

WORTHY CAUSE

# Writer who is changing lives of street children

Centre for destitutes last year produced one of the top pupils in the national exams

By BOB ODALO

“When I was in the streets, I used to be a drug seller. I sold drugs but I stopped, before I joined the vocational training. I was a deadly thief... but now, I am changed,” said Eric 17.

“I did not know how to communicate without hurting anyone.”

Sarah, also 17, said: “In the streets, I had a difficult time, I lacked food, protection and I used to sleep there. I also used drugs like marijuana, but now, I am feeling good. I feel rehabilitated with my income as a handresser.”

“I support my family and I also want to help change the lives of other girls currently living in the streets.”

## Share of struggles

Ten years ago, a young American undergraduate journalist, Ms Farah Stockman, then 22, joined forces with two veteran teachers from the Kenya Adult Education office in Machakos to find a solution to the problem of street children in the town.

The result was the establishment of Jitegemee (Kiswahili for help yourself), Centre to assist children and destitute youths obtain primary, secondary and vocational education.

Speaking about the initiative today, Ms Stockman says it has seen its share of struggles and challenges.

“The original group of 30 children has grown into secondary school students, carpenters, welders, tailors and handressers.”

Machakos Town too has changed a great deal. However, the number of children in the streets has reduced drastically.

Today, the centre caters for more than 200 former street boys and girls.

Ms Stockman is back in the US, working as a writer with the *Boston Globe* in Washington DC.

But despite being two worlds apart, this has not stopped her from running the project she founded.

Recently, as Jitegemee was celebrating its 10th anniversary, Ms Stockman found time off her busy schedule to fly back to Kenya to celebrate with the centre's fraternity.

She came with her parents and close relatives to share the happiness of the moment.

When she first visited Kenya, she was a student at Harvard in the US.

“In 1994, I was a bit restless at school. I was tired of learning everything from books, and I wanted to go out and see the world for myself. So I enrolled in a study abroad programme that took me to the hills of Machakos. It was called Friends World,” Ms Stockman recalled.

## Shut down shortly

She said the programme shut down shortly after, but the experience changed her life.

“I really fell in love with Kenya. I learned Swahili.”

“I also developed an interest in street children in Machakos and Nairobi,” she said.

Ms Stockman said that while in the US, she had volunteered to teach children in a public housing project, so she knew how to work with children.

“But the street children really interested me. They seemed so eager to learn, and it seemed like such a small amount of money and time could help them. So I decided to come back to Kenya after I graduated from college to work with them,” she said.

In 1996, Farah got a fellowship from the Stride Rite Foundation (a famous shoe-company) that helped her to come back and teach in Machakos for two years.

“When I arrived in Machakos, I originally had planned to set up my own programme. But I quickly realised that there was already an informal classroom in town under the Adult Education office, so I asked them if I could join their efforts as a volunteer, and they agreed.”

**‘I support my family and I also want to help change the lives of other girls currently living in the streets’**



“I am sure that were it not for them, my own efforts would not have succeeded,” she quipped.

It was not smooth sailing for Ms Stockman as she embarked on trying to assist disadvantaged children far away from her home.

“I was very young when I went to live in Kenya. Just 22 years old. The first few months were marked by loneliness, even though everyone in Machakos was so friendly.”

“When I moved into my first home in Machakos, I didn't even know basic things like how to light the cooking stove, or what to do when there was suddenly no water in the town,” she adds.

Ms Stockman confesses that she had little experience in running an organisation apart from the volunteer work that she did in college.

One thing that she admired from her pupils was that they never asked her for money.

## Rwanda genocide court

When her fellowship ended, Ms Stockman went to Nairobi to take up a job as a freelance journalist with Reuters.

She later went to live in Arusha, Tanzania, where she worked as a journalist covering the Rwanda genocide court.

Years later, when she moved back to the US to work for the *Boston Globe*, it became clear that she needed to hire a director and register formally with the Kenyan Government if her project was to succeed.

As she globe trots, covering events affecting her country, Ms Stockman at times finds herself bursting into laughter in the

Jitegemee Centre director Farah Stockman is all smiles as she receives traditional Kamba gifts from guardians of some of the children she rescued from the streets. Photo/BOB ODALO

company of colleagues as some memorable incidents during her stay in Machakos flash back.

Ms Stockman lives in the US and she does not interact with the children as she used to. Her time, she says, is spent managing a board of directors in America that hopes to raise \$50,000 (about Sh4 million) this year and overseeing the programme.

So what does the future hold for her and Jitegemee?

Ms Stockman says she plans to launch a programme specifically for sponsored secondary school students so that they could have attachments in the fields of medicine, law and business and begin to think more clearly about their lives after graduation.

## At least a meal

Keeping Ms Stockman's dream alive in Kenya is the programme director, Mr Mike Kimeu.

Mr Kimeu said today the programme has over 20 students in secondary schools spread across Machakos and more than 70 pupils attending primary schools.

The children are not housed at Jitegemee but during school days, they are assured of at least a meal at the centre.

Last year's KCPE candidate Peter Muiya, who was plucked from the streets about five years ago, was the toast of the centre after he emerged the top candidate in the district with 420 points. This saw him placed among the top 50 candidates nationally.

Kimeu said that recently, mobile phone provider Safaricom, gave them a Sh800,000 assistance.