. I was lucky to have escaped that demise, thanks to my parents' commitment to my education. I used the opportunity that they had laid before me to escape poverty.

For as long as I can remember I have searched for my freedom in an effort to understand who I am and to unleash the potential I knew I possessed. Having endured much, I hope that I am closer to finding out who Irene really is. If all of my material possessions were stripped off me, would I be able to define myself as a person? My understanding of who I am lies in knowing how to transform what lies in my heart and soul into actions.

Over the years, I have learned that the values that lie deep in my heart, that motivate me and my actions, are integrity, honesty, care, respect, love, generosity and forgiveness. It took a while for me to realise that to be my best I had to be true to myself. I had to determine what company I kept. It takes too much energy to try and be what someone else expects you to be. If you entertain people's perception of you, you are liable to lose your own identity. I decided to be the person I wanted to be. If I am not happy within myself, I cannot truly be happy.

I have an enthusiasm for life, and I like having like-minded people around me that can help me grow and achieve a spiritual level within myself that I am comfortable with. Like any sane person, I fear failure. It is that fear that has made me make wrong decisions at times, although fear can be the best motivator, if used correctly. I taught my children that if someone tells you that you cannot do something, they most likely can't do it themselves. You will only know if you try. My children and I still don't like the words 'I can't do it'.

I admit that it is easier to follow the crowd than to stand your ground and follow your own path. But it is never too late to start fighting for what you believe in. No one can tell you who you are, unless you give them the power to. If something is standing in your way, look in the mirror first. The person looking back at you is the

one you will have to start with, if you want to solve the problem you are experiencing. 'Look at yourself before blaming the world for your troubles' is a saying that I believe rings true for everyone. We tend to become content with our surroundings and to blame everyone but ourselves for our demise. You might need help along the way, but only you can start to change.

There is much anger in the world. I have experienced it in my life in various forms, from the violence in Uganda, to apartheid and xenophobia, not forgetting everything in between. It seems that anger was present through it all. With all that I had been through, my heart was still filled with the capacity to love. I chose to accept and share my blessings with those who were willing to receive them, especially those who related to what I had been through. The scars left behind by all the pain are just that, scars. I chose to use them as stories of motivation. I hope that my stories will encourage and motivate people along their paths, to help them see that they are not alone. I have learned to forgive on my journey, and it has become part of my being, part of the core values that define me. I believe that we need true forgiveness to move forward with our lives. It allows the heart to heal.

I have read and heard that reflection enables resilience. After each day, I reflect about my life and the day's happenings. I try to relate what has happened in the day to my dreams, goals, and future objectives. If they do not line up, then I will find an alternative that aligns with my plans. I pray to God for guidance and courage to face the day and get through it.

Failure has never been an option in my world. Instead, I choose to see it as a teacher and a lesson for what not to do in future. Through failure, one can learn what cannot be taught in a classroom. One just has to be willing to learn from the failure at hand. I learned over the years that if you don't see the lesson in your failure, you are bound to repeat the mistake. Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results. When I felt like I didn't fit, was demotivated or stagnating, I would change my career. When all the job switching didn't work, I learned to surrender, learn from my failures, and change myself. In doing that, I was able to see

more clearly where I wanted to be, what was within my reach, and what was just wishful thinking.

I grew to love myself and what I believed in more the older I got, although there were times that I doubted myself, or felt like I didn't know myself anymore. Being away from home, I learned to rely on my intuition and the truth I believed in when making decisions. By living alone, my appreciation of the power I had to create and control my happiness, through the choices I made, grew. The ability to have confidence in my decisions gave me the strength to approach many challenges. I tried my best to pass this on to my children, in the hope they would learn to make meaningful choices in life.

We all need someone to look up to in difficult times. Often, when no one is there physically, I think of Maama, and reflect on her fearlessness and courage when facing daunting situations. It helps me stay focussed on what I am doing, and to go the extra mile, to never give up. I use prayer, faith, and the power of positive thinking to get through life every day, and to take care of my children, to be a good mother. I believe that one has to learn to listen to oneself. This will give you the power and confidence to make a decision you can live with. I listened to my inner voices and it took time for me to understand them clearly. When I did, my life slowly changed for the better.

Another thing I firmly appreciate is if you take the first step and make a decision to keep moving forward, support will find you along the way if you are true to what you believe. And so, I tell everyone that they need to make the decision to take the first step in life to get anywhere.

