



## A COMMON WEALTH OF EXPERIENCE

Freedom fighters, child brides and other untold real life stories

Edited by  
Ingrid Evers  
and  
Annie Waddington-Feather





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Freestyle Publications



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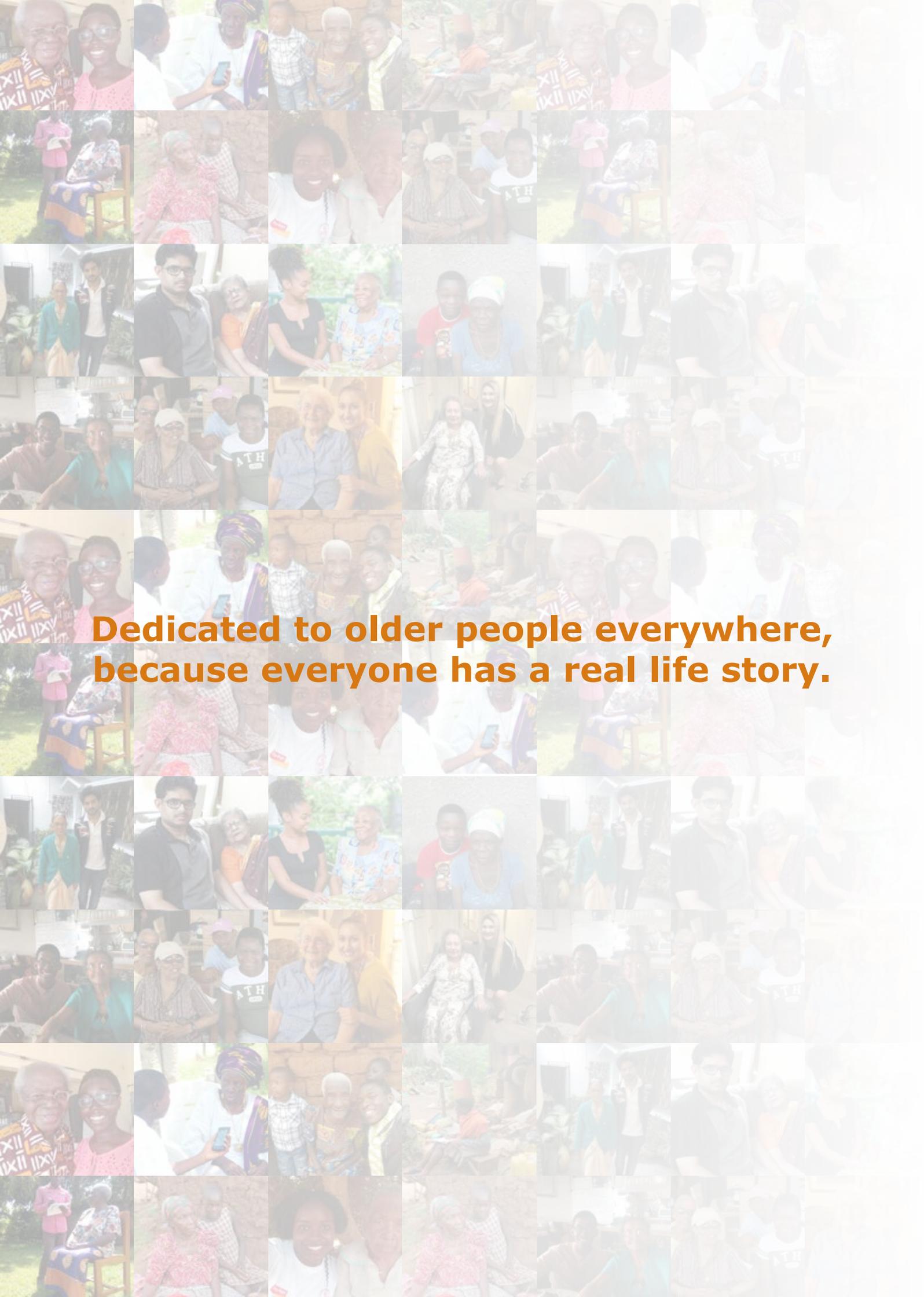
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**Dedicated to older people everywhere,  
because everyone has a real life story.**

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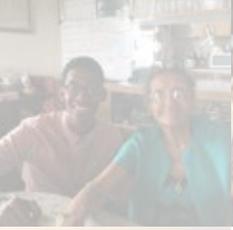
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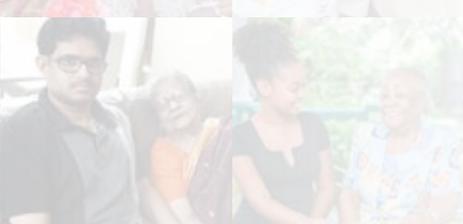
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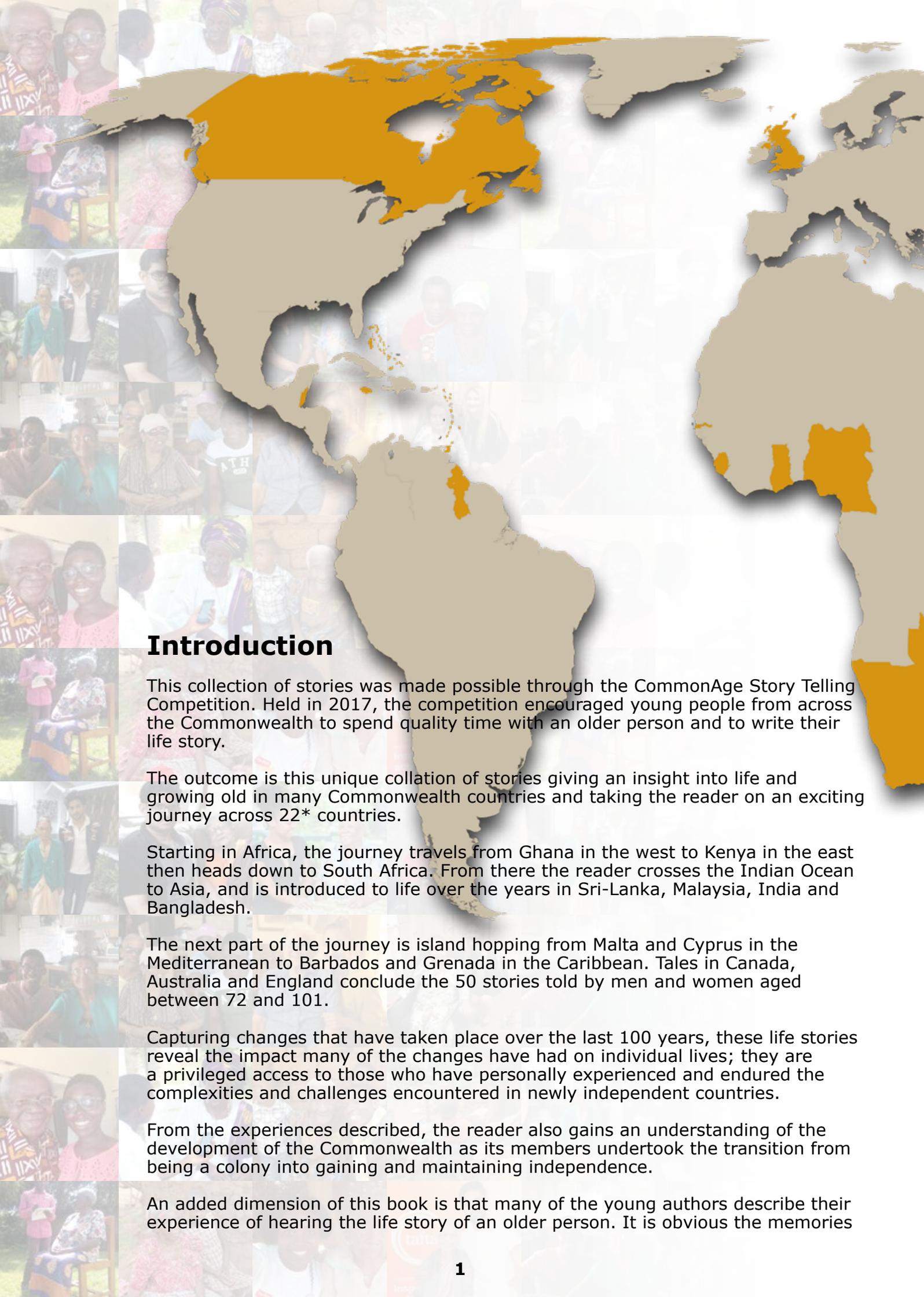
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## Introduction

This collection of stories was made possible through the CommonAge Story Telling Competition. Held in 2017, the competition encouraged young people from across the Commonwealth to spend quality time with an older person and to write their life story.

The outcome is this unique collation of stories giving an insight into life and growing old in many Commonwealth countries and taking the reader on an exciting journey across 22\* countries.

Starting in Africa, the journey travels from Ghana in the west to Kenya in the east then heads down to South Africa. From there the reader crosses the Indian Ocean to Asia, and is introduced to life over the years in Sri-Lanka, Malaysia, India and Bangladesh.

The next part of the journey is island hopping from Malta and Cyprus in the Mediterranean to Barbados and Grenada in the Caribbean. Tales in Canada, Australia and England conclude the 50 stories told by men and women aged between 72 and 101.

Capturing changes that have taken place over the last 100 years, these life stories reveal the impact many of the changes have had on individual lives; they are a privileged access to those who have personally experienced and endured the complexities and challenges encountered in newly independent countries.

From the experiences described, the reader also gains an understanding of the development of the Commonwealth as its members undertook the transition from being a colony into gaining and maintaining independence.

An added dimension of this book is that many of the young authors describe their experience of hearing the life story of an older person. It is obvious the memories



of natural disasters and wars that have shaped storytellers' lives have made an impression on the young authors.

For many authors, English is not their first language; each story has its own very individual style and reflects the personalities and culture of the authors and storytellers. The editors of the book have respected these aspects and have kept editorial changes to an absolute minimum.

What in some instances could be conceived as crude language, has after due consideration, been maintained; to change the wording would sterilise the story. Potentially politically incorrect statements have been edited.

Whilst the historical events have been crosschecked, the events are described from the perspective of the storyteller and author. Where needed, brief explanations of words/terminology have been added.

We hope you find the stories both insightful and informative whilst providing food for thought.

Through the process of encouraging and promoting intergenerational relationships, we sincerely hope to have contributed towards fostering a mutual understanding that will be a step towards stopping ageism.

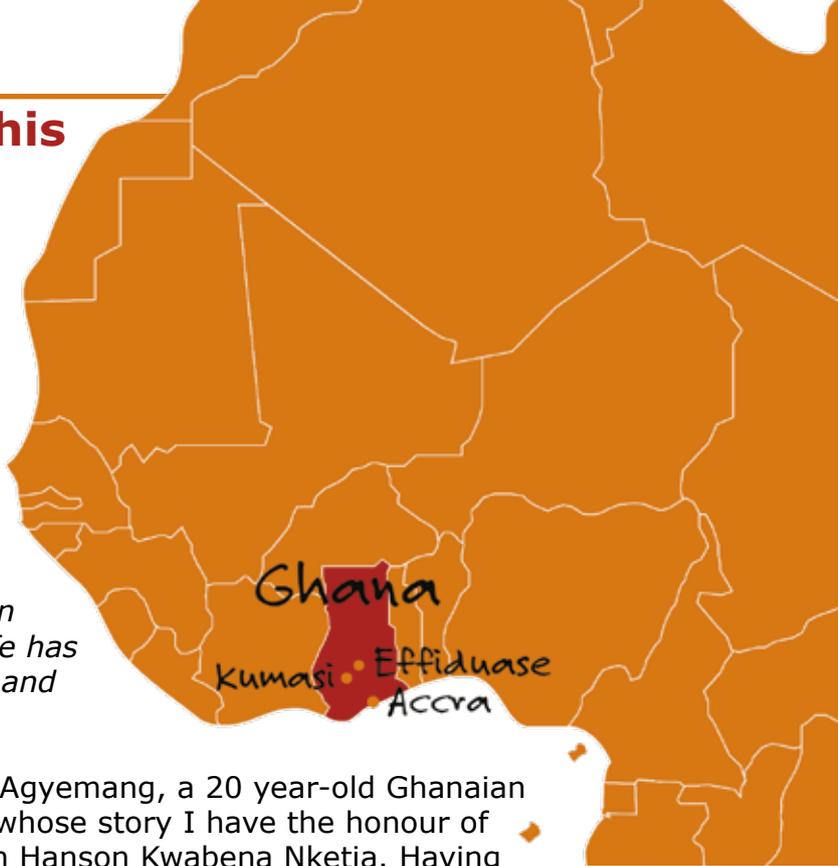
**Ingrid Eyers and Annie Waddington-Feather  
Co-editors**

\* This includes one story from Iran that was submitted and considered suitable for inclusion

# 1 Professor shares his love of music

**Told by John Hanson Kwabena Nketia and written by Nana Adwoa Tekyiwa Agyemang**

*Introducing the composer of Ghana's national anthem is an appropriate starting point to this book. Architecture student Nana Adwoa Tekyiwa Agyemang talked to eminent ethnomusicologist John Hanson Kwabena Nketia whose life has been shaped by his love of music and determination to be educated.*



My name is Nana Adwoa Tekyiwa Agyemang, a 20 year-old Ghanaian architecture student. The person whose story I have the honour of sharing is Emeritus Professor John Hanson Kwabena Nketia. Having read my grandparents' music books, I relished the opportunity to talk with the man whose eyes always seemed to twinkle in the photos above his compositions.

At 96 years, Professor Nketia is Ghana's foremost ethnomusicologist and composer whose career spans over nearly 70 years and has lectured in many top universities and symposiums in North and South America, Australia, Europe, Africa and Asia.

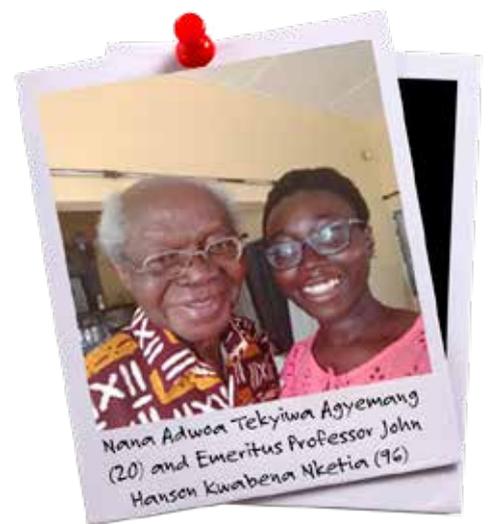
Ghana is a Commonwealth nation, having achieved independence from British rule on 6 March 1957. After its first president, Dr Nkrumah was ousted by military coup d'état in 1966, Ghana operated in military rule, first under Lieutenant General Ankrah (1966-1969) then under Brigadier Afrifa, who led a brief transition to democratic rule in 1969.

Four coups and three republics later, Ghana has enjoyed relative peace in the Fourth Republic for the last 25 years. Its capital city is Accra, in the south of the country. Ghana shares its borders with the Gulf of Guinea in the south, and Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, and Togo in the west, north and east respectively.

The approximately 27 million citizens can be separated into five major ethnic groups: Guan, Mole-Dagbon, Akan, Ewe and Ga-Adangme. The official language of Ghana is English, but it is compulsory to study one indigenous language at the basic education level.

## **Playing to the Tune of Providence**

Life for Professor Nketia began in June 1921 in Asante Mampong, a town to the north-east of Kumasi, nearly 273 kilometres away from Accra. Born Kwabena Nketia, the only child of illiterate parents, he spent his early years, up until the age of seven, playing with other children in his community, learning



children's songs and dancing. His formal education began when his mother, a farmer, insisted that he should go to school.

The nearest school being in Effiduase, Kwabena Nketia walked 25 km daily to attend his lessons. After the end of his first year, he skipped a grade, having been promoted from Standard One to Standard Three. He marvels how that could have happened, being the first of his family to attend school. Then again, things like these, he says, are commonplace in his life.

When he reached Standard Five, he wrote the standard exam for entrance into the Akropong Teacher Training College. His desire to attend the College was born one Sunday evening when he saw members of the college perform. Dressed in white slacks and blue jackets, the students sang Ephraim Amu's "Bonwere Kentewene" (translation: Bonwere Kenteweaving). Nketia was entranced by the lyrics of the song, the main chorus of which was onomatopoeic, mimicking the sounds made when working a loom to create Kente [a type of silk and cotton fabric made of interwoven cloth strips in Ghana].

Nketia decided then he would attend this school. He found out to attend the College, a Presbyterian mission institution, he would have to be baptised and adopt an anglicised name. The name he chose, Joseph Hanson, belonged to a bosom lifelong friend who later became Police Chief of Ghana. Nketia spent four years at the training college, followed by a year of theological training as a catechist at the same.

### **Turning point**

His time spent at Akropong was a crucial point in his life. It was there he learned to play the harmonium and received a formal education in the Twi language. Although Nketia had gone to Akropong primarily to study under Amu, he was mentored by Rev Danso, a pupil of Amu, instead. Amu by then had been dismissed by the college's authorities for dressing in his traditional attire of cloth.

