

Mothering the abandoned: Namara mothers the forgotten

There were moments when Namara doubted her path. The more time she spent with the children, the stronger her bond with them grew. The more she cared for them, the more attached she became.

BY BETTY KAKULU

Doreen Confidence Namara is not only a professional teacher but is also the founder of Doreah Child Care Uganda. This centre provides care for children with special needs, including those suffering from Cerebral Palsy, Down syndrome, Hydrocephalus, epilepsy, Autism, sickle cell disease, and intellectual disabilities. The organisation's home is located in Gobero, off Hoima Road, where construction of a permanent facility is still underway. The land was purchased with help from Sophie Mirembe, and the centre is a work in progress. Currently, there are only two makeshift kindergarten classrooms, with limited facilities, and the children who live here need more space to grow. The centre also includes a dormitory and kitchen, but there is much more to be done to make it a comfortable, permanent home for these children.

Where do these children come from?

The home currently cares for 17 chil-



Doreen Confidence Namara, the founder of Doreah Child Care Uganda.

dren, many of whom are orphans or have been abandoned. They have been brought to Namara by probation officers from Gomba, Nasana, Kampala, and other areas, as well as by concerned members of the community. Strangers, too, have arrived at her doorstep, bringing children they found wandering in the streets or abandoned by their families. While only three children have biological parents who placed them in Namara's care, many others were found in desperate circumstances and arrived with no one to claim them.

"When the children first arrive at the centre, they undergo full medical and neurological assessments to ensure they are not a health risk to the others. Some

children cannot speak or remember their homes, making it impossible to trace their families," she says. Despite the challenges, Namara and her team make every effort to reunite the children with their families, but often, they remain in her care.

A conversation with God

There were moments when Namara doubted her path. She would pray for guidance, "I told God that I needed to start a school. I had been a very good head teacher in some of the best kindergartens, but why these particular children? I delayed starting the school in the hope that I would get 'normal' children."

That delay cost her an entire term. She finally accepted her calling and opened

NAMARA'S JOURNEY TO CARE

Her path to caring for special-needs children was not always clear. Before starting her own centre, she worked as a teacher at Victorious Education Services, where she was trained to handle children with learning difficulties, particularly slow learners. She received additional training from specialists, including Dr Paul Eria Njuki, a leading expert in dyslexia, and gained invaluable insight into inclusive education.

Namara's passion for special-needs children deepened when she worked at Parenting Uganda, where she championed the inclusion of children with Down syndrome in mainstream classrooms. She learnt how important it was for differently-abled children to learn alongside their peers, a principle she later applied in her own center.

But long before all of this, Namara kept having this single dream that haunted her. The dream was filled with images of children in wheelchairs, neglected and abandoned by society. That dream ultimately became her calling. She started a school in Nasana focused on inclusive learning, specifically designed for children with disabilities. She walked door to door, asking parents to bring their school-aged children, but they all said they did not have any. However, some opened their homes and told her that the only children available were those with disabilities, particularly those with Cerebral Palsy, who had been hidden away due to the community's stigma over having children with disabilities.

the school on May 19, in the second term. She came to terms with the fact that this was her dream, and she enrolled every special-needs child she could find. She also reached out to parents in the community, asking them to bring their "normal" children to study for free alongside the others, to help foster inclusion. Word of mouth spread through the community, and more children with special needs were brought to her doorstep. Calls started pouring in from strangers, but every child had a disability.

The more time she spent with the children, the stronger her bond with them grew. The more she cared for them, the more attached she became.

"Whenever my four biological children came back from school, they would ask, 'Mummy, did you get any new children?' And I would tell them, 'I got the special-needs children.'"

When the time came for the 4 p.m. pick-up, other children were picked up, but those children with disabilities were left behind at school. Concerned, Namara went to the local authorities for assistance. It was then that she learnt that the abandoned children were orphans. That is when the decision was made to establish a weekly boarding section, and Namara began living at the school to care for the children.

The pandemic effect

The childcare centre truly began to take shape during the Covid-19 lockdown. As the country went into a complete lockdown, schools were shut down, and parents and relatives quickly came to pick up their children. However, the children with disabilities were left stranded at the school. Namara was advised to formally register the school as an NGO, which would help her navigate the legalities and gain access to more support. Left alone with the children, she relied on the kindness of a few well-wishers to help her care for them.

Mothering special needs children

Caring for children with special needs is not easy. The financial costs are high, as many of the children require special diets, diapers, and medical care. Some need spoon-feeding, while others require 24-hour supervision. Workers who understand the needs of these children are hard to find and often leave without notice, which is why Namara has made the centre her first home, sleeping there most nights and only occasionally visiting her biological children.

The children also require education. Some are moved to mainstream schools as they advance, while others attend special classes for the hearing impaired or other specific needs. Despite the challenges, the love and progress that Namara witnesses in her children are enough to keep her going.

Her work is about more than just caring for these children; it is about giving them a chance to thrive. Children who arrive anxious or unable to communicate slowly start to settle in. Some who were once nonverbal learn to speak, while others with seizure disorders receive treatment and grow stronger. The children respond to language, learning both English and the skills they need to function in society.

Family reunification is another part of Namara's mission. At the end of each term, the children with families go back during holidays, and then return to the centre when the new term starts.

Despite the immense challenges, Namara remains hopeful. She dreams of building a permanent, well-facilitated home for the children, where they can live, learn, and thrive without the constant need to relocate or face the uncertainty of rented spaces. The work is hard, but the rewards are immeasurable.



Namara with some of the children in her care. She has developed strong bonds with them. PHOTOS/BETTY KAKULU.