Maama once said about me that I had been given the heart of a woman and the mind of a man. I planned and acted, and yet I cared so much about others and protected them. I attribute that acknowledgement to my upbringing. My parents taught me that love, care, integrity, listening and acknowledging are fundamental to building relationships. Although Maama taught me this in her own unique way, she still got the lessons across. From the hardships that Maama endured when raising my siblings and I, I knew that I had to be the best daughter I could be. I owed her that much for all that she

had done for me.

I am who I am because of Maama. She gave everything to make sure that I got an education. Even with no education, Maama managed to see the importance in her children being educated. As she always said, 'Without education, there is no life, because education elevates man to the dignity of his well-being. Education is the key to escaping from the bond of ignorance.'

Where and how you were raised constitutes your roots and the core of who you are. The circumstances you grow up in become the benchmark that you judge life and your reality on. That is where you build your character, values, resilience, integrity, and those ever-so-vital survival instincts. All those are to serve you in the journey ahead that is your life. We need to feel that we are on Earth for a reason, and that we are being heard. It is our need to fulfil a purpose that feeds our desire to be recognised; they are one and the same thing. We need and want acknowledgement. I have learned to look people in the eye when having a conversation with them, and give them the attention that they need. That helps in showing that you acknowledge, recognise and respect what they are saying, as well as them as a person. That lesson has served me well during the years. Maama taught me some of these lessons by doing the total opposite, and that is where you have to listen carefully to the lesson being given. Maama never listened to my siblings or me, and I vowed to myself that I would listen to my children, and to other people, before judging a situation.

Sacrifice and giving back are fulfilling acts that have been fundamental to my happiness. I consider myself different from my siblings in that I was brave to leave home to look for opportunities to better my life and theirs, especially when it came to education. I chose to care for my family in Uganda after I left. By saving for my siblings' education, I wasn't able to visit my home country. The longest period I was away from Uganda was thirteen years. It was a big sacrifice. Only when my own children were out of school could I visit annually, and now I spend my Christmases in Uganda with my other family, which I treasure.

I see perseverance and courage as two attributes that work

together as an art form. I was lucky enough to learn this art form through hard work and turmoil. Perseverance and courage help to fight off the effects of toxic self-pity. If left unchecked, self-pity can consume every bit of you, as you play the victim. This is where one of my favourite traits, hope, comes in. With hope, you have something to live for and look forward to. I had sixteen siblings, and our lives differed considerably. I put that down to the belief and hope I had in myself. I believed that I could do better, and have more than I had; that there was something out there for me more than what was placed before me.

I have been a positive person my whole life, although there were times when I failed to keep positive. The good thing is that I always found my way back to a state of positivity. There are many reasons to be pessimistic. Things don't always go according to plan, but only you can make the choice to be positive. When something doesn't go my way, I see that as me being shielded from harm. I then search for an alternative. There is always another way, even though it may be harder, or easier, you just have to find it, to believe, and never give up.

To do my best, I need to be my best, which means always improving. I constantly surprise myself at what I am capable of doing – things that I never thought possible, including writing this book. I see myself moving forward and discovering a new piece of me with every step. I never thought that after more than half a century on this Earth I would still be learning about myself. I eventually figured out that the only way to be my best is to be true to myself. I decided not to settle on one me, but to be happy with the fact that I am able to keep learning. I am growing every time I learn something new about myself, and I am happy, as it makes me a better person.

Even with the success I have in my life, I chose to keep grounded in who I am. I try to remain true to myself. Any decisions that I have made that impacted on people's lives came from a good place within me. I have strived to live a life that is unselfish. I hope that this legacy is passed on to my children, and is seen through their successes. When they achieve anything, I achieve it as well, and they always want me to be there, which makes it that much more special. Everything they are is a reflection of the positivity I have contributed

to this world. Even when I am lost as to who I am and where I am, I always remember that, 'I am the choices I made, and will be the choices I make.'

For children stricken by poverty, life's experiences can be a constant, daunting battle, and a huge challenge. Education is a luxury that most impoverished children will never have. This means that they are most likely going to be stuck in the poverty cycle. Education was the key to me making it to where I am, allowing me to be able to write this book and tell my story. It has afforded me freedom of expression, and it has allowed me to reach for my dreams. Every child must acquire an education.

I realised, when looking back on my life, that poverty and fear go hand in hand. The fear of reaching new heights, when there is no one to hold your hand, can be overwhelming. I was lucky to have recognised my guardian angels, who helped me along the way. That's why we have to help manage the fear that accompanies poverty, by helping people and showing them that there is a way out. You just have to work at it and believe in yourself. You have to aim high to get ahead in life and sometimes take risks.