However, in a brief encounter Amu instructed Nketia to be original in his music, not merely becoming a copy of Amu's style. He advised Nketia to explore music from the older generation, much like how he, Amu, began his music career.

This, Nketia says, changed his life. On a visit to his hometown, he sought out his grandmother, the leader of a performing troupe, and studied the traditional schools of music. He collected about 60 songs from her, recording these in a manuscript. When he was satisfied with what he had learned, he visited another town and recorded there, again and again.

Next, he was appointed as a teaching assistant within the college, working directly as the assistant to Clement Anderson Akrofi. Mr Akrofi was an educator, theologian, and linguist, the foremost authority on Twi in his lifetime.

It was under Akrofi Nketia began exploring and researching Ghanaian culture. Then in 1944, a representative from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London (UOL) visited the college. When she chanced upon Nketia's manuscript, she offered him a scholarship to study there for the next two years, which was then extended by three years.

## **New opportunities**

On the subject of his stay in London, he says with a smile, "Well, I was young and it was interesting. It was during the wartime, but it was exciting." The bombing on London meant that travel by air was next to impossible, so he went to England by boat. While explosives falling on London meant living in constant fear for many, Nketia speaks calmly about them, saying, "Well, sometimes you would hear the warning siren and hide, sometimes it would just fall. Then it was over and you knew that you were safe."

It was during this time that former Prime Minister Professor Kofi Abrefa Busia, then a member of staff at the University College of the Gold Coast (now the University of Ghana), invited him to join the university's Department of Sociology as a research fellow.

Recognising the importance of Nketia's research to the country, the position was designed to allow Nketia to further his studies in Ghanaian music and dance. With an assistant and driver, he would travel about the country recording and transcribing performances, songs, and interviews. This invaluable archive can be found in the University of Ghana's Institute of African Studies. Nketia went on to compose music of his own, with over 40 compositions under his belt.

## **A love of music**

When asked why he chose music, Professor Nketia laughingly says, "I like it!" He speaks dearly of a love for music stemming from his childhood. Encouraged by a supportive family, he attended the performances of playing troupes in the countryside. These troupes would come from Kumasi to Mampong, and then to Effiduase. Kwabena Nketia would follow the troupes, watching, listening, experiencing.

He insists that the most important thing for him is that everything in his life is a gift of Providence, the hand of God. The only child of illiterate parents in a colonial village at a time when Africa was strictly the Dark Continent, the odds were severely stacked against him. As a child in Mampong, he could not have imagined the path his life would take, let alone plan it. Yet as opportunities presented themselves to him, he thrust himself into them, taking full advantage of each situation, embracing and learning from it.

## **Learning from our elders**

"That kind of mind prepares you to be a researcher," he says. As a child, he would go to the farm with his mother, and as children are wont to do, copy her by planting yams alongside her. However, at harvest time they would turn out smaller than hers. Then she would ask him questions that made him reflect on and compare the processes the two of them had used in planting and caring for the plants.

This was his mother's way of teaching him, of letting him learn from experiences, a model he kept up with his whole life. He says, "It is the traditional way, we learn from our elders."

Impressed by Nketia's knowledge, love for music, and all things related to the African continent, many in positions of power have held him in high esteem. When I left the Professor's house, he was seated, thinking of what to say at the ceremony at Flagstaff House being held in his honour by the President of the Republic of Ghana, His Excellency Nana Akufo-Addo. The president's father, former President Edward Akufo-Addo, invited Professor Nketia several times to come over to his home and talk with his children, including a young Nana Akufo-Addo, and teach them how to play the piano.



His association with President Nkrumah began when the leader conceived the Institute of African Studies, inviting Nketia to join the faculty of the new department. After three years working under Professor Thomas Hodgkin, he became its director, serving from 1965 till 1979. His association with Dr Nkrumah continued, in large and smaller ways.

When walking on the street and going about his business, Professor Nketia could expect a wave or some other sign of acknowledgment from the head of state should their paths cross. It was Professor Nketia who was invited to organise and perform at Ghana's first Republic Day celebrations and concert, because, as he put it "Nkrumah saw something in me."

"In fact, I have never had a problem with any of the political parties in power," he says. This is not a simple feat, rather miraculous in nature, considering Ghana's political history. In the years after Dr. Nkrumah's deposition, Professor Nketia wrote a song, the first line of which is "Osagyefo ma won akye oh" (loosely translated, Osagyefo [Nkrumah] greets you good morning) which was broadcasted by public service radio every morning.

When General Afrifa heard the song, which praised the leader he had helped depose, playing at a state event, he asked the young woman sitting near him (she was the Comptroller of Programmes at the Ghana Broadcasting Company) who the author was. "My husband," she replied. At that, he 'shut up' to borrow the Professor's words.

Like Nkrumah, His Majesty the Asantehene Osei Tutu Agyeman Prempeh II, King of the Empire of Ashanti (1931 - 1970), encouraged Professor Nketia's activities, attending concerts he gave in London, constantly inviting him to the Manhyia Palace in Kumasi. He regularly attended his performances, acting as a self-appointed tutor and mentor to a younger Professor Nketia.

Smiling bemusedly, Professor Nketia recounts how he would pop by the palace and the Asantehene would be informed of his presence, immediately halting other activities to come visit with Nketia and talk with him. These are the extraordinary experiences Professor Nketia has had, none of which he had planned. That, he insists, is the point he wants to stress. Not at his expense, but of those who wanted to hear what he had to say. "The trumpet I blow is not my own", he says.

Another favourite memory he shares is that of his interactions with his students at UCLA. Professor Nketia worked in the Music Department at the University of California, Los Angeles, prior to his appointment as Emeritus Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. The students constantly sought him out, inviting him to lunch and sup with them. Armed with a barrage of questions, they spoke with him, trying to glean as much as they could from him while they had the chance. He reminisces, "I think I learned more from trying to find the answers to their questions than they did from me."

### **Always thinking**

Now, Emeritus Professor Nketia sits in his armchair, trying to live a more sedentary life in his retirement. This is no small task when ideas are constantly entertaining his mind. He keeps his work at the university ongoing with the help of an assistant. Although officially retired, he goes back every other Tuesday. He does admit that now, at 96, he has had to change his schedule. "Now I can sit in a chair," he says, "and do nothing but think about something."

As he thinks, many things occur to him - things that become important for a book, or an essay, for future addition to his body of work thus far. "I have stopped travelling," he says, "yet my mind keeps on bothering me." That's what keeps him awake, ideas that need to be developed, publications that need to be written. He points to the television set, which has been on since I arrived at his house, although the volume seemed to be turned down very low. "That's only to stimulate my eyes. Always, I am thinking."

Every situation is a learning process. When he goes to a concert at the Albert Hall, he does not say, "no, this is for western people", and tune out. Likewise, when he meets a friend who takes him to the theatre, he finds something to learn from, a new piece of information stored away in his ever-active mind.

He does not worry about the future, knowing he has stretched as much as possible out of his life, living it to the fullest. And if it happened to him, he says, it can happen to other people. For it is not an exceptional thing, what he has done in his life: it is finding the ability to recognise that there is indeed something you can do, that everything you do has relevance. And, when you are done accomplishing this task, he concludes, you look down on the path you trod and realise it might not be the exact goal you set out to achieve, but it was wonderful nonetheless.

### **Author experience**

That, for me, is the lesson I take away from my time with Professor Nketia. I have had one goal since I was nine; to be an architect. It has not stopped my mind from wandering and plotting a laundry list of projects and side-goals I want to achieve. And so I will follow these other threads, just as he did.

For Professor Nketia, this meant transcribing and recording performances.

For me, this means drawing, sketching, and photographing, the building-steps in creating an archive of how the architectural landscape of our homeland has changed over the years. Following those threads, embracing the ideas that come will not remove my focus, I realise. They would only add to my overall goal in the end.

## 2 Tales from a well-travelled grandmother

Told by Irene Akumbea Asare and written by Grace Larweh

*Far away from Ghana's capital Accra linguist graduate Grace Larweh learns from her well-travelled Grandmother Irene Akumbea Asare about women being married at an early age and a passion for politics.*

It is 4pm and the sun is just going down in Peki, a small village in the Volta Region of Ghana. I am Grace Larweh, a 24 year old linguistics graduate who has just recently completed a mandatory one year national service program, working as a teaching assistant at the University of Ghana. I am very passionate about fashion, taught myself how to sew during university and I have just started my own fashion designer business in Accra, the capital city of Ghana where I live with my parents and siblings.

I have been in Peki for a week now visiting my maternal grandmother and basically enjoying the serenity of this quiet village. Irene Akumbea Asare, my grandmother is a 92-year-old lovely lady, full of life and energy, eager to tell me her life experiences and secrets to her longevity. She has lived through colonial rule, independence, military rule and democratic governance and is very equipped to describe living and growing old in Ghana.

Ghana is a multicultural nation, located in the west of Africa and home to about 27 million people spanning a variety of ethnic, linguistic and religious groups. The country was known as the British Gold Coast before attaining independence from Great Britain on 6 March 1957. Ghana has been a member of the Commonwealth nations since 1957. The country is divided into 10 administrative regions and a central government that is elected for a four year term.

### My Grandmother, the traveller and family woman

Irene was born in June 1926, at Peki Avetile to Mr Lawson Kwesi Ameyibor and Madam Margarete Akpe. She was the second child out of five siblings, a relatively small family size compared to the average family size of 12 in those days. Her parents were peasant farmers, growing vegetables and corn on the family land.

Growing up in the Ameyibor household meant a daily routine of house chores, school, and helping on the family farm. As the first girl child, she was responsible for doing most house chores from the tender age of seven. She recalls helping her mother prepare family meals and was also responsible for filling the family buckets with water from the village well.



"In those days you had to grow up early and had no time being a child," she says. She did however have fond memories of playing outdoor games with friends as well as with her siblings whenever they got the time to do so. She describes her fondest childhood memory as 'scarily exciting'.

It was an earth tremor that occurred 22 June 1939. "We were so scared and excited at the same time as the earth was shaking around us. What made it more memorable was that, school was cancelled and we got to play more," she concludes.

Schooling was a privilege for those who could afford it. Given the large family sizes in those days, preference was given to boys over girls. Irene says she was lucky her father was able to afford basic education and middle school education for her and her siblings. After middle school, her father was unable to afford tuition for her to progress to secondary school. Her maternal uncle who was in Congo at the time, promised to send the money needed for her secondary education.

Unfortunately, WWII had just started and the wire transfer of the money was lost in transit. That ended Irene's formal education. She was 14 years old.

### **Apprenticeship and career**

It was either apprenticeship or marriage for an adolescent child who drops out of school in those days. In line with that, Irene's father sent her to learn a trade in Sogakope, two hours from their village and thus started her travelling exploits.

She was sent to live with a Pastor and his wife who was a seamstress in order to learn dressmaking. However, things didn't exactly pan out as planned as instead of learning dressmaking, she was put to work as a sales person, dealing in fabrics. According to Irene, she was a quick study and soon became a top sales person often earning praise for her hard work from her madam. After a year in Sogakope, she moved with the Pastor and his family to Koforidua, the capital city of the Eastern region. She served her madam for a further two years till she had to return home as a result of her mother's failing health.

Back in Peki at the age of 17, Irene had to start her own petty trading business from the savings she had made. Because of her affable nature and industry, she was able to provide for her other siblings and her sick mother till she got married at the age of 22.

### **Marriage and family life**

According to Irene, in those days, girls were given out for marriage at very tender ages and most of her friends were married by the age of 19. Getting married at 22 as she did, was usually an anomaly, she says. There is however a backstory to why she didn't get married at a 'younger age'. Irene had a lot of suitors coming to ask for her hand in marriage from the age of 16, but she repeatedly turned them down. This was because, growing up she witnessed her father being abusive to her mother and hence thought that was the norm of every marriage. She therefore resolved never to get married.

What changed her mind? She met a charming young man who was visiting the village from the capital city where he worked. They got talking and she instantly liked something about him. They remained friends and Emmanuel would visit her house anytime he came to the village. She still had her phobia and told Emmanuel, her future husband this when he proposed to her. Emmanuel however reassured her that he would never lay a finger on her and was able to convince her to accept his proposal.

Irene moved to Accra to join her husband in 1948 in order to start a family of her own. Her husband worked for the information services, meaning the family moved around all over Ghana. She and her husband were blessed with seven children; four boys and three girls.

In Accra, Irene gave birth to her first two children and juggled being a mother with petty trading. She sold toiletries in a stall and later added Christian literature due to her faith and a chance encounter with Christian missionaries.

After four years in Accra, her husband was transferred to Tamale in the northern region. Being a dutiful wife, Irene moved with the children to Tamale to be with the husband and keep the family together. In Tamale, Irene learnt how to weave cane baskets and sold them in the market square. She had two more children in Tamale further expanding the family. She said the seven years in Tamale was not very pleasant due to the language barrier and the high temperature in the north of Ghana. The food was however amazing as there was a variety of delicacies to choose from.

The family moved on again to Ho in the Volta region where another child was born and then to Koforidua in the Eastern region where the last two children were born. In both places Irene made and sold cane baskets in addition to toiletries to support the family income. She was determined to help support her husband in educating all the children and had to work very hard in order to add to the family income.

18 years after moving from Accra, the family moved back there when her husband was transferred in 1970. There they stayed until Emmanuel retired from active service in 1980 at the age of 60; Irene was 57 years old. With all but two of the children moving away from the family home, Irene and her husband decided to move back to their native Peki and make their forever home there. Irene continued her petty trading in Peki whilst her husband started a little corn farm as well as rearing of sheep and goats.

Irene remembers how she and 'Papa' (as she used to affectionately call her husband those days) rekindled their love. She remembers how they would reminisce about their travels and how Ghana had changed over time. Sadly her husband didn't keep his promise to be with her forever as he died at the age of 72. With sadness in her voice she recalls how traumatic that period was for because he started battling several illnesses precluding his death for many years. He was finally bed-ridden for almost a year before he passed.

"He died peacefully," she says. "I had just wiped his body that morning and went out to wash some clothes only to come back to find him gone to eternity." My grandmother never spends the Christmas season away from her home; her reason is because prefers to use that time to remember the good old days she had with her lover and friend.

Irene Akumbea Asare is 92 but she still has much information on current affairs since her hobbies are listening to the news and reading the daily newspapers. My grandmother is the 'go to woman' whenever you are in need of sage advice and there is no advice she's give you that is not rooted in the word of God. She still reads her bible faithfully and amazingly without any reading lens.

## **A passion for politics**

Having experienced colonial, military and democratic governance, my grandmother has strong political views and says, "I am passionate about the affairs of Ghana because, I have seen the good, the bad and the not so pretty." Growing up during colonial rule wasn't all bad, she says there was a variety of nice food and munchies readily available at quite affordable prices. She has fond memories of King George VI's coronation day, where all the school children were given mugs with his face on it and lots of candy bars.

The struggle for independence was not an easy one she acknowledges. During her earlier days in the capital of Accra, she remembers the numerous demonstrations and rallies organised. Though mostly peaceful, it was a frightening period as soldiers were often deployed to disperse crowds. Although she was not actively involved in the political struggle, she feels proud that Ghana was the first country in West Africa to agitate for independence from the British.

Post-Independence Ghana was not as smooth as they imagined it would be. Prices of goods and services shot up and corruption had crept into various sectors of the economy. Living conditions became insufferable as a result and a once joyous and hopeful country had turned gloomy. Agitations from the public incited the military to overthrow the government in the first military coup d'état on 24 February 1966.

Having experienced four more military coups, she absolutely abhors them. "Living under military rule was the worst moments of living in Ghana," she says. "There is nothing worse than being forced to live based on schedules imposed by soldiers, and to obey a set of autocratic rules. Worst of all, economic conditions were very harsh as well."

She will be forever grateful for Flt Lt Jerry John Rawlings who returned Ghana to democratic rule in 1992. Irene is very proud that Ghana has had a stable democratic governance system since 1992, with several peaceful elections. "Things are looking up, Ghana has been on the rise and working well," she says.

## **Secrets to Healthy Ageing**

Irene credits her longevity to her Christian faith and a good personal attitude. She explains that, being a good Christian, she has been blessed with good health. "I have devoted my life to serving God and he has not let me down," she continues. "The secret is to be kind to everyone," she says. "A good attitude in life showers unto you a lot of unmerited favour," she concludes. She also believes in eating healthy and being active. "I have always been a trader," she says. "Walking a lot was part of the job and I think it benefited me well."

## **Life lessons learned**

There is no substitute to hard work. That's the biggest lesson in life according to Irene. "Due to my hard work during my apprenticeship, I learnt vital trade tips that served me very well during my petty trading career." Though she wasn't rich, she always made enough to support her family and achieve her proudest achievement of educating all her children.

Irene believes that family is everything. "Without the love and support of my family, I wouldn't have survived as long as I have," she says. At 92 years of age, Irene believes she will live to be a 100 if she continues to enjoy the love and support of her seven children, 28 grandchildren and 16 great grandchildren. "I have lived a full life and I don't believe in having regrets. I however wished that, I was able to further my education at least to the secondary level," she concludes.