Education was a pinnacle moment in my life at every stage. It changed my life every time I moved up a notch. I have always tried to use the freedom I gained from education to make a difference in the lives of those who cross my path. When you are able to do something in your life that doesn't feel like work, it is destiny, and you should hang on tight. I was lucky to find that within my work as an educator and a scientist. I have chosen to use what I have learned during my own life journey to try and free the African child, especially the students I have had the pleasure of guiding. It has always been a dream of mine to help African children out of poverty. I know that education and love are central to helping us overcome poverty. It would take everyone choosing to lend a hand to help change the state of the African continent, by saving the African child, one at a time.

I would like the writings that these pages carry to be a message of hope and inspiration to everyone, especially the disadvantaged African child. My hope is that anyone who reads the pages within this book will gain something that will be of help to them, to ease the

fear of the unknown and obtain the courage to face what comes their way. In many ways, the journey that I find myself on is travelled by many African children, and many will follow. I have chosen to use my experiences to help the African Child to see that you can choose to survive poverty, desperation, fear, pain, and sorrow. You can choose to let your dreams flourish, and you can choose to be more than what you are now. I am hoping that the message in this book will speak to many guardian angels who will make themselves known to help the impoverished, poor, helpless African child. We need people to stretch out their hands and help just one child each, and the change would be monumental.

CHAPTER 18

Where are they now?

At the age of 58, I find myself with four beautiful children and two grandchildren. I have achieved many of my goals, including getting a good education. With a PhD in hand, I gained my freedom from a life of poverty, and provided my children with the best quality education I could afford. Most importantly, my children's lives were easier than mine was. I made sacrifices, spending so much time away from my family in Uganda. I had disappointments, too, such as my divorce. There were times when I felt as if it would be too much to endure, but I have made it. Failing to acknowledge my achievements would only rob me of the joy and pride I felt and still feel about them. However, I am humbled by what I have achieved, more so when it comes to my children. They are my life, and the understanding, caring, faith, and trust they have in me keeps me going forward.

At this stage in my life, I get to enjoy my children's successes along with them. They are all fully educated and they lead quite healthy lives. Edmond has a Bachelor's degree in architecture from the University of the Free State. He is currently following his dream in animation, doing a three-year course at the Animation School in Rosebank, Johannesburg. In fact, I am so proud of him for being the main editor of this book. He has a creative talent, which he has put to use as a writer and as a fine artist, among other things. He is married to Shayleen Howard-Kamara, who has a B.Com degree in finance and economics, and currently studying towards the Chartered Institution of Management Accounting (CIMA) designation. Both Edmond and Shayleen live and work in Johannesburg.

My second child, my beautiful daughter Joyce, has grown into an amazing, independent woman. She holds a B.Com degree in marketing from the University of the Free State. Joyce moved to London after her studies, where she met and married Everest Njemanze, changing her last name and becoming Joyce Kamara-Njemanze. Joyce qualified further in strategic management and leadership. Everest has a degree in business management. They have been blessed with two children,

a daughter, Amarachi, and a son Arinze, my first grandchildren. They all live in London. I am happy that Joyce is building a life she can be proud of and that she has children she is proud of.

My third born, Sam, has ferociously taken to studying and improving himself. He obtained his first electro-mechanical engineering degree with honours at the University of Cape Town. He immediately added to that a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) designation, which he studied part-time. He passed his CFA exams in three years on the first attempt while working full-time in the financial sector in Johannesburg. To achieve his dream of studying in America, he applied to study for a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) and arguably got into the best business school in the world in Stanford Graduate School of Business. That is an achievement in its own right, given how difficult it is to be accepted into the school. While busy with his MBA, Sam was concomitantly studying for a Master's degree in environment and resources engineering at Stanford University. We were a very proud family when we travelled from South Africa to witness him graduate two days in a row for his MBA and Master's degrees. With an education like that in the bag, Sam landed the job he had always dreamed of at Goldman Sachs in San Francisco. With the education and knowledge that Sam has acquired, he is blessed, and he deserves all that comes his way. I am very proud of him as his mother; extremely proud.

Edward, my last born, is an honours graduate in electrical engineering from University of Cape Town. He further studied at the Project Management institute in Pretoria to become a Project Management Professional (PMP). At a tender age of 27, Edward was fully registered as a Professional Engineer with the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA). He is married to Rivhatshinyi Nicole Kamara, also an honours graduate in electrical engineering from University of Cape Town, and who has a Master's in management finance and investments (MMFI) from University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. They both live and work in Johannesburg, and have plans to study overseas in the future.

I am so proud of all my children and the new additions: wives, husbands and grandchildren. I love that they have that spirit, and the will to be better than they were yesterday. They carry this with them everywhere they go. I pray that this spirit never dies, and that they pass

it on to their children, who in turn will pass it on to their own children, and that it never gets lost through generations. To never give up, to take life by the collar and pull it along as you follow your dreams. It might be hard, but always believe there is light at the end of the tunnel.

With my children taken care of and able to take care of themselves, I am now ready for the next stage in my life. I know that I am able to handle all that is laid before me. If I have the Lord in my heart, and the love of my children and my family, I can handle anything thrown my way. I am an educated, independent, strong woman, and I am in charge of my life. All along, Maama was right when she said that education will open doors for you.



My parents Joyce and Wilson Bugembe

The front door to our farm house



The sitting room window at the farm house

My first time in Kampala city



I am in boarding school



My family at my first graduation

In Zambia with my husband, Edward and Edmond



In Thabanchu, South Africa

My MSc research group at University of the Free State, South Africa



*I graduate with a Master's degree
in Organic Chemistry*



I graduate with a PhD in Organic Chemistry



My family after my PhD graduation



*My first day as a lecturer
at University of the Free State*



*I am the first and only black female lecturer in Chemistry at
University of the Free State*

I am presented with an award for best lecturer of the year in the Science Faculty



At University of Mississippi

I see my father for the last time



I visit home after thirteen years

Edmond and Mom

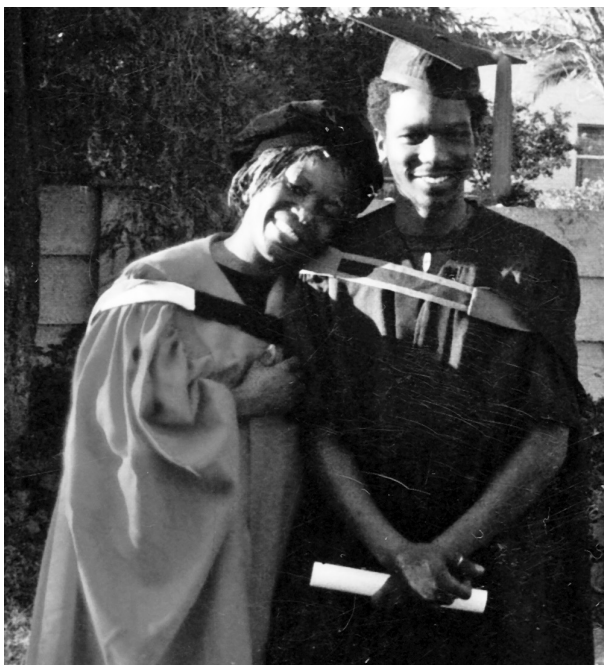


Joyce and Mom

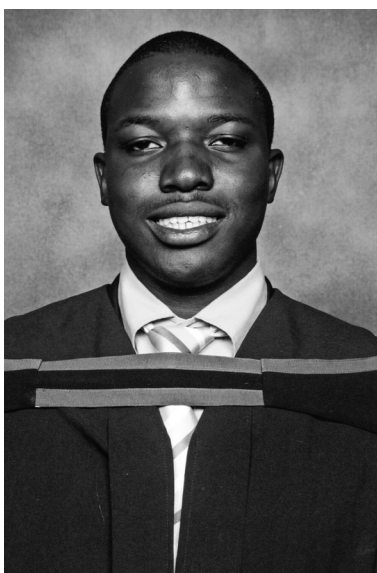
Sam and Mom



Edward and Mom



Edmond graduates with a Bachelor's degree in architecture



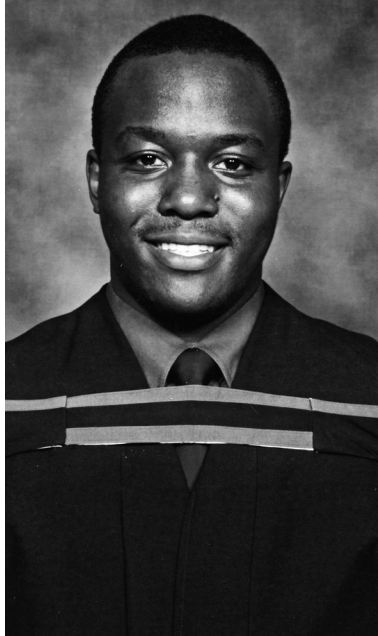
Edward graduates with honours in Electrical Engineering