**Author experience**

I have come to see my grandmother in a whole new light now; she has earned the status of a role model for me. I am still a tad bit amazed by how early girls were expected to marry. I am 24 years now and have no plans of getting married so early in life. Girls getting married at 16 is something I cannot fathom was a norm back then.

My grandmother's zeal to educate all her children even the girls back then has given me a renewed passion to further my education to the highest level. Her numerous sacrifices for her family has taught me that family is indeed everything.

### 3 Forge ahead and never give up

**Told by Eugena Chiesonu Anowo and written Mmesoma Anaka**

*From Ghana we travel further east to Nigeria and in Lagos, the country's largest trading centre and port. Here we meet budding author Mmesoma Anaka who hears about the experience of war and life in Enugu [part of former Biafra] from the oldest person living in her area, 72-year-old Eugena Chiesonu Anowo. Having lived through the civil war, this inspiring woman shares with her young author her approach to life; never give up.*



**Eugena Chiesonu Anowo (72) and Mmesoma Anaka (16)**

I am Mmesoma Anaka a Nigerian, born in May 2001. I am the third of three children and the only daughter. Growing up wasn't so easy, considering my dad died three months before my birth in February 2001. I was raised up by my single mother alongside my two elder siblings who are both eleven and ten years older than me respectively.

Nigeria, a federal republic in West Africa, is officially a democratic secular country, comprising of 36 states and a Federal Capital Territory; Abuja. Our official language is English, with approximately 186 million citizens as was found at 2016 general population census. Nigeria is often referred to as the 'Giant of Africa' owing to its large population and economy. Nigeria is the most populous country in Africa and the seventh most populous country in the world. Nigeria is the founding member of the African Union and a member of many other international organisations, including the Commonwealth of Nations. Chief Emeka Anyaoku of Nigeria was Commonwealth Secretary-General from 1990-2001.

#### **Forge ahead and never give up**

Mrs Eugena Chiesonu Anowo (nee Ezechi) was born in November 1945 into the family of Mr and Mrs Ezechi in Ukana, Udi in Enugu state, Nigeria. Her date of birth makes her to be amongst the oldest living people in my neighbourhood. She is the third child of four children and the second daughter of her family. Her primary education took place at Saint Joseph Primary school, Ukana, Enugu State, after which she proceeded to Comprehensive College, Ukana, Enugu State where she was in the Arts Department.

After her Secondary school (High School) education, she enrolled into the National Certificate Education program and became a teacher. She had always had a passion to serve others, so teaching was the best area to turn her passion into practice. She believes you have to do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

She began teaching Igbo Language in the year 1980, when she was 35 years old, in Holy Rosary College, Enugu State. She taught for 25 years, and retired from teaching in 2005 at the age of 60. She retired not because she was tired or worn out but to spend quality time with her family. As at that time, some of her children had gotten married and also had children, so she travelled to spend time with

them. She participated in volleyball as a young girl. She presently hikes in order to stay fit.

She started making use of a mobile phone in 2010. During her time, they made use of letters to send messages and it got delivered through the post office. Also, the richest man in the community could boast of a bicycle not as we have models and designs of cars nowadays. There were less concerts then because their musicians never sang for fame or popularity but sang to pass messages to their listeners.

### **Living through war**

She experienced the Nigerian Civil War, which took place from 1967 to 1970. She said it started in January 1966, the disequilibrium and perceived corruption led to the 1966 coup. The coup plotters succeeded in murdering Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Premier Ahmadu Bello of the Northern region and Premier Ladoke Akintola of the Western region.

The civil war began as the Nigerian government side (predominated by soldiers from the North and West) attacked Biafra (the East region declared independence as a state under the leadership of Lt. Colonel Emeka Ojukwu in May 1967). The war, which started on the 6 July 1967 ended in January 1970.

She was 22 years old when the war started. She, her family members, relatives and friends sought for refuge in the forest. In her words "there was no clean or treated water, no good food, no house for 31 months, we survived by drinking from the stream and ate raw bush meat, we made use of palm fonds as blanket because of the severe cold in the forest."

She said their lives were really difficult. They couldn't leave the forest because of fear of death. She lost one of her siblings and several other close friends who couldn't survive anymore in the forest at that time. She didn't know what was happening at the war front, but she continually heard gun shots.

Nobody announced that the war was over, they just discovered for some time they couldn't hear gunshots or noise again and they summoned courage to come out. When she and the other surviving people came out, they discovered that all their houses were completely destroyed and burnt down, but they were still grateful to God that their lives were spared. Her father was not a witness to the war as she lost him at a very tender age, although she couldn't remember the exact age, she knew she was still very little and tender when he died.

### **Re-building lives**

After, the war, they started their lives all over again. Although it wasn't easy, but as the popular saying goes; 'where there is life, there is hope'. They were able to get their lives back on track, once again, they could properly fend for themselves.

She got married in 1975 at the age of 30. Her husband Mr Anowo also hails from Enugu state. Unfortunately, she lost him to the cold hands of death on the 19 March 2012. When asked if the war or anything like such repeated itself again, she said no as up till today, she has been living in peace.

### **Daily life**

Being a mother, wife and teacher didn't stop her from practicing her handwork. She usually baked cakes, snacks and pastries and supplied to supermarkets at Enugu State, Nigeria, such as 'The Leventis Store'. She also used the income to assist her husband in taking care of her family alongside the salary she got from teaching. Her mother had the greatest influence on her personal life.

Losing her father at a very tender age was a big challenge, but with the help of her mother, she was able to overcome. She lost her esteem at that time because she couldn't boast of a father-daughter relationship among her peers but her mother helped her boost her esteem back and encouraged her to be the best she can be.

She is currently living in the city, Lagos State, (which is the biggest state in Nigeria) with one of her daughters who is a teacher. She is living happy as she lived her dreams and can also see her children living theirs. She is currently a proud mother and a fulfilled and happy grandmother who believes that passion drives perfection.

### **Author experience**

Speaking with her, I gained a lot of knowledge of which includes:

- how to take the initiative to investigate the places I think are of interest, which implies deciding not to stick to the status quo and still succeed.
- She was a wife, mother, baker and a teacher.
- you have to spend more quality time with family as they are all that ever matters
- choose a spouse that will understand, support and encourage you
- never settle for "good enough" when you can strive for excellence
- you can retire but never get tired of doing what gives you joy
- stay physically active

And finally, find your preference or your passion then focus on it with your heart.

## 4 Valuing education

**Told by Cecilia Adeola Keshiro**  
**written by Kawojue John Oluwatosin**

*In Epe, Lagos State*

*Nigeria, Senior Prefect Kawojue*

*John Oluwatosin interviewed market trader Cecilia Adeola Keshiro, who tells of the challenges of raising and educating a family.*



I am Kawojue John Oluwatosin, I was born in 1999, presently a graduating student of Adesowon Senior Grammar School Ilara Epe Lagos State, I am the Senior Prefect of my school. My mission is to promote intergenerational activities between all my fellow students and their grandparents.

### **Working hard to send her children to school**

Mrs Cecilia Adeola Keshiro was born to the family of Chief and Mrs Portas Bankole, She was born in June 1929 in the sleepy town of Odoshiwola Eredo Epe. She started schooling at Saint Joseph Primary School Ibonwon Epe Lagos State, she stopped her education because girls are not encouraged to be educated unlike boys. Her parent gave birth to eight children, four boys and four girls, she was the last born of her family.

She got married on the 25 December 1951 to Mr Ferdinand Olusanya Keshiro, who was among one of the literate and educated in the whole of Epe. He was a teacher and later become a Chartered Accountant who worked with the Federal government. She gave birth to nine children and by dint of hard work and caring heart, all her children are well educated and well to do.

Madam Cecilia Adeola Keshiro is very intelligent, although she was unable to complete her education at primary school level, but at least she can read and write, even in old age her cognitive abilities are very sharp to the extent she grasps things easily.

On 1 January 1917, Nigeria became a British protectorate, part of the British Empire, the foremost world power at that time. Nigeria was divided into the Northern and Southern protectorate and Lagos as colony. Colonisation lasted until 1960 in Nigeria when we became an independent nation.

### **Excerpts of the interview**

#### **What can you say about Nigeria since you were born before independence?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I love my country and I am very passionate about our nation, Nigeria. It is blessed with so many natural resources, more than any country in the world, we have natural resources like crude oil, gold, silver, iron and others that are yet to be discovered, my grandchildren use to tell me.



Kawojue John Oluwatosin(19)  
and Cecilia Adeola Keshiro (89)

Do you know that the name Nigeria was derived from a river known as River Niger that runs through the major parts of the country? The name was coined in 1914 by a British journalist Flora Shaw, a young lady who later married Baron Frederick Lugard, our first British Colonial Administrator.

The first Governor General of the Federation of Nigeria was Dr Nnamdi Azikwe and the first Head of Government (Prime Minister) was Sir Tafawa Balewa; unfortunately the man was killed in the first military coup.

Nigeria became a republic in 1963, but succumbed to military rule three years later after a bloody coup d'état. A separation movement later formed the republic of Biafra in 1967, leading to three years of civil war in Nigeria. Nigeria became a republic once again after a new constitution was written in 1979. However, the republic was short-lived, when the military seized power again.

President Ibrahim Badamosi Babangida and General Sanni Abacha ruled our nation until 1999 when the fourth republic was established which ended three decades of intermittent military rule in Nigeria. President Buhari is the current President who is trying his best to make our nation great again.

### **What can you say about yourself and your background, we want to know about you?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I was born in Odoshiwola Epe Lagos State. I attended Saint Joseph's Primary School Ibonwon Epe Lagos State. I could not complete my education as in the olden days boys were more favoured to go school, and my father believed that the female education ends up in the kitchen due to ignorance.

This is utterly discriminatory to the girl child. Most fathers in those days believed if they sent their daughter to school, she will still end up in a man kitchen or might be unduly exposed to bad things in life, they took their time in teaching their female children how they will be good wives to their husbands, back then moral values were high and our parents are our gods.

### **What was your growing up like?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** Life for me was so difficult. I had no leisure time. I always spend my time either working on the farm, doing housework or hawking goods around the streets. You could see how difficult my life was as I still engaged in pretty odd jobs. Throughout those hard periods, I still gathered some money to assist my husband, Chief Ferdinard Olusanya Keshinro so we could send our children to school.

We did not have functional transport system like we have now; we trekked for most of our activities, no matter how long the journey was, there was no vehicle and this made our life difficult. Thank God we are in a modern world now where you have everything at your beck and call.

### **What was your saddest moment?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I had so many sad experiences but the one I cannot forget was when I lost my twins (she sobs). The boys were sick for a few days. Thinking it would go after being given some local medications, but after some days, the condition became worse and there was this dark night in my life when the boys stopped breathing in the middle of the night. My husband and my mother stood by me until I overcame the loss of my twins. I will forever be grateful to them.

### **Can you tell me your happiest moment?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I have lots of happy moment in my life (her face beams with smiles) I live a happy life, all my life, starting from my childhood, although life was so difficult growing up, but at least, I still found ways to make myself happy. The day my last born did her wedding was my happiest day in life, I was happy I am alive

to witness such an important event and still be the one to play my role as mother to the bride.

All my children are graduates and are taking care of me. I have million reasons to be happy and see my grandchildren and their friends this gives me joy too.

I am a leader of my age group, though most of our members have answered the greatest call and only a few of us are still alive. I am well known in my community and I still engage in my trade as a local business woman. You can see my shop and my building, I give glory to God for good health and grace to be alive.

I am a member of Age Demand Action Age Nigeria Foundation International Programme, my uniform is inside and we play active role in promoting senior citizens' participation in my communities by meeting government people, attending parties and socialising to get involved in my town.

I also remember my wedding day too, it was also a day of happiness to me. That was on Christmas Day, 25 December 1951. My joy was indescribable. I gained my freedom from my parents, free from hawking around the streets every day. I wept a lot on that day too because I missed my mother by staying with my husband for the rest of her life.

#### **What currency did you spend before independence?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** The currency spent in those days were pounds, shillings and pence represented by (£.s.d) before it was changed to Naira and Kobo in 1972 by General Yakubu Gowon who was a military head of government.

Then things were cheaper with pounds and shilling, unlike now that our Naira has been devalued making goods and service to be very expensive.

If I am to choose between the olden days and the modern days, I will choose the good old days because the kind of money spent then seemed to be more valuable and it had more purchasing power. At that time if you had £10, you would be able to purchase anything you want compared to now where 1,000,000 (one million Naira) cannot purchase enough for your satisfaction.

#### **What can you tell us about your interest in trade?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I have been involved in so many kinds of businesses in order to get money to help my husband to send our children to school. I was first of all involved in farm products, back then I use to buy goods and farm produce from the farmers at cheaper rate and then later take them to the main market the next day to sell at higher rate.

I was involved in agricultural business for 14 years before selling and repairing shoes and sandals of different kinds, I was involved in that business for 26 years. I worked hard for 40 years before I could be able to gather enough money and later came back home to start selling goods as wholesaler which I still do till now.

### **Can you compare the level of communication and transportation before independence and now?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** The communication system was local, poor and undeveloped; we had no radio station back then until the first radio station was established in Ibadan, only few people could afford it. Local ways were used to transmit information like the gongs and use of emissaries. There is nothing like telephone, laptop, or computer then.

Another way we communicate with someone living far away from them was by writing your message inside one paper, put it inside one envelope and then take it to a nearby Post Office. They will tell you the amount you will pay and your message will be delivered safely.

In the area of transportation, the only road that was tarred then was the road linking Epe to those popular towns like Ijebu Ode and Lagos Island. The remaining roads were not tarred at all; everywhere was just full of dust. Now we have massive road development and networks.

### **What can you say about Queen Elizabeth's visit to Nigeria?**

**Madam Adeola Keshiro:** I learnt HRM Queen Elizabeth was born 21 April 1926 and she became the queen of England on February 1952 and was crowned on June 1953. The Queen Elizabeth came to Nigeria around 1956 and I was privileged to be among those that welcome her at an event in Race Course along with some kids and government dignitaries that was a long time ago.

She was a wonderful young woman. I am happy she is still alive and doing well as a great leader. How I wish I can to meet the Queen again.

### **Author experience**

From the lively interaction with Madam Cecilia Adeola Keshiro, a woman of uncommon strength and intellect, in spite of dropping out of school, she is still a successful businesswoman and still engages in her business activities in old age.

We the youths can learn how to endure when faced with challenges of life and succeed in life through her life experience. Although this older woman faces a lot of challenges in her life, yet she still find a way to make it in life. She worked harder to send all her children to school now she enjoys fruits of her labour.

## 5 The rough and smooth course of nomadic life

**Told by Adha Dicko and written by Bahiru Adamo**

*The transition of the journey across Africa from Nigeria to Cameroon commences with the migration of the nomadic Fulbe tribe, who crossed from Nigeria over to the highlands of North West Cameroon. In North West Cameroon English literature student Bahiru Adamu spent time with his strong willed, feminist grandmother Adha Dicko who tells us about her experiences as a child bride, a nomadic childhood, and how both natural disasters and war have influenced her life.*

My name is Bahiru Adamu; I was born in July 1996 in Weh village, Menchum division of the North West region of Cameroon. Now I am attending the University of Bamenda where I am reading English Literature.

There are so many old people in my community. I like listening to their stories because I can learn a lot from their life experiences. I have selected to write about my grandmother Adha Dicko who celebrated her 91st anniversary in April 2017. Adha's name literary means big sister in Fulfulde. She is the elder sister of three brothers who have long died. Adha is not learned but she can teach me far more history than most of my history teachers. The only problem is that she doesn't quote dates as in history books but she does narrate all the events off by heart, exactly as they happened.

Cameroon is a country in central Africa which is supposed to be bilingual by nature. I say 'supposed' because it is not actually so because the bilingualism is only on paper.



This is due to its colonial heritage where Cameroon was colonised by Britain and France after the defeat of the Germans during the First World War.

The Fulbes, popularly called the Mbororos or the Fulanis, migrated from northern Nigeria to settle in the North West region of Cameroon because of the abundant pasture to graze their cattle. It was also for safety from the frequent attacks made on them and their animals by the Moshi tribes of Northern Nigeria. Since they were Nomads, they move from one grazing land to another. Bamenda happened to be their final destination, as Adha often puts it.

### **The rough and smooth paths through life**

Adha's life story is just like any other life story I have come across. It is a long journey, a road with rough and smooth paths. She often make reference to it in every decision making process in our community; which supports the saying that once beaten twice shy or rather, what the old people see while sitting, the child cannot see it even if he/she climbs a tree.

Born in neighbouring Nigeria, Adha's parent migrated to the North West region of Cameroon when Adha was only 14 years old, two years after her marriage to Dogoh. Her experience on this long, exhaustive and breath-taking journey will never be forgotten. A life story she is ready to share to every listening ear, most especially to her children, grand children and great grand children.