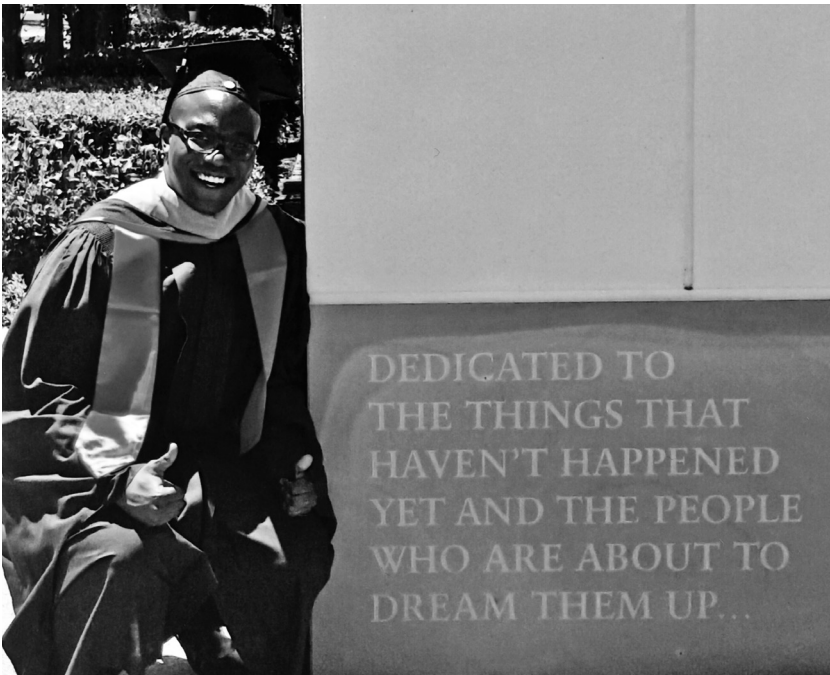
Joyce graduates with a BCom. Marketing degree



Joyce, Everest, Amarachi and Arinze Njemanze



*Sam graduates with honours in
Electro-mechanical engineering*



Sam graduates with a MBA at Stanford Graduate School of Business



Edmond and Shayleen Kamara



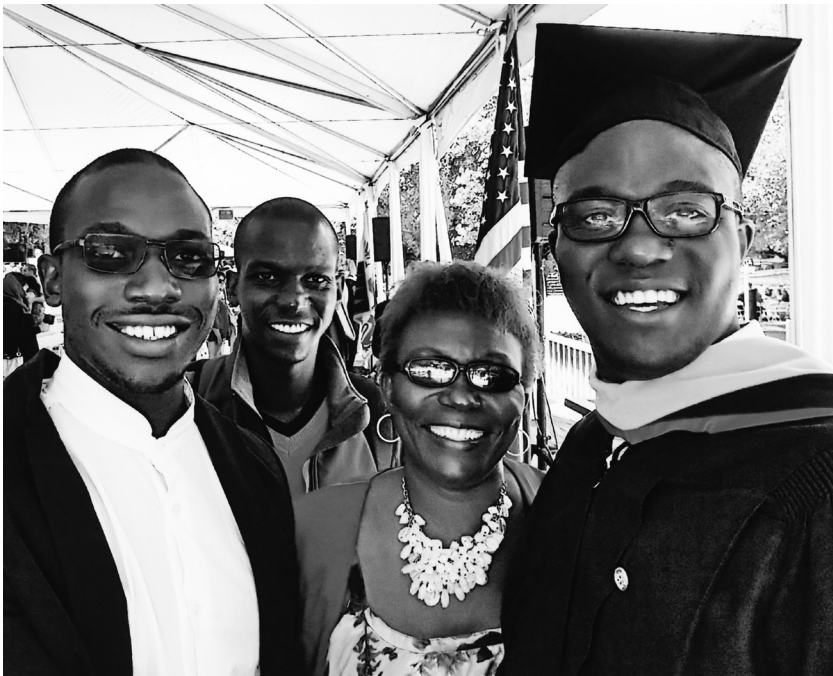
Edward and Rivhatshinyi Kamara



Joyce and Everest Njemanze



*Sam graduates with a Master's degree in environment and
resources engineering at Stanford University*



Celebrating at Stanford University