In her childhood, she usually tells me, it was not the age of schooling. The main activity was herding grazing animals which most of the time was male oriented. At the age of 12, that was in 1938, Adha was officially handed to her husband Dogoh. According to the story, Adha was betrothed to Dogoh one week after her birth. Dogoh was her father Khura's childhood playmate and friend. He was one day attacked by a lion while grazing the animals but was saved by his best friend Dogoh. Khura which means lion in Hausa language thus derived his name from this incident. Adha had no option than to accept her old husband.

### **Migrating to Cameroon**

Adha still has fresh memories of her long journey to Cameroon in the 40s as if it happened yesterday. In those days, the only means of transport at their disposal was horse-back. Belongings were tied on donkeys and old women and children used the horses while young men drove their wealth; cattle and sheep. Adha and her crew travelled for months, occasionally resting at night fall or when a woman or an animal puts to birth. Adha was almost drawn into the river separating Cameroon and Nigeria but was rescued. There was no bridge and these migrants had to swim across with their livestock. This was one of the greatest tragedies that killed many people, including Dogoh, Adha's first husband and the bloody river carried away many of their animals.

Adha's parents finally settled in Nyos, beside the Crater Lake in today's Fugom sub division; North West region of Cameroon, without knowing about the ordeal that awaits them in the years to come. There, Adha was a young widow and a mother of two: Kurmi and Namori. Kurmi in Fulfulde means forest, due to the many forests in the area whilst Namori was named after a grinding meal. Adha's father Khura continued to take good care of her and her two sons.

Since she was unmarried, she took care of domestic chores like cooking, washing clothes and the pounding of grain since machines to grind were rarely seen in those days. Though Adha didn't attend any formal western education, which was rare at the time and reserved mainly for boys, she can still comprehend and murmurs few words in English. This is due to her encounter with the locals, the 'Grass field' or Garaffi people of the area and she soon began to listen to news on her father's radio.

## **Natural disasters**

The volcanic eruption of the poisonous Lake Nyos in 1986 came to peel the semi-healed wounds of Adha and her relatives' journey. This national and international disaster completes the rivers' tragedy. When Adha narrates these events, tears flow down her cheeks. This catastrophic event, which killed over 1700 people and tens of thousands of animals, brought everlasting pain and misery to the entire Nyos community and even beyond.

According to Adha's story, two days to that fateful day, Adha begs for her father's permission to go and pay a visit and celebrate Salah, the Muslim's feast, with her brothers who had settled around Wum town the headquarters of Menchum division. The lake surprisingly sends out seven thunderous blasts as signals. The sound was like that of a gunshot but very much louder as far away villages received this announcement of doom.

The Lake's water changed in colour to red, the blood of innocent people and ignorant animals. The angry lake like a plague devoured the entire land by dawn. The feast of Salah has become the feast on people and their animals by an angry wind, thick and cloudy vomited by this notorious lake. Adha narrowly survived the wrath of the lake, which was painted in indelible ink in life as well as in that of those who experience this mysterious event. Her two sons, her father, mother and the family together with all what they have had suddenly melted like ice under the sun. This is the most intense and emotional part of Adha's life story which often makes her listeners to shed tears with her.

Adha and her kin received much help from donors across the globe. Piles and tons of food, water, clothes and building materials were brought to the victims of this natural disaster. Ironically as Adha says most of the donations were not actually distributed to the victims as intended. Some of it ended in private pockets while for others the distributors mostly made up of the men in uniform with guns traded them. The survivors were resettled in camps build in Kumfutuh, Esu and Upkwa.

## **Advocating for women's rights, justice and transparency**

Adha became an activist and a feminist in her camp at Upkwa. She remarried to Ardo their local leader which gave her the golden opportunity to fight and advocate for women's right, justice and transparency in her community. To her the Government enriches itself with donations flowing in from the international community using the disaster as a pretext and not delivering these goods to the victims.

Adha galvanised her women folks and warned them against officers who exchange gifts for sex thereby spreading venereal diseases to them, arguing that the donations is theirs to own and does not belong to the officers. This further explains why the victims were held hostage as they were refused the right to freely migrate to other places.

Adha is also a peace crusader. When the farmer versus grazer conflict erupted between the Fulani grazers and the local farming inhabitants, Adha puts her rich life experiences to good use. Firstly, Adha mounts pressure on her husband, the leader Ardo, to summon a general meeting

of all the grazers. Here, she called on all of the grazers to build fences to restrain their cattle from moving carefree without anyone controlling them. This to her will prevent the animals from destroying the farms.

Secondly, she cautions all the people to refrain from any physical confrontation with the farmers for it will not help to solve the problem but will instead worsen it.

There was a day that the farmers came out in their numbers to attack and burn down all the huts of the grazers. Adha thought of it and finally came out with a plan. All the women, the old and the children will be carried to the forest for safety together with all their valuable belongings, while the men will use the horses to escape with the cattle until peace was restored to the area by the Government who resettled them there. At the end her ideas prevailed despite the hate speeches and urge for confrontation with the farmers in the meeting. The farmers prepared, armed with sharp machetes, Dane guns and even sticks came ready for war but there was no one to fight with.

### **The secret to longevity**

Adha in her old age is very optimistic, still looking fresh and strong in her appearance. Once, I decided to ask her what the secret to that was. Adha smiled and smiled again then burst into quiet laughter and said that is the secret. I was confused and said I didn't get her. She laughs and was silence.

It then came to my mind that Adha is being philosophical just as she has always been. I then realised that her poetic language is that of showing and not just telling. Smiling, I realise, is her secret for looking fresh and beautiful even at the age of 91. Adha always smiles even when confronted with difficult situations. She always believes that there must be a way out of every difficulty and that every problem has a solution. It seems that whenever someone defies her advice, problems follow them immediately, many of which she rushes to solve and consoles those involved. Adha often talks in parables whenever she is consulted in serious matters. I only began to comprehend some of the things she used to tell me now that I am attending university. For example she used to say that the Anglophones will one day rise up and ask for their independence which is eventually happening now.

### **Social philosophies**

To Adha, the Anglophone problem that is rocking Bamenda and Buea is not a surprise to her. She knew from the beginning there was a problem which like yams have been planted and buried under the ground with all parties concerned pretending all is well or that the problem doesn't even exist at all. These seeds of planted yams took time to sprout from 1961 to today. She often tells me that it is not good to divorce those who don't cater for you in a marriage. You should sit in dialogue with your partner so that even the next door neighbour wouldn't know and take advantage of your plight. But to her, problems come in when this dialogue is, as she puts it, biased. That is, when one of the parties considers themselves as far more superior to the other.

That is the exact problem here in our country. Public servants consider themselves as masters rather than servants. When a person is assigned a post of responsibility, either voted or appointed, they are there to serve the people and not to be served by the people. Adha says that with true and sincere dialogue, everything is possible. But for this much talked about dialogue to happen, pride, arrogance, reservations, intimidation and all the things that caused the immediate crisis must be put aside. Adha believes that it is not secession, federation, unionism or any form of state that both parties are clamouring for that will solve the problem but good governance, justice and equity.

Adha often tells me that Cameroon is a "State of Law" that's why it remained an island of peace for years. But this peace is being threatened now because most of these laws are not been implemented to all the people. The state, she often says, spend billions in creating new projects every year but there is no follow up of these projects. The end result is that the people are impoverished through too much taxes and nothing in return. Not even clean water to drink; not to talk of better roads, medical care, affordable food and housing conditions.

This problem is all over as she says but they are mostly felt by those living in the two Anglophone regions of the country. If and only if the government has catered for these weaknesses, there would have been little problem because there are always minor problems wherever humans live.

Adha always fights against these ills in her community. She always speaks out for the suppressed. Implementing her social philosophy of good, peaceful and stable life for all in the family and the community at large occupies her pride of place. It is a good thing to have such a sweet grand mother whose ideas are not only realistic but life saving. Adha advocates for peace in all her sayings and doings. That is why even with all the male domination in the Fulani community caused by cultural, traditional and religious practices, with all the chauvinistic attitudes of the people, Adha still asserts her place in her community. Adha is an independent influential activist, a social reformer, historian and a political theorist and consultant in Upkwa village.

She is role model to all who know her.

### **Author experience**

I have gained so much experience from listening and writing out Adha's life story. First, I have learned that old age is a blessing in every community. Old people have so much potential to offer in all domains of life. Listening to them gives me wisdom.

Through her life story, I have learned the history of my ancestral origin as well as that of my country. I have come to see old people as assets and not a liability. Adha's story has pushed me into deep philosophical thoughts. This is because she at times used indirect language to put her message across with wise sayings, proverbs, parables and idioms.

Adha is a role model to many in the community and she is admired by all. I have learned to be patience with others and also to have an understanding of the world through her experiences. Life is too short and ageing which I now knows very well is inevitable is something to be cherished. Old age is a blessing for all especially to those who dedicated all their youthful age to serving humanity like Adha.

I now fully understand what the future holds for me because it is now beyond all doubts that I will one day become old too. There is no doubt about it and it is very, very natural. Adha's life story had made me overcome the fear of getting old.

## 6 A courageous life of pain and sorrow

**Told by Awesi Clement Fru and written by Che Honorine Yussi**

*In North West*

*Cameroon university student Che Honorine Yussi learns about the courageous life of pain and sorrow of blind, double amputee Awesi Clement Fru.*

My name is Che Honorine Yussi. I was born in 1997, into a family of ten in Mankon-Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. I grew up with my parents, Che George and Margaret Bih. I have four sisters and three brothers. I did primary education in Government Bilingual School Nghomgham where I obtained the First School Leaving Certificate. I further studied in Government Bilingual High School Bamenda where I obtained both the G.C.E Ordinary and Advanced level. I am presently studying in the University of Bamenda Cameroon.



**Che Honorine Yussi (20) and Awesi Clement Fru (92)**

Awesi Clement Fru was born in 1925, in Nkwen-Bamenda, North West Region of Cameroon. He had two brothers and one sister. His father was Awesi John and his mother Anna Bih Zama. He grew up with his aunt. He started education in Infant One and ended in Standard Three due to ill health. He lived all his life in sickness. He visited one hospital to another until he finally lost his two legs and his sight. He is presently a single old man with no child of his own as a result of the mysterious illness.

Cameroon is situated in the heart of Africa. It is made up of ten regions and is a bilingual country with French and English as official languages. This came as a result of colonisation. The eastern part of Cameroon was colonised by France and the Western by Britain. The two Cameroons later gained independence in 1961 and reunified some years later.

### **A courageous life of pain and sorrow**

Life was never easy for Clement Awesi. He lost his father when he was barely six years old. His mother could not raise all the children alone. As a result, Clement was sent to his aunt's where he grew up. In his new home, he gradually got acquainted with his new family. His new father, mother and brothers. His adopted father reared animals such as goats and fowls. He taught Clement how to weave baskets and cages.

Clement assisted his mother in doing the farm work. They grew crops such as cassava, cocoyam potatoes, maize, beans, and groundnuts. After tilling a particular place for years, they fallowed it for two years. His mother sometimes sold some of these farm products to better the welfare of the family while most of the products were left for house consumption.

### **The challenges of health**

Clement grew up with the passion of going to school but sadly, his poor health was a barrier. An unknown disease attacked him when he was about six years old. He was down for about four to five years. When he was strong again he decided to



go to school despite the lengthy distance from his house at Ntabesi in the village of Nkwen to the Catholic Mission School Cathedral in Mankon. He covered about two miles daily before arriving at school.

In order for him to be in school early, he woke up very early to tie the goats, feed the fowls and get set for school. He started in Infant One and he succeeded and was promoted to Infant Two. Later, he was removed from the Catholic Mission School because of his age, which was regarded as being too old to be in the school. He still did not give up. He decided to enrol in the Catholic Mission School Futru which was located in Mile Four Nkwen where he attended Standard One and Two with great academic results.

The primary school ended in Standard Two so he had to go back to the catholic mission school so he could continue his education. This was an advantage to him because he could easily leave school and go to the newly opened general hospital for his treatment. Despite his ill health, he was still determined to go to school. He was the only child going to school in his house for his uncle did not enrol his sons into any school.

Many young people were not going to school during this era especially in the villages. He did all he could to see that he went through school to no avail. He even made counting sticks from when he was a small boy so it could help him better understand arithmetic. Unfortunately, for him his enthusiasm for school was betrayed by his health.

After living with his adopted parents for quite a long time, his adopted father died. It was another sad experience for him. He was buried the next morning for at that time mortuaries did not exist. The funeral was celebrated with sympathisers and family relations.

### **Building houses**

Months after his death, Clement went to the bushes and cut down grass, which he used in repairing the roof of the bamboo house. There were very few or no block houses so after a while, they renewed the roofs with grass. It was common to see the communal way of living amongst the people.

When a man was about building his house, he calls upon many men so they all cut down and mould the bamboos together. At the end of this building, there is a big celebration before the owners of the house can live in it. Varieties of meals are prepared such as, corn fufu and vegetables, 'achu [taro] and yellow sauce' and others.

New houses were also constructed when a man comes to get married. In some families, before a man marries he builds a house for his father in-law usually referred to as 'moyo'. The young man in question gathers many guys so they assist him in the work since in those days no contractors existed. Some men fetch firewood and bring it to the 'moyo' house, some clear, some work farms. This tradition has some kind of a lineage. The work was done in accordance to how the girl in question's father got married; so it was not done in all families.

### **Deterioration of health**

As days passed, his health condition grew worse. Unknown rashes grew all over his body especially in his legs. His parents tried to the best of their ability to treat this mysterious disease to no avail. He visited so many

hospitals of which included Acha Hospital, Mbingo Baptist Hospital and others yet it did not help the situation for the doctors couldn't identify what disease it was.

Finally his family decided to try the traditional treatment. His eldest brother took him to Sabongarri to a native doctor for treatment. He stayed there for three months but no improvement so his brother decided to bring him back home. He went through much pain. He later went to another native doctor in Bafut and spent another three months but no change.

Having visited all these places with no solution, he retired home and later went to Mankon to live with his grandfather. He loved his grandfather so much and was very close to him. He spent his free moments asking him questions.

His grandfather was a retired soldier and as such, never lacked stories. His grandfather told him how he was a cook to a white army and how he later joined the army. He also told him of his old days in other parts of the country like Garoua and Maroua. After some few years, his grandfather fell seriously ill and he had to take care of him, bath him and feed him, with the help of his uncle called Fon Jacob. His grandfather finally kicked the bucket.

Things got worse every day; the rashes kept increasing severely especially on his legs, he was later taken to Mbingo Baptist Hospital where his left leg was amputated. Three years later, the rashes affected the right leg so badly and it was also cut off during the time when there was political uprising between Cameroon's People Democratic Movement (CPDM), the ruling party and the Social Democratic Front (SDF), the opposing party.

The chairman of SDF won the election in Mezam Division and the keys were demanded which the government delegate refused to grant. The crisis later boiled down and things resumed back to normal.

After some few years, these rashes started affecting his eyes severely and caused him so much pain. His eyes were always filled with tears until he finally went blind. Despite the pains and trauma he was going through he still didn't give up his faith in God as a Christian that he had since childhood. He prayed always but due to the pains he went through, being just a human, they were times he actually preferred death. He always says "sleep is a friend to death." Thus, he wished he could just die in his sleep instead of suffering.

His disease was never known, he had all sorts of medical booklets and checkups but no one stated the name of the disease. Some flesh was cut from his hand in the hospital and he was told that the flesh will be taken out of the country for research on the mysterious disease yet he didn't get any reply. Life continued in its usual hardship for Clement. He continued living in his grandfather's house with his uncle Jacob who later embraced death leaving behind six children and his wife.

After his grandfather's death, Awesi was crowned the successor of their father who had died some years before his grandfather. At this juncture he added his father's title "Asatu" to his name. Five years later, his uncle's wife too fell severely sick, she had stroke and was down for about 25 years. She was a bosom companion to Pa Clement. They spent all days together, prayed together and were always there for each other. All she could do was to sleep on the chair; she could neither walk nor stand on her own. Clement's cousins are the ones taking care of him for he has no wife or child of his own due to his sickness. He often says God alone knows about his sickness and God alone is the medicine.

Recently, he lost his bosom companion, he couldn't hold his emotions, he cried all day for how will he welcome the loneliness. Who will he sit with? Who will he speak with? With all this in mind, he just couldn't hold his tears, he felt like the veins in his eyes had been detached.

His life is indeed a tragedy from childhood to his old age and he has lived in sickness and pain, tears and sorrow. Till date, he still has rashes on his hands and marks of older ones. He sometimes finds himself in a strange world and he sees visions. How would life be for the old man when he had wept for death to come and take him and it didn't come?

However, he is still courageous and acknowledges the fact that God made him so for a reason for he is a living miracle. He prays the rosary every morning and says his evening prayers every night before going to bed and hoping to sleep for eternity.

### **Author experience**

People are born with different endowments; some are born strong and some weak. We never can determine our fate, for our fate lies in the hands of God. Despite Pa Clement's dream to grow and become a great man in life, his dreams died down like roses in the dry season. Sometimes in life, one can wish for something passionate but the forces of life tend to change one's vision.

Nevertheless, hard work, determination faith and trust in God are the only way out. Always have in mind that God is the way and with him, you can make it no matter the situation. He is my creator and he knows my all. Like Pa Clement will always say "God alone knows my illness and He alone is the cure." I shall never give up in anything no matter the situation, I will be strong and follow my heart.

## 7 Taking pride in being as the same age as Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

**Told by Mrs Mary Wirkom and written by Dwight Atanga**

*Also in North West Cameroon, university graduate Dwight Atanga takes great pride in his work with older people and is delighted to write about Mary Wirkom who is the same age as Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II.*

My name is Dwight Atanga. I am 24 years old. A son of both parents being teachers, I have a Masters Degree in Health Economics, Policy and Management from the Catholic University of Cameroon, having earned a BSc. Degree in Economics from the University of Buea in Cameroon. I am a care worker with Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance (CDVTA), Cameroon's leading organisation in care of the elderly.

My services for elders, blessed me, to meet 91 years Mrs Mary Wirkom, an elderly social club member in North West Cameroon supported by CDVTA. Mary lives in a mud house with her grand and great grandchildren. Mary who will be same age as Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II next year, is a true African woman, who has served her community throughout her life, as a farmer and an advocate for peace and social integration.

Without formal education, Mary spent her life working on farms and gardens growing food for her family and income. Having lost her husband 47 years ago, Mary when asked why she never gave up when life was hard on her, had this to say, "I have never had a reason to give up. When I was pregnant and lost my husband, I did not give up in life. I placed all my trust in God." "Thanks to our club supported by CDVTA I am encouraged and motivated by their support and teachings. Old age does not sound like a nightmare anymore."

### **Taking inspiration**

Given the opportunity to work with an eldercare organisation like CDVTA and interact with happy, encouraging elders like Mary is not only praiseworthy and rare but most importantly an innovative, highly enriching learning opportunity for active positive ageing to the world of ageing and the care industry.

While there are still many elders in our rural communities neglected and abandoned under conditions of poverty, hunger and human rights violations especially widows, Mary's story is a bit different; even though she is not abandoned, she still goes through a lot of hardship that other needy and impoverished elders in Cameroon and beyond go through. These include loneliness, poverty, poor health, frailness, body weakness, hunger, limited care services and disrespect.

Having gone through several poor communities, networking and having exchanges with more elders and their families, it may be fair to say how inspiring, encouraging and motivating it is to see the smiles on the faces of

elders like Mary. Despite their situation, they still have a reason to smile and lead better lives, thanks to the encouragement and support they get from CDVTA through its network of community volunteers and care workers.

Mary is one of such women and the inspiration that generates from her is one which is enough to drive anyone to work hard to be able to give something back to these communities.

Having to hear her story is encouraging enough. It makes me realise that having to grow old can be considered a blessing in many ways rather than curse, as often is seen by some.

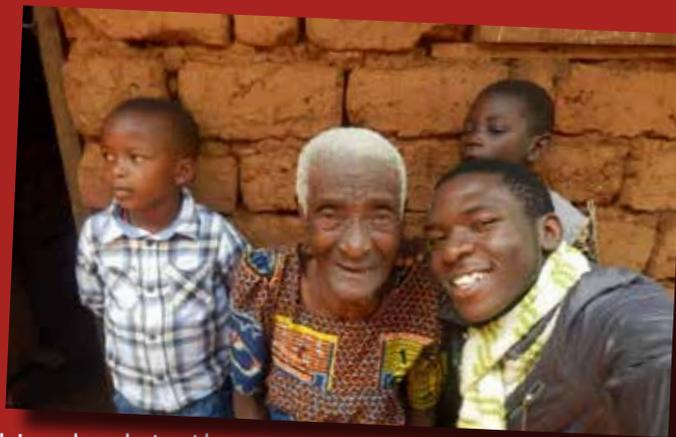
Although Mary may not have had the same life like that of Her Majesty, The Queen of England, her story inspires and teaches us that no matter the difficulties we face in life, we can still have a reason to lead happier and fuller lives in respect and dignity.

At 91 a rare age to reach in Cameroon under poor living conditions, Mary is a gift and blessing to her family and community. Mary has worked hard to improve her family and community. She continues to encourage and inspire growth and transformation in her community through solidarity and sharing with her fellow club members.

At 91 Mary is lucky to be the same age like Her Royal Majesty the Queen of England. Mary's story could also be told of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II; whose life was influenced by World War II, shaped by the early death of her father in 1952 and assuming the throne of one of the greatest kingdoms on earth at such an early age of 27.

But here gloriously she is today, 91 years old, graciously Queen of England and Head of the Common Wealth. With all her experiences and today 91 and just like Mary, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth is a God given praiseworthy most gracious and glorious gift for England, the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Association for the Ageing (CommonAge), whose vision is to "advance the interests of older people throughout the Commonwealth by building capability and capacity in health and care service".

The story of Mary and community based care is a combination of a grassroots implementation of older persons' clubs at a rural community level, supported by strategic livelihoods rights based activities. Potentially conceived as two halves of a single programme, each half is integral to the whole.



**Mrs Mary Wirkom (91)  
and Dwight Atanga (24)**



**Mrs Wirkom and family  
together with Dwight  
Atanga**



The presence of the elderly social clubs, and the improvements they bring to individual and community lives like that of Mary, strengthens the rights of older people. It provides an example for other stakeholders to see – that community based care and social mobilisation for older people is possible, that it is possible to improve their livelihoods, and that they can work together to exercise their rights. On the other hand, advocacy to local, regional, national and international authorities is the mechanism by which those gains might be replicated throughout the Commonwealth of Nations.

It is therefore, an honour for me, to use the inspirations of Mary and Queen Elizabeth both at 91 through CDVTA innovative service delivery, to promote the vision and mission of CommonAge in Cameroon and beyond, which is to advance the interests of older people throughout the Commonwealth by building capability and capacity in health and care service.

It is my wish and trust that by collaborating with CDVTA, Commonage Ambassadors in Cameroon, and CommonAge, we can ensure that many of our elders especially women and widows would be inspired and encouraged by this story, to reach the age of Mary and Her Majesty the Queen of England who remain excellent examples for graceful and positive ageing.

As Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II celebrates her 92nd birthday next year, Mary, who will also be 92 next year, joins my humble self in collaboration with CommonAge Ambassadors in Cameroon, CDVTA where I serve, and the entire CommonAge family, to wish Her Majesty a great and wonderful celebration, good health and a longer life, as she celebrates her God given glorious birthday. May God continue to bless and protect Her Majesty in her Divine mission of graciously looking after the great nation of Britain and the Commonwealth. I thank CommonAge for giving me the rare opportunity to share this exciting story for Her Majesty's Birth Day celebration.

### **Author experience**

As CDVTA care worker, at age 24, I am privileged to be serving and interacting with elders at the grassroots level. I use a rights-based approach to both address elderly self-identified needs and enable them create lasting changes in their lives. Mary's story inspires and motivates me to improve my work and reach out to more needy elders.

It is my hope and trust that Mary's story continues to provide me with more courage and determination to make the world a better place for our elders. Taking a look at Mary's life story, one may think it may have been easy, but the look on her face when she narrates her story, shows a woman who has gone through pain and suffering and who always has a broad smile on her face.

No doubt that in a society like ours, where the life expectancy, is currently at 57, Mary like Her Majesty the Queen of England has made it to 91 this year and God willing, she hopes to be 92 next year just like the Queen of England. She and Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II are to me, examples of positive ageing for others throughout the Commonwealth to emulate.

## 8 The challenges of a childless life

**Told by Nini Mary Gha-ah and written by Musih Vale Ngong**

*Originating from the Kom tribe in the highlands of West Cameroon another university graduate Musih Vale Ngong writes about the experiences of her childless friend and neighbour Nini Mary Gha-ah. She explains how personal belief and experiences in life have shaped her current, at times, unconventional behaviour.*

My name is Musih Vale Ngong, born in 1993 as a first daughter of Ngong Martin Ijungi and Goodness Ibefi. In 2016, I gained admission into the University of Bamenda, Cameroon where I presently am a third year student at the Department of English, Faculty of Arts. We are natives of Kom, a tribe of about 300.000 people in the central highlands of the Bamenda grassfield area of West Cameroon.

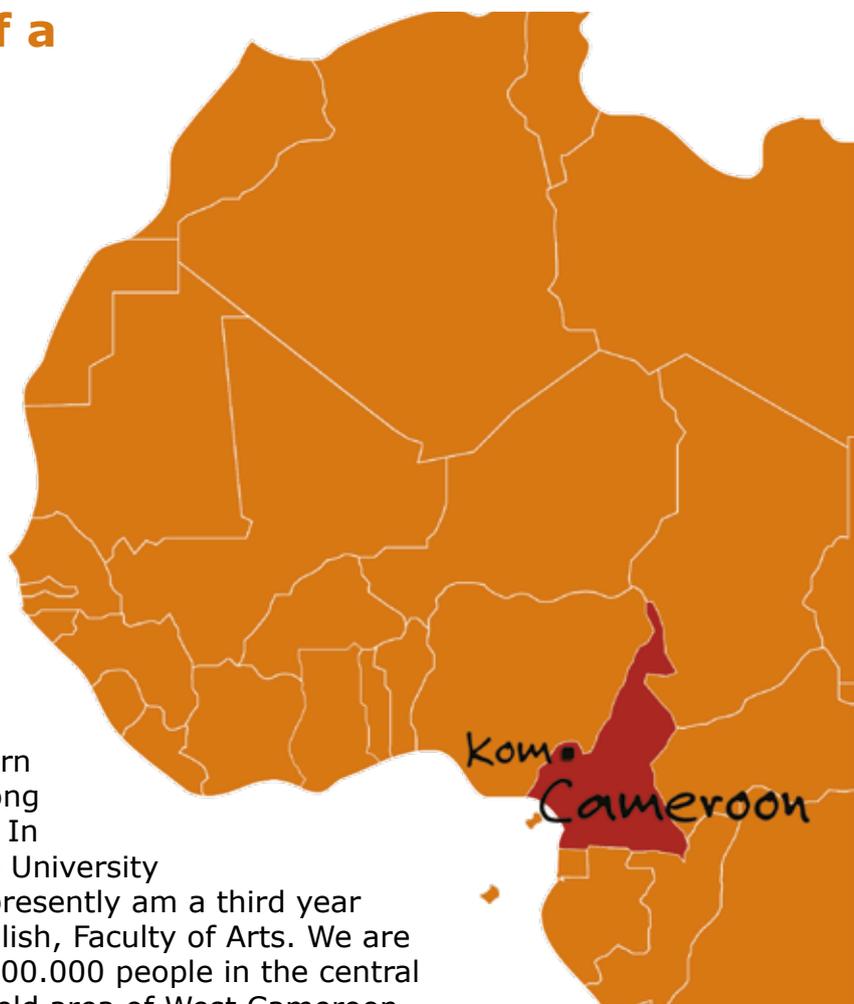
The Republic of Cameroon is a beautiful country in Central Africa whose socio-cultural and geographical diversity has made her be nicknamed Africa-in-miniature.

The country experienced colonial administration under Germany and Britain and France as mandated, and Trust territories of the League of Nations and the United Nations, respectively, till independence. Both sections formed a federation and later a unitary state. The latter move has led to what is today referred to as the 'Anglophone problem'.

The elderly woman whose story I tell is that of Nini Mary Gha-ah who is her early nineties, she is still very strong though slightly bent. She is fondly called "Nini" (Grandma in Kom). Her strength may stem from the fact that she is childless. However, in the village she is looked up to because of her special concern for little children. Since 2012, I have always been close to her. Her pathetic but insightful life story needs telling.

### **The Life of Nini Mary Gha-ah**

Nini Mary Gha-ah was born in 1926 in Kom. She is the third child and first girl in a family of five (two boys, and three girls). Her parents were successful farmers. She pointed out that their



early childhood was interesting and happy as they grew up together with much love in the family. When she reached the age of five she was eager to go to school because their compound was just near the school, a Catholic Mission School Isehngoh which means below the stone in Baingo-Kom.

She recounts that she was disappointed because her left hand could not cross above her head and touch her right ear. However, three years later she was admitted in the school. She performed very well but when she completed primary school, she could not go to secondary school because of lack of finances and she was given out for marriage at the age of 12.

### **The shame of infertility**

It was rather unfortunate that this woman could not bear children after seven years in marriage. Her husband could no longer take the shame so he sent her out of his house. Notwithstanding her infertility, other men hoped to bring her in again in their houses for marriage because she was so attractive and caring. This woman could not accept any other challenges again in her marital status. She decided to stay in their compound and do business to earn a living.

Her saddest time was when she lost her both parents at the age of 27, she thought the world had come to an end and would not want to live again on earth because she was so attached to her parents. She knew what will befall her after her parent's death. Just like her instinct had told her, she started witnessing some challenges from her family members and relatives. She thought of leaving their house to a new environment but what crossed her mind was that it was better to stay behind and to mourn her parents for three years. Her decision for not leaving their house made things worse. Her uncles completely restricted her from using anything that had belonged to her father.

After a long time of conflict between her and her relatives, joy was finally restored between them when her relatives realised that the family needs to reunite. They begged for forgiveness and the family was made whole again. Childlessness became her only nightmare. She recounts that she visited traditional healers and consulted soothe sayers, all in vain. When it was evident that she could not have a child, she made up her mind to accept her status and move on with life. She directed her love to any child around her.

### **Growing older**

When she started approaching the age of 73, her mentality and her way of doing things changed. She became naughty and giving too much assignments or instructions to those around her. Even when she had instructed them to do these things, she will come back and say that is not what she asked them to do. This attitude of hers made people shy away whenever she wanted them to do something for her. She always used to feel neglected and abandoned. This is because she did her things in a way that is good for her and would need no one's assistance. When I even asked her why she did not assign me to do something for her, she will say she never wanted to inconvenience any one. That is why she decided to be doing most of her things without our knowledge.

In her eighties Nini started to talk alone or to herself most especially when she thought no one was around her. The reason of talking to herself stems from the fact that she always had flash backs on what she used to do when she was young as compared to now that she can no longer do them.

She is assertive and forgetful. When she felt like doing something productive, she would go into the coffee farm, may be to weed or harvest. Before she gets into the farm, she would remove her shoes and keep by the road. When it is time for her to start going back to the house, she will stay behind and scatter the grass she weeded looking for her shoes, forgetting that she did not get into the farm with them. She will be very confident in a way that will make people believe what she is saying is true.

### **Health challenges**

Moreover, she always has complicated health issues. One cannot really predict what she is sick of and what is really hurting or paining her. Today, she will complain of body pain, tomorrow she will talk of just her legs. To her when you come with a drug that will help reduce the pain, and she sees that it was effective she would believe that the same medicine can cure all other illnesses. She will be bent on consuming just that type of medicine when she starts feeling her body is not okay.

She believes strongly in superstition and tradition. Because of this, she depended too much on the few people who shared her superstitious views. These people were mostly traditional doctors who performed rituals or traditional rites. She believed that traditionalists were next to God, because whatever they said was what it was and could not be changed. She would even suggest that we go for spiritual cleansing or protection from an enemy, if they want to carry on with their spiritual attacks so that it would not affect us.

She used to say before you beg God to protect you, you must first protect yourself. Each time anyone close to her is going out or travelling, she gives them some traditional medicine to eat, to protect him/her from any poisonous food. This belief had made her never to go to church on Sundays.

She is also addicted to her environment in such a way that she would limit her movement around the compound or to nearby neighbouring houses. She knew that she could discuss related issues concerning the environment with her neighbours for possible solutions. At times, she would stay in the compound for more than two weeks without people knowing she was around because she did not usually go out of the compound.

When she sees a new person in the environment, she became more rigid in getting to know the person. She will start asking questions like; what is your name? Where are you from? Where do your parents live? She would say her reason for asking these questions is because it is good to know somebody before you start dealing with that person which she thought it was the right way for self-introduction.

### **Daily life**

She also likes sitting beside the fire and under the sun. Very early in the morning, she is given warm water to wash her face while she is seated beside the fire. By 12:00 noon, she bathes with warm water and after that, she enjoys the warmth of the sun that always made her feel alive. Most often, she does not eat much no matter how nice the food is. She always tastes her food before eating. At times, she will either give people the food to eat or preserve it to eat later. She also has a clay dish called 'limi' in which she uses to warm her food.



She prefers old things to new ones because she said she would not know how to use new things whereas she is already acquainted with the old ones. Her bed is littered with all types of old torn dresses some of which she has arranged as her pillow. When one even tries to put things in order in her room, she would say he/she is scattering her room instead of arranging it. In fact, nothing suits her more than the way she does her thing by herself.

She is also a type of a woman who loves natural things. She hates to see a girl or a woman that had polished her colour, painted her face and even put on short dresses. When she saw such things on any lady, she would say it had instead made her to look older than her. She likes to cook her food without salt or Maggi [a food flavouring]. She hates using fried tomatoes to cook food. She likes doing her things in a natural way.

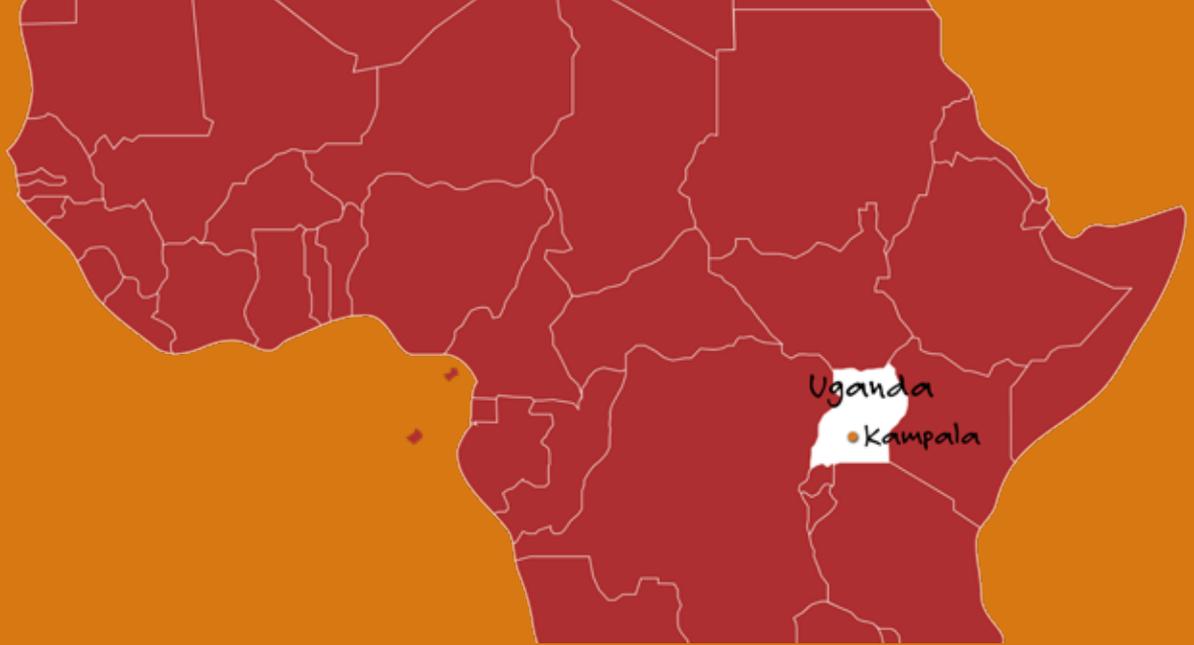
My friend revealed that Nini scarcely sleeps at night. She is always the last to sleep at night and always the first to get up the next morning. Usually, in the night, she would get anyone up at about 3:00 am simply because she wanted someone to be talking with. When she discovers that the person is not in the mood, she would ask him/her to go back to bed.

Her story indicates that it can be discomfoting to live with old people. However, it is also very important to gain knowledge from them because they are telling good stories. Moreover, the good company you give to old people will be the same company you will receive when you are old since anybody who reaches old age is likely to experience effects of ageing as Nini Mary Gha-ah.

#### **Author experience**

I have gained from the old woman's experience that wisdom comes with old age. Nini Mary Gha-ah has the ability to make sensible decisions and give good advice that she has acquired in the society or culture over a long period. I have also realised that old people make the home happy. It is a phenomenon in our Kom culture that old people love their great-grand and grand- children so with the company of these children, the old woman always feels rebirth again making the family to be happy.

The old are a source of history. Through interaction with her I was introduced to the peaceful protest of the "ANLU" in 1958 and the 1990s. When I compare her narration of these events with the situation in Cameroon today, I realise that the marches of 22 September 2017 were not new.



## 9 Being a stylish man about town

**Told by Mr Aston Kadoma and written by Timothy Muhumuza**

*From Cameroon we travel eastwards across the African continent to Uganda where we first meet business administration graduate Timothy Muhumuza. He spent time with former stylish man about town Aston Kadoma who tells of his experiences as Uganda transitioned to become an independent State.*

*Editors note: some of Aston Kadoma's language may not be considered appropriate in current times.*

I was born in 1993 and raised in a Christian family (Seventh Day Adventist) which I highly credit for my character. Amidst challenges, at an early age, I was inspired to write simple stories and songs. In July 2014, I joined a youth initiative 'The Big Spit Cooperation' which focuses on engaging the youth and society through creating awareness on pressing needs through talent development in areas like; Writing song lyrics, short movie scripts, photography. These interested and boosted my passion as a junior writer, actor and singer/rapper.

Uganda is a land locked country in East Africa. It covers an area of 241,038km<sup>2</sup>. It's bordered to the east by Kenya, to the North by South Sudan, to the West by the Democratic Republic of Congo, to the Southwest Rwanda and to the South by Tanzania.

Uganda has a current population of 41,487,965 people, a 2016 estimate with a population density of 157.1 km<sup>2</sup> under the leadership of His Excellency Y K Museveni.

From 1894, Uganda was under the British protectorate rule until it attained its independence from Britain on 9 October, 1962. It should be noted that Uganda is also a member of the Commonwealth.



### **Mr Aston Kadoma: 'Humm?!! The world ends'**

Born in the Pearl of Uganda in 1934, is an elderly Mr Aston Kadoma. "I am a twin," he says. With his name 'Kadoma' giving evidence of the lineage of children born after twins from the same mother as per Toro culture. That is; Kadoma, Masiko, Kiiza and Kaahwa respectively. Out of 20 children, Kadoma is the only surviving son with his three sisters.

Kadoma attained up to Level 4 from Galihuma School, in Kyenjojo district. At the age of 14, Kadoma got a job as a turn boy, coffee barista and later as a gold refining engineer at Standard Bank. Years later, Kadoma got married and they had 10 children.

### **A ladies' man**

Kadoma was very fond of cinemas. "I could get a lady from the streets to go along with to the cinema. Ladies of those days were like bitches, in a sense that even if one never had money, they would stick around. Not like the ladies in this era, they are available only when money avails. So each lady for a single day. I could go with any type or race because I had a sound status," he says.

Kadoma used to go to the two famous cinemas back then; Audian Cinema along Bombo Road and Neta Cinema around the railway station. He had his national gramophone radio where he could listen to his music and later he bought a record player for 7000 Ugandan Shillings. Back then this was a higher value compared to the currency value to date. Philly Bongole Lutaya's music was the best alongside the lingala music from Zaire. Kadoma wasn't a man of sports despite the fact that he was a gold refining engineer who would make the trophies.

Technology in terms of transport and communication changed a lot. "Despite the wealth we had, our transport and communication systems were lacking. A journey which now takes four to five hours from Kampala to Fort Portal Town would take three to four days and nights by bus. Making an announcement in case one died would require sending a messenger, which could take almost a week and people would find their beloved ones buried already.

"We had table phones at the post office of which only the well-off would manage using the services. We also had one radio station and that's Uganda Broadcasting Cooperation," he explains. "In my youthful age, I used to walk from Galihuma to Mpanga market in Fort Portal Town for shopping; nowadays items are even delivered home! Things really advanced."

### **Memories of Uganda's Independence**

Among the historical events that Kadoma can't forget was the 1962 Uganda's Independence which he says was fun. People cut different hair styles though the most popular one was like that of Prime Minister Doctor Milton Obote. There were a lot of fashions, joy and happiness among the people of Uganda. According to Kadoma, Independence was significant in a way that it paved the way for the development of a road network to other parts of Uganda making every region at least accessible, though the process took some time. It's better to him because people were used to crossing the bush.

### **Changes in burial practices**

Another event, though sorrowful, was about the burial practices. Unlike today, where coffins are used, mats were the burial cases. One interesting thing about status, it was even symbolic to the burial extent; for a poor person, a plain mat was used, whereas for the rich the mat was painted with different colours. Graves were dug very deep to avoid wild animals from feasting on the corpse. Burial would take place in the morning at around 9:00 am and after reeds would be planted around the grave for its recognition, unlike today where crosses are used.

## **Working life**

While working with Standard Bank, Kadoma had all the privileges including feeding on whatever he wanted. He would order any kind of food he needed to satisfy him from Metropole Hotel. However, this could not erase the desire he had for his indigenous food that raised him from childhood.

"I like eating well prepared, healthy food like Ferinda (traditional sauce from Tooro culture), rice, sweet potatoes and not forgetting millet and meat. It's a pity; the food we eat today does not reflect the values of our indigenous food due to the introduction of improved species, use of machines to grind and the fries instead of cooking has created an insecurity to our food - hence causing health hazards such as malnutrition, obesity, stunted growth, and diseases like cancer," he says.

## **Education**

Kadoma studied in Galihuma, Butiiti Kyenjojo and he stopped in Level 4, which is equivalent to a higher level according to him. Education wasn't a priority because most time was spent in grazing [animals]. So the enrolled scholars at school were minimal. Uniforms also existed; white shirts and Khaki shorts, which were termed as "maldufu." Female teachers were to teach girls and male to teach the boys, which is not the case in today's arrangement.

There were not as many subjects as we presently have, like science, social studies. These were not studied until Level 5. Subjects like mathematics (counting), handwork and games were considered the most. The school timetable was highly dominated by games in a way that from Monday to Friday, games like playing football, handwork, which included carpentry work and mathematics were attained in a ratio of 3:1:2 respectively. The examination was general and only the best would be promoted to the next level. That is to say, out of the 15 only five best would be considered for promotion. Others were considered failures to aim for the next year. It should be noted that, in early years there was no law to make parents to educate their children.

So it was optional to educate a child unlike today whereby it's a necessity. "I stopped in Level 4 because my father trusted me much more than any other amongst us. Reason being, I was the most obedient and responsible son. He commissioned me to take care of his wealth," he says.

"We were rich that's why a child couldn't study. Ensande (local drink), distilling alcohol could generate money not like nowadays. You weren't too badly off," Kadoma says. "There was 'tonto' not like the waragi [home made gin] which is even processed. One Jerry can could cost about 20,000 Uganda shillings/kg. There was coffee which was sold at 200 shillings/kg. For a bag of coffee, one could acquire 150,000 shillings. There was no job searching unlike this current economic evil of rampant unemployment; it wasn't common at all. We were rich because of my late brother; he was a train engineer at Kasese cobalt copper."

## **Working life**

At 14 years of age, Kadoma was advised by a fellow friend to leave his father's home and get a job to sustain him as a young man instead of grazing. Without consulting his father, he took up his friend's advice and deserted home. Kadoma started working for Baraganza an Indian trader in Fort Portal Town in a place called Rwengoma. Later, he joined Moldina, also an Indian trader in the same town, as a turn boy on his merchandise

delivery truck. His salary on this job was 8000 shillings. While in Kampala, where they were getting the goods from, Kadoma got a job with a better pay of 100,000 shillings. This left him with no option other than deserting the turnboy job. On this new job, Kadoma served as a coffee barista, preparing and serving coffee in the gold processing workshop at Madhivani on William Street. As he was doing his work, slowly he developed an interest in learning how the process in the workshop was going on. He also started teaching himself making jewels and trophies. When the Indians started trusting him, they gave him a safe with all the equipment to use, so he left barista job to an engineer and now he was working in the premises of the Standard Bank.

Kadoma got the expertise and now he could work dressed in a labelled uniform and he started to train the internees from India where he later became a consultant engineer. The wage was now high because all the earnings that came from the repairs of the broken trophies and jewellery belonged to him. Kadoma was trusted and he couldn't steal because it was a taboo in their home since he was raised in a Christian home. Unlike the Baganda who would steal, he was far different and a highly treasured asset to his bosses.

One day, Kadoma thought about his dad after donkey's years since leaving home. He bought a bicycle, which was at 100 Ugandan Shillings, the Kanzu [traditional long white gown], a gas stove and went to visit his dad.

"I was still a dad's boy, I was 18 years and scarcely had I engaged myself in relationship issues. On reaching home, what a joy it was!!!? My father was so happy to see me, he welcomed me warmly though he condemned me for not telling him the day I left home for work. To me, it was a right way to leave without any interference from my father. Since he loved me and trusted me, he could hardly let me go. My father ordered the slaughtering of a big bull and a party was made."

On returning to work, "I grew," Kadoma said. He was given a self-contained house and also adopted the luxurious life of having many women, going to cinemas since his timetable of working a half day could favour him. His status changed and he started enjoying life as he could even get his food ordered at Hotel Metropole.

"One for the road each day" was his formula for women. He believed they couldn't fear any sexually transmitted diseases because an injection for safety was administered. AIDS/HIV wasn't in existence by then he says. "When I saw that these tavern harlots were good for nothing, I decided to go home to my father and organise an introduction for a woman, I finally married customarily."

He paid 80,000 shillings as bride price. He and the wife were blessed with 10 children. "We used to produce much not like nowadays because we had wealth and much land. Ooh! How different it is today. In relation to the population increase, land tenure system together with land fragmentation all this limits the resources for the many number of kids one can have. My kids all have land and plantations."

He thinks that's why these days, people are adopting the Western life style when it comes to family planning. When asked about family life, Kadoma finds it difficult to express himself because he lost his wife, a mother of his 10 children and this sad incident happened in 1993. Indeed "the world ends" he says.

### **Changes in his life**

When asked about the things that changed his life, with deep sorrows portrayed by his facial look, Kadoma says, "Now that I am old, I look like a baby. Everything I

need is provided to me with little or no influence. Gone are the days when work was all I had on mind. I could provide everything I needed for myself with ease. Hmm - the world ends.”

Another point that Kadoma raised which could have changed his life was religion. “Our family was so religious. Not only the baptism, the Sunday service but also the knowledge that the missionaries brought helped in governing my life and our country as well. For God and my Country,” Kadoma says. “We never had any idea of brethren and this is an aspect that we were missing for sure.”

Through this, he was taught to live in peace and harmony.

### **Happy memories**

The happiest memories of Kadoma mostly were about parties, marriage ceremonies whereby he says the most interesting about these were the code of conduct and dressing. It really depicted the core values of our culture and brings people together. Working in high profile place gave him joy and happiness because it came along with other associated benefits like high luxurious lifestyle of which he had not thought of living in his youthful life or even his entire life.

When it comes to sad moments, Kadoma says the death of his beloved wife hit him hard. Living a life of a single father to raise his 10 children had never been an easy task. In his own words, “I feel very uncomfortable on how things are in today’s living and economy, my grandchildren have studied but no jobs, no productivity at all. It seems like education is bringing more poverty to us because for a parent to educate a child in school it will mean selling off like six cows to raise the tuition, others sell off their land and the end result we even find it difficult to put food on the table or let’s say sustaining our necessities. Life is getting harder despite the infrastructural developments the government endeavours.”

### **Author experience**

Well! This was an opportune moment, sharing with Mr Aston Kadoma. Personally, I didn’t get a chance to sit with any of my grandparents to share about what their past was like. Mr Aston and I created a grandfather/grandson relationship during our conversation. It was awesome; sharing experiences about cultural values, politics, work, leisure, education, family life and events was really a blessing as I was getting the first hand information.

All we shared gave me a clear view on how things were, how they are and how they will be like in future. Most importantly, the guidance from Mr Kadoma based on the mistakes he made in the past gives me a reason for staying focused and living a more purposeful life by not falling a victim of the same mistakes.

Finally, his presence and his willingness to sacrifice his time to share with me taught me how to be patriotic “a selfish, loveless elderly couldn’t share and guide me.” Passing on the information and experiences from generations to another ensures provision of solutions to the available challenges. Yes! Old is Gold! Our fathers were also wise and great, so their wisdom still counts.



## 10 The King's brave and strong men

**Told by Katende Gaalimaka and written by Mirembe Gloria Namata**

*In the Ugandan Kingdom of Buranda, volunteer at Rise and Shine Dyslexic Organisation Mirembe Gloria Namata met Mzee Katende Gaalimaka who was the lead King of Buranda's huntsmen. He shares experiences of life hunting with a bow and pursuing lions, buffaloes, elephants and crocodiles.*

My name is Mirembe Gloria Namata and I live in Kampala, Uganda. During holidays, I volunteer with Rise and Shine Dyslexic Organisation (RASDO), which exposed me to work with special groups of people in Uganda as team leader supplying food, clothes, cleaning most slum areas and sensitising the public on HIV and AIDS in Kampala Capital City Authority (KCCA).

Over the years, the Kingdom of Buganda in Uganda East Africa had cultural beliefs and customs, which made men and women of the Kingdom feel happy when they were performed. They believe they keep the Kingdom moving forward when followed properly compared to other Kingdoms in the country. Hunting for the King is one of the cultural customs done by brave and strong men of the King.

A 93-year-old Mzee (a term in Uganda used to mean an old person) Katende Gaalimaka, was found at his dirty home and environment in the suburbs of Kampala the Capital of Uganda with dogs, grandchildren and one woman who he did not disclose his relationship with.

### **From a stone quarrier to a famous King's hunter**

In 1925 Katende Joseph was born in Mpigi district where his late father Ssemakula Yoana and Ndibulyawa Felomina had migrated. The family later moved to their ancestral district of Mityana when Joseph was only five years old. Katende Joseph who was the third born, started school when he was seven years at Namukozi Primary School



Gloria Mirimba (19) and Katende Gaalimaka (93)



together with his siblings. Besides school activities most of school age used to go to church every Saturday for Holy Eucharist and confirmation lessons.

He explained, "Schools were also teaching in local languages, English was taught as a subject." He was weak and poor at school. "I didn't complete neither the church nor the main school as I only went to Junior Classes 1- 4 and then joined a team of hunters in my village where my father was one of the King's huntsmen.

"I enjoyed the activity of community hunting as we used to move in a group with dogs, horns and nets. The activity was only performed by men, and all women would wait at home for the bush meat," he added.

### **Starting work – and becoming a father!**

At the age of 15 Katende realised he was growing big and with no proper income he decided to join a stone quarry project near by his home to earn a living alongside hunting. He produced his first daughter Nabatanzi when he was only 17 years old.

### **A visit to the palace**

In 1945 the King Mutesa II of Buganda called one of his known hunters, late Ssemakula Yoana, to the Palace at Mengo in Kampala to hunt for bush meat. "My father decided to go with me to the palace and my life never remained the same. I was a stone quarrier but I became a famous professional King's huntsman. As the saying goes, all that glitters is not gold, this matched well after the death of my father who was bitten by a snake. I faced some challenges in the palace for some time and what man has done, man can do. I was appointed by the king as a leader of huntsmen in the Palace."

In the early 1950s Katende became famous after killing hundreds of antelopes, kobs, lions, buffaloes, wild pigs and crocodiles among other animals. He was considered to be one of the toughest and most effective kings' huntsmen in the Buganda Kingdom. Old Katende is well known for his skills and knowledge of using bow and arrow, spear and nets not any modern technology. "I would shoot down an elephant with my bow until its dead," he explained.

In 1953, Sir Edward Mutesa II of Buganda was exiled to Britain after the Lukiiko demanded special status for Buganda in the Legislative Council (LEGCO). In 1955 the King was allowed to return from exile under the conditions that he has reduced powers and Buganda to remained as part of the whole Uganda.

In 1963, Sir Edward Mutesa II became the first Constitutional President of the independent Uganda and Mzee Katende had to re allocate to Masajja Kibiri Ggangu in Busabala Makindye Sabagabo where he was found for this interview.

However, before King of Buganda Sir Edward Mutesa II was exiled to Britain, Katende was asked to go to hunt fierce lions which were killing domestic animals, men and women of the King in Kyagwe sub-county. The king recruited strong men to kill it in vain.

"He called me and asked me to join other hunters to go and kill these animals," he said. Animals killed other eight of his fellow hunters but he survived. "On my return the King of Buganda awarded me a certificate as Professional Hunter for the King of Buganda."

He was very proud his scope of work was also extended. After he became a professional hunter, he would go on long trips in different communities both in and outside Uganda where he would spend months in the wilderness with fellow hunters. In 1952 he went to West Africa, Kenya and Congo basin for six months to hunt lions which threatened human life in the areas.

### **A second family**

The happily smiling Katende would go back to his home/village to see his family once in a while but he started raising another family in Kasubi Nabulagala Kampala under a polygamous family. He produced another 14 children who have also produced grandchildren for him, although none of his children supports him at this stage of old age.

Mzee Katende Gaalimaka doesn't believe in God anymore, that is why he replaced his name Joseph to Gaalimaka. He believes in a small God called Ddungu the sprint/ god for hunters. After the re-installation of the current King Ronald Muwenda Mutebi, Mzee Katende Gaalimaka would not continue to hunt for his King. He only visits the palace to talk to fellow elders.

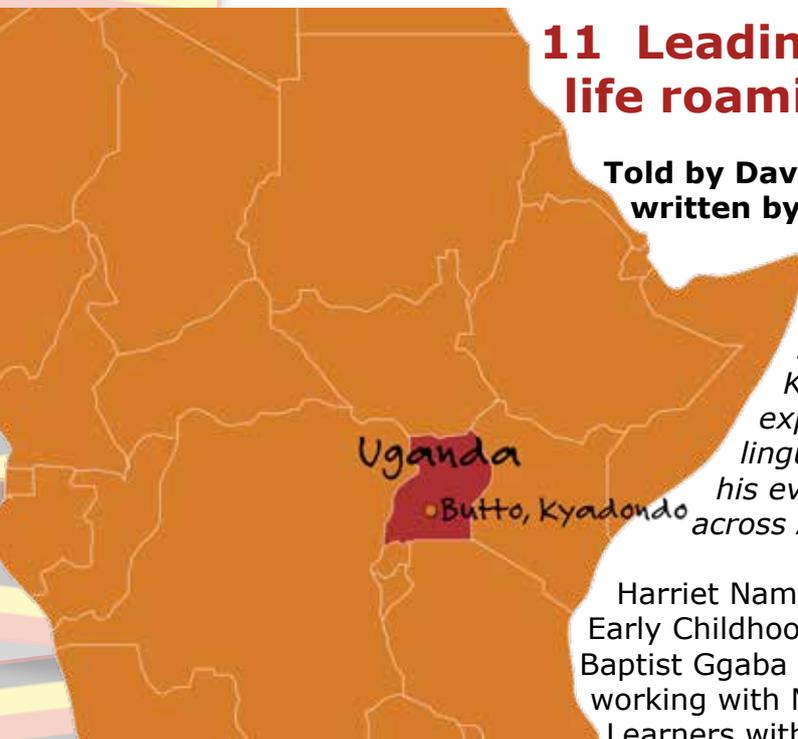
### **The worry of modern changes**

Mzee Katende who is feeling pain almost everywhere, is worried about his village becoming an urbanised area. He raised concern of fear to shift to a known place due to developments at this stage, he is also concern of where Uganda especially his Kingdom Buganda is heading as he realises lack of respect for older persons by government officials, youth, young adults within communities including by public service providers.

The dirty Mzee Katende now earns a living through well-wishers and acts as an herbalist who prescribes local herbal medicine to people in the communities of Uganda.

## 11 Leading a non-conformist life roaming across Africa

Told by David Gerald Kamyia Nsubuga and written by Harriet Namubiru



*Still in Uganda, teacher training college student Harriet Namubiru, has spent time with David Gerald Kamyia Nsubuga. She learned how his experience at school influenced the linguistic skills that enabled him to lead his eventful non-conformist life roaming across Africa.*

Harriet Namubiru is pursuing a Certificate in Early Childhood Development (ECD) at St John the Baptist Ggaba Primary Teacher's College but also working with Munyonyo Learning Centre for Learners with Learning Disability.

### Roaming through Africa

David Gerald Kamyia Nsubuga was born in December 1927. At a place called Butto in Kyadondo in present day Mukono. He was born by the late David Mutebi and Nansubuga Hadijja who are both buried at Sseeta Mukono.

His parents produced four pairs of twins and David Gerald followed the first pair of twins and other four individual children. David Gerald being one of the eldest was then forced to leave home because he was tired of babysitting his siblings in addition to helping his mother with domestic work.

He decided to stay with the neighbour, unfortunately they did not have enough food which forced him to sometimes sneak home to his parents for something to eat then run back to the neighbour's home. Afterwards he decided to settle home because the father used to bring a lot of eats and he saw that he was missing!

After some years, his mother divorced and went away; this made them suffer for a time since their mother was not around. His father did not appear to mind and did not even take care his children. Kamyia started school in 1933 at Nsangi Church of Uganda Primary school in Primary one.

By that time, he was staying with his grandparents. There was shortage of food but fruits like mangoes, jackfruits, guavas and avocado were in plenty so they would go with other children to collect these fruits and also took some water and used this as their lunch. They had to wait for supper to eat the day's meal. David Gerald said that in Primary one his first day at school pleased him because he was in special society.

Unfortunately he was not used to the school rule and regulations in that when one broke them the result was strong punishment. So one day David Gerald was the victim whereby he was punished and this made him not to go back to school and decided to hide under the bed.

After sometime his grandparents discovered this was happening and David was then transferred to Naguru Katale Primary school. Here he met very many children of different races like the Iteso Bagishu, Basoga from the East, Banyankole, Bakiga Batooro from the West, Karimanjong, and Nubian from the north and some few Baganda from central Uganda.



This made him learn so many languages and enabled him to move to many parts of Africa like Nairobi Kenya, Congo Zaire, Sudan Libya and many more countries.



**Harriet Namubiru (18) and David Gerald Kamy Nsubuga (90)**

They used to pay school fees for the whole year not as like today where they pay a single term. They were paying 24 shillings but on that same amount, they were able to get scholastic materials like pens and books. However to get this money for the fees was a tug of war, so their mother was the one who used to provide for their fees but after a great tribulation because she used to dig in other peoples garden to earn a living.

In 1937 he was then transferred to St Peters Primary School in Nsambya to complete his junior six to eight. This made him so happy because this catholic school modelled him in line with God and he learnt many things including to be a God fearing person. This has helped him in his day to day life; however it was like a prison because it had a lot of school rules and regulation. Yet he did complete his Primary Leaving Examination (PLE) where he managed to score 2nd grade.

He joined Kamuli SSS in Jinja where he completed his High School. During his vacation of Senior Six he traveled to Nairobi for his Diploma in Art and craft at Abellatermu Forest Institution which was next to Nairobi University. While at the institute he used to make impressive art products and sell them during the exhibition this enabled him to get money for rent and food among other requirements.

During this time in Kamy David Gerald got his first wife who was a Kikuyu girl Jane Joki from Banana Hill Village. After some years David Gerald decided to leave Nairobi and came back to Uganda. "East, West home is the best" he says. He left his three year old child and as of now he doesn't know their whereabouts. After reaching Uganda he got another wife and they produced another child who was a boy whom he doesn't know much about although he hears that he lives in Kamwenge in the western part of Uganda.

He then got another wife, they had another child and this child is now a teacher at Seeta School, unfortunately she doesn't take care of him. Lastly he has his last born whom he also doesn't know where he is.

Alongside Gerald's many marriages on his return to Uganda he taught at various schools such as Kireka SDA, Mityana, Munyonyo COU which were both private and government aided although with no pension rights.

David Gerald stated that he regrets why he came back to Uganda because Nairobi, Kenya was better than Uganda by that time. The time he came back to Uganda it was during President Amin's regime where so many properties were destroyed and people lost their lives but lucky enough, "I survived and I am happy for that".

Apparently, David Gerald is staying in a miserable way because he sometimes lacks food although he was a talented artist, he cannot do his work as effectively as he used to do and few people entrust him with work due to his age. He only depends on relatives who provide him with something to eat and some community members. He concluded by saying, "My life was a long journey but full of experience."

## 12 Surviving polygamy and loneliness

Told by **Gwokyalya Bena Nampeera** and written by **Viola Nakagiri**

*In Central Uganda schoolgirl Viola Nakagiri visited her maternal great grandmother Gwokyalya Bena Nampeera who after a polygamous marriage, now leads a very lonely, isolated life.*

“Haaah!!!! Let me pray that your conversation about my life doesn’t change my mood due to the hindrances I went through in my life.”

My name is Gwokyalya Bena Nampeera. The name Gwokyalya is so important because it was given to me by my grandfather. I was born in January 1927 by Mr Sonko Yusuf and Miss Nassimbwa Eleanor, both deceased. I am a resident of Bukolooto-Bugerere Kayunga district in Central Uganda; before it was up-graded to a district it was called Kyagwe County. This is where my parents were buried when they died and I also built my own temporary house (made of mud and reeds) here.

My mother produced four daughters, three of us had the same father but our youngest sister had a different father. Among these sisters I am the eldest. Unfortunately, the two died twenty years back and we remained with the youngest but now she has also grown old with so many complications of joint pain and ulcers.

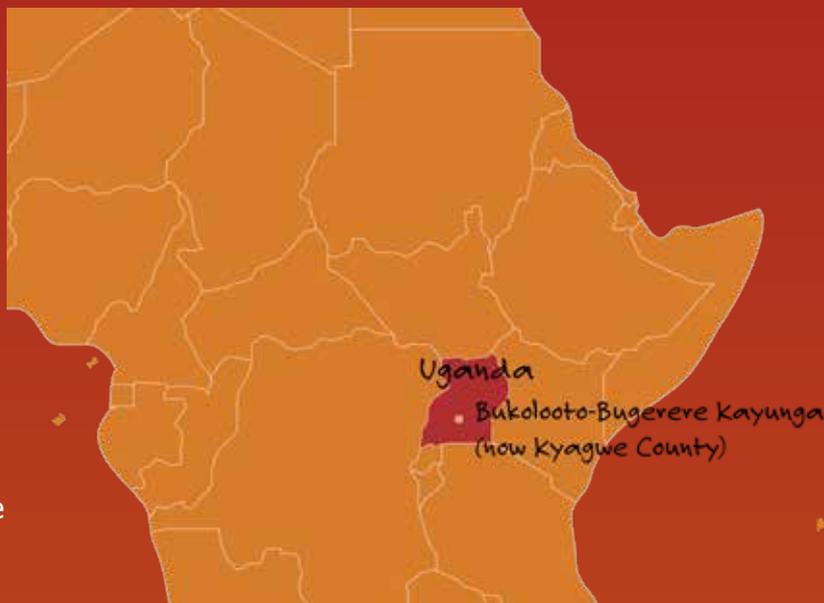
During childhood, we were unlucky that our mother divorced when I was too young, then she took us to the grandparents on her side and she got married to another man.

Oh! At my grandparents’ home everything was good as regards feeding, sleeping well and showing us love to the extent that they never wanted us to do heavy work the way I see people do these days. The grown up Bena with grey hair smiled a bit when she was telling me that “my grandfather used to call me his wife something which made me feel proud”.

### Education

After sometime, our father came home claiming that he wanted us to go for catechism which forced our grandfather to let us go back. By that time, we had formal education in schools which were started by the missionaries from 1895 onwards and they were called Central Schools. Such schools were; Mengo, Ndejje, Baskerville Ngoggwe and others which I don’t remember well.

In 1924, I was not yet born the government got involved in helping the missionaries to provide better services but still my parent couldn’t afford the time I was supposed to join school because only sons and daughters of chiefs plus rich people could access education so, I went for catechism where



**Viola Nakagiri (17) and Gwokyalya Bena Nampeera (90)**



much emphasis was put on religion plus reading and writing. Unfortunately, I didn't complete it.

### **Marriage proposal**

Indeed he took us to school but there was a man who admired me and agreed that he would give my father fees when I complete catechism, I can be his future wife. By that time the man was in his 50s when I was only 13 years old. When I heard this from people, I felt bad and hated my father because I never wanted to

get married to such a man. This habit was so common for most girls during those years as girls used to get married at the age of 12 and above years.

From that time I thought of what to do and then decided to run away from home and went back to my grandparents' home. Much as a parent has to be respected, when he came for me the second time he never saw me. Hardly had he arrived when I ran away from my grandparents and I went to my aunt's home, a sister to my mother.

While smiling, Bena stated that, "I had favour because when I reached my aunt's home all people loved me so much and I enjoyed staying there.

Unfortunately, I never continued with my studies because I had no one to pay my fees. Every morning we could go with my aunt to garden. We then came back home and made banana juice since it was her job where she used to get money for up-keep.

Another thing I remember is that I liked playing with dolls so much and plaiting hair for the children who were younger than me."

Much as girls during adolescent stage enjoy clubbing, I never got involved in such activities because I had respect and fear of my aunt so, I spent most of the time at home.

Like any other woman, I also got married but it was not like you girls of these days who just fall in love with men anyhow. This man used to come at home and converse with the husband to my aunt then afterwards he could go. He did this for about two years then a grownup lady told me that the man, who has been coming to your aunt's home, is proposing to marry you!

It took me time to accept but at last I accepted and even my aunt encouraged me to go because the man had good behaviour. We married officially and my grandfather was given a Kanzu (Uganda's traditional wear for men) and due to the love he had towards me, he was forced to accompany me to see the home and also talk to my husband not to mistreat me.

### **The other wife**

Like I told you, I was also loved by my husband to the extent that people said he treated me like I was his daughter or baby! What I had not told you, after sometime I realised that my husband once had a wife but by the time he married me they had separated. This lady came back and my in-laws



requested my husband to allow her come back and we shared the same house. This co-wife had green eyes on me, she used to cry all day and night and she abused me. At first I kept quiet but one day we exchanged words and that's how she started fearing me.

Our husband gave each of us land where to plant crops but the co-wife was too lazy! I cleared the land and planted all types of food in that my husband used to request me to give the co-wife food if it was her turn to cook because she had nothing to prepare for the day's meal. While smiling she added, "These days women can't do that because I see them fighting for men."

### **Overcoming other challenges**

In my marriage I produced one daughter then the second pregnancy was ectopic and I had to be operated and the fallopian tubes were cut. When I was in the hospital, I had no one to take care of me, because he loved me my husband clad in a gomesi [colourful floor length dress] so that he could help me because that time they could not allow a man to be a carer in the hospital.

From that time, I didn't get pregnant again and remained with one child unfortunately, she also died! My daughter was also loved by the father and grandparents of both sides. I remember one time my daughter cried for the eye of the fish then her father checked in all plates so that he could get the eye and give it to the child.

Time came when my husband wanted to marry another wife, he brought his suggestion to me and I accepted. The co-wife was not aware of this but we both went because he told me that he wanted me to be like her sister, we went and he paid dowry to the family members. That day of the wedding he hired a troupe to entertain guests, when they were drumming I also got excited and went in front to dance but when my husband saw that I was dancing with other men, he stood up and stopped those who were drumming.

That occasion was ended and all people told to go back to their homes! My husband never wanted all of us to plait hair and I remember one time he found one of his daughters when she had plaited hair, he got a wooden sandal from his foot and threw it to the girl, luckily it didn't hit her!

Our husband separated us and I was taken to my home in a distant place. Despite the fact that he loved me so much, I didn't stay long in that home where he took me. We didn't quarrel and he didn't realise at first that I had left his home for good! I went back to my aunt's home but she had so many problems, which forced me to go back to my father's place because we had big land. He gave me a piece of land where I built my own house where I am staying now.

### **Going it alone**

The period I built my own house, my daughter had got married then she gave me her first born to stay together. Since I was still energetic, I did all jobs like selling banana juice and banana leaves in town in order to get money for survival. That time I was like in my 40s and another man approached me for relationship but he was married.

I told him the dos and don'ts of which I told him not to leave his family to come and stay at my place. Since I was tough about that point, whenever he could come and say he wanted to stay at my place I could chase him which forced him one time to take poison luckily enough neighbours came and helped me to rescue his life and he did not die! From that time I gave up with men and decided to stay alone until now!

In my early 70s, I experienced so many problems like the two sisters died, husband, then after three years my daughter died when she was 49 years leaving six children.

Gwokyalya said this when tears were rolling down her cheeks as she makes some moments of silence then proceeds with the story. I tried all I could to see that my daughter does not die but it failed. Again my mother was brought to my home because she had grown too old and she could not help herself but she also died at 98 years of age.

### **The problems of old age**

Most of my relatives died which have affected me in my old age. I sometimes keep isolated at home; fail to sleep at night when I am in thoughts. I am feeding poorly because I did not prepare for old age in that I did not set an income generating business where to get money and feed on whatever I like! More so, I had a vision of building a house made of bricks like other people but it did not come true.

What makes me get worried is that my eyes cannot see well and doctors told me they can't work on them. Another thing is that, I have a lot of pain in my joints where by moving around my home is a problem as this makes me wait for one of my granddaughters who stays near my home to come and do most of the things. What I have seen, isolation is one of the diseases that can kill old people like me! The bad thing is that my grandchildren have no money, they would have got for me a care giver like those of Geriatric Respite Care Foundation so that I enjoy this remaining time.

"If all wishes were horses, all beggars would ride - here I mean I wish I had produced many children, if one died others would have cared for me," stated Nampeera Bena in a miserable way using her local language.

### **Author experience**

First and foremost, Nampeera Bena is my grand grandparent to the side of my father whom I have stayed with for two years, now she was isolated. According to her story, I have learnt that a person can stay with any relative provided he/she is humble and respectful to others.

More so, a person needs to take time before rushing into marriage so that one is able to choose the right partner to be with. It has also enabled me to know that not only men of these years marry many women so; one has to act wisely to avoid causing problems because a man has married another woman.

I have come to learn that producing one child is problems that can make a person develop wounded heart in case that child has died.

It is also a lesson that we need to plant shades for our old age when we are still strong to avoid staying in a miserable way when one can't afford anything of his/her heart's desire. 'Indeed, let's plant shades for our old age.'

## 13 A life of love as a nurse, midwife, wife and mother

Told by Mrs Noeline Ddangana and written by John Paul Matovu

*The final story from Uganda is from cytotechnology student John Paul Matovu who talks to his step-grandmother, retired midwife Noeline Ddangana. Her life is an insight into the experiences of hardship and love as a nurse, midwife, wife and mother.*

Uganda  
Kampala,  
Bisanje and Kyadondo

My name is John Paul Matovu. I am 19 years. I am a Ugandan by origin.

I am a student at Makerere University pursuing a Bachelor's Degree in cytotechnology, which involves training of individuals in microscopic study of cancerous cells. I am a third born in a family of five children. My father is a farmer while my mother is nurse tutor at Nsambya Nursing

Training School. My hobbies are dancing, singing and cooking though during my free time I like watching football.

I have chosen to write about my grandmother, Mrs Noeline Ddangana. She is my mother's step-mother who took on the role of her mother when she lost hers. She is 89 years old. She is a retired midwife who stays in Kansanga in Kampala. She is a mother, a grandmother and a great grandmother. She loves being with children, watching and listening to news and spending times with her children and neighbours (approximately age mates).

She also likes being taken on evening walks. These make her so happy. She is a nice and lovely person to be with. My grandmother and I live in Kyadondo County. Kyadondo County is found in the central region of Uganda. It is mainly an administrative division though it contains other economic activities like trade, industrialisation, transportation and others.

### **A life of love as a nurse, midwife, wife and mother**

Mrs Ddangana is my mother's step-mother who took on the role of her mother when she lost hers. She was born in December 1930. She was delivered from their home in Bisanje town in Masaka district. She was the last born in a family of six children. They were four girls and two boys. Her parents, Mr and Mrs Lukyamuzi were married. Generally, she was raised in an extended family because at their home, they used to live with a number of relatives i.e. uncles, aunties and cousins as well as neighbours.

Her parents were both farmers and traders who dealt in coffee from which they earned a living that they used to care for the big family. Her parents were really hardworking people. Their mother used to work with the girls and being the last born she used to be favoured during work, for example she used to be given a small portion of land to dig compared to the others. They used to have basically three meals per day i.e. breakfast, lunch and supper.

## Education

The first education Mrs Ddangana acquired was catechism at the age of six where they, as the children of the village, were gathered on a daily basis to be taught the basics of religion. During these lessons they learnt new songs, had bible studies and learnt how to pray. She admitted that catechism helped in inculcating moral values in them. At the age of eight, her elder sister who loved her so much took her from their home to her place where she lived with her husband and family so that she could join infant classes which involved reading, writing and arithmetic. Thereafter, she joined primary school at Villa Maria which was a missionary school managed by Nuns.



Her worst experience there was the barefooted journeys to and from school. Their feet got blisters on hot days due to the heat and they got waterborne infections during rainy seasons. This made them quite uncomfortable during their studies. Sr. Anne, a white nun rewarded her with a pair of shoes at the end of Primary six for being the most punctual and most organised pupil in her class. The reward really motivated her to remain in school as a number of her classmates dropped out for a number of reasons like early marriages. This was a common thing in African societies because it was a source of income. Being rewarded was overwhelming since it was her first pair of shoes since she joined school.



**John Paul Matovu (19) and Mrs Noeline Ddangana (89)**

At the age of 15, she was offered a scholarship to study at St. Theresa Girls Senior School Bwanda where she attended classes' senior one to senior three. She wanted to join Teacher's Training College thereafter but she was discouraged by her elder brother who was already a practising teacher. Her mother helped her get a vacancy in Nsambya Nursing Training School which was a missionary institution and offered free education for girls in the profession of nursing and midwifery. This was to encourage Girl Child education. This school was situated in Kampala. By then Kampala was a prestigious city where everyone wished to stay, study and work from.

## Training and working as a nurse

Mrs Ddangana was trained as a nurse for three years but alongside her studies, she used to work as a nursing assistant in Nsambya Hospital where she could interact with a number of patients for example helping them to bathe, feeding them, washing their clothing and counselling them. This part time work in a way increased her passion for the nursing profession because she loved watching the improvement in the patient's condition.

In other words she loved assisting in the betterment of patients which is still her aim. After the three years, she worked in Nsambya Hospital for six months. She basically worked in the maternity department because she had a lot of interest in caring for pregnant women and women who had just given birth to their babies. This prompted her to go back to the nursing training school and train as a midwife for one year. During her studies and stay at nursing school, she made a number of friends with her classmates, tutors and other support staff. This made her stay in the school fun and memorable.

During their free time they loved going for walks to the trading centres for window shopping, going to the theatre to watch plays, catching up with new people for example at dance parties and they also volunteered in community health services like immunisation, visiting the discharged patients to check on how they were doing and also seeing the general sanitation of communities. The friends she remembered include; Jeanette (her friend from Rwanda who initially had a problem in the usage of English), Nabulya Rebecca and Nakimuli Annet. She sadly informed me that majority of her friends had died. Narrating this made her really emotional and she almost cried.

After her studies, Mrs Ddangana worked in a number of health facilities. She was first posted with one of her friends in Iganga Hospital which is situated in Eastern Uganda. Iganga Hospital was also a missionary hospital managed by nuns. She described working with nuns as a great experience and that they were hardworking, passionate and principled people. Iganga hospital was basically a maternity centre which offered antenatal services, immunisation services, assistance to women while giving birth to their babies and assistance to breastfeeding mothers.

### **Facing challenges**

Her worst experience there were the moments when she used to feel homesick and for the fact that Iganga was quite far from her home and transport services by then were not well established, she could rarely visit her mother. There was also inefficient communication with the people at home. Letters which were the most commonly used modes of communication by then could take long to get delivered and as well the replies could be received late.

The one moment she also recalls was when there was an outbreak of cholera which was characterised by people who had severe fevers, watery stools and frequent vomiting in Iganga. This epidemic claimed a number of lives. The infected people were all isolated in to health camps so that they could reduce the risk of infecting the rest of the population. During their tireless and selfless efforts in saving lives in the camps her colleague she used to work with acquired the disease and died. This scared her so much.

Shortly after the death of her colleague, she presented with the some clinical features that had claimed the life of her friend which scared her workmates. This led her total isolation from others. There was a white nun called Sr. Lourita who volunteered to take care of her which she did selflessly till she got better. After she got better she feared to go back to her home for the fear that she could infect her relatives. One of her best moments then was receiving a letter from home. This could make her so happy.

The hospital used to provide the staff with places of residence and so during her free time, she could catch up with a number of her workmates and hold really long conversations whereas other times they (some of whom had boyfriends) could go out as a group of young ladies for dances. These made their leisure time quite interesting and memorable.

### **Falling in love**

Mrs Ddangana met the love of her life at Iganga hospital. One day, a project was launched by the ministry of works at the hospital. It is during this function that Mrs Ddangana (Noeline) met a handsome medium-sized tall gentleman



**Taking notes**

(Mr Ddangana) as she described him. The gentleman was an assistant engineer at Ministry of Works and so during their three month project he used to meet Ms Noeline (Mrs Ddangana) on several occasions and sometimes when she was out with friends till one day when he proposed to her.

She told me that she didn't even hesitate because he had already displayed the kind of person she wanted for a future husband and a person who would be honoured in society. It is during this time when she got a leave and rested from work for a long period of four years. It was at the age of 24, when she got married to Mr Ddangana in 1954. Incidentally Mr Ddangana was from Masaka district where her home town was also situated. This was a blessing in disguise for her because the marriage drew her closer to her home. Another incident was that her husband was a close friend to her elder brother and so their homes were close to each other. This made her so happy because she had family close to her. During this marriage, she gave birth to nine children.

### **Moving around**

Mr Ddangana was transferred to the headquarters of ministry of works in Kampala. For this reason, he shifted with his family to Kampala where they settled for some time. In Kampala, Mrs Ddangana worked in the city council hospital. She remembered her worst experiences at the city council hospital being the long night shifts, she also had limited time for her children and the national insecurities by then because of the Kabaka crisis.

In 1966 the Kabaka [King Frederick Walugembe Muteesa III], of Buganda and the president by then was fighting for the interests of the Baganda while Milton Obote, the prime minister by then was fighting for the interests of the Uganda as a nation. During this war, there were massive killings and a number of assassinations. This made the city council hospital overcrowded with wounded patients but again it was under-staffed. This used to leave the few nurses with a huge work load. She worked here for approximately five years before her husband was transferred to Lira.

Her husband's transfers really affected her because she had to get employment elsewhere, settling in and also by then travelling with children was not easy at all, given that they had to study. Changing the children's schools could also affect them socially and academically. In 1970, they came back to Kampala, Mr Ddangana got into the Vector Control Organisation which was a government organisation. It is during this time that they built a house in Kansanga where they settled with their family.

### **Running her own clinic**

In 1979, due to the insecurities in a bid for Obote II to overthrow the government of Idi Amin, pregnant women faced a number of complications and could not easily access any hospital. Many of these ladies were assisted by Mrs Ddangana at her home which prompted her to start a private maternity clinic near their home. This saved the lives of many mothers and their babies from that time on wards. Her maternity clinic has been operating till today though she has had a number of challenges in its management. Her biggest successes in the clinic have been that she has helped a number of women at the village to give birth. It is from this clinic that she has got tuition to take her children to good schools, she had made friends with a number of people i.e. the ladies she has helped, she has inspired a number of people to become nurses for example my mother. She usually refers complicated cases that she cannot deal with at her clinic to Hospitals.

### **Life's challenges**

Her worst experiences have been the death of her husband in 1996 and the death of her three sons in the following years. Her husband was hit by a thick branch from an old tree. He was rushed to the hospital unconscious. No sooner had he reached the emergency unit than he died. This was quite heart breaking because he had been the strongest pillar in their family and the extended family. In 1997, her oldest son, Peter who was 38 years old died of AIDS which also claimed her second son, Thomas in 1999. During this time AIDS claimed a number of lives because treatment to its symptoms was still on clinical trials before it could be approved for use. Her third son, Godfrey who was 32 years old was diagnosed with a brain tumour which was poorly managed. This led to the total paralysis of his body hence leading to his death in 2000. This was really traumatising to the family. These boys had graduated into professions from which she thought they could help her in the management of the family as she could not do it alone after the death of her husband.

She narrated all this in tears.

### **Happy times**

Her best memories have been seeing her daughters getting married into respectable and honourable families and also, her grandson getting ordained as a priest. She finished her story by thanking the Almighty Lord that had brought her till then and thanking Him for all her life achievements.

### **Author experience**

Having listened to the story of Mrs Ddangana, I have learned to be a hard working person because there is no gain in simple life. This is seen when she is employed in a number of places and she works tirelessly to see to it that her patients get proper treatment for their quick recovery.

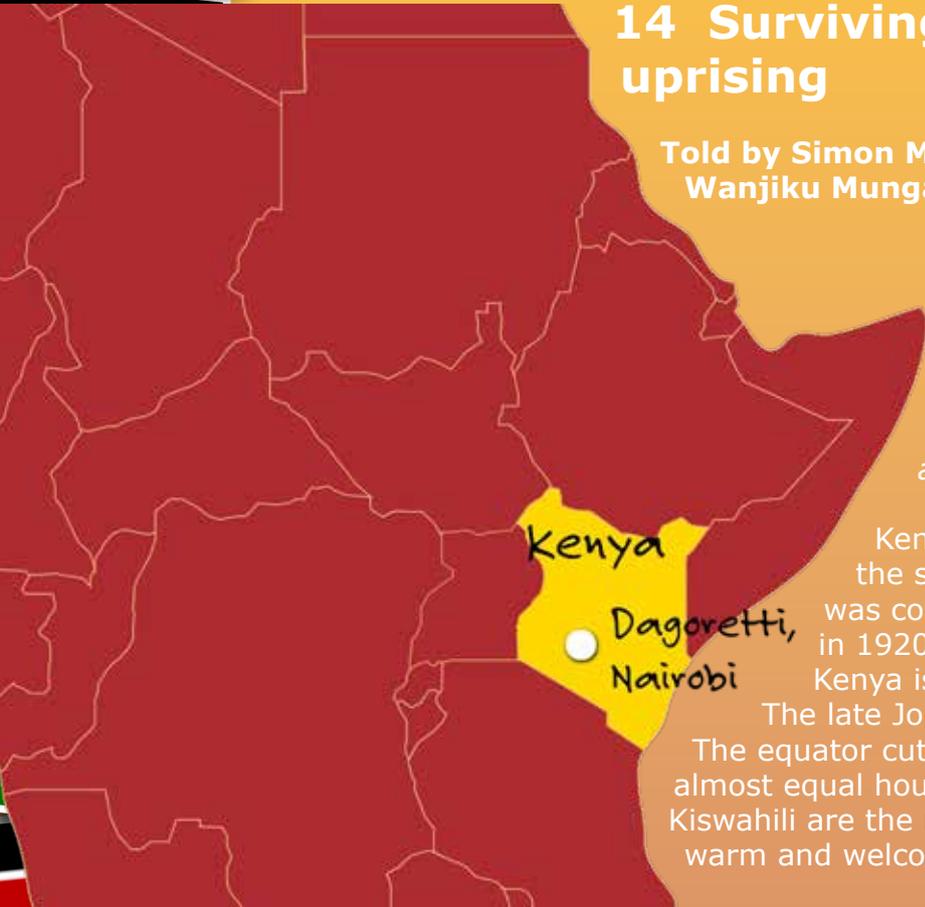
I have also learned to be passionate about what I do for example she worked as a nursing assistant during her studies because of the passion she had in her work even though she was not being paid. This is also seen currently when she is consulted about some issues by the junior midwives at the clinic. In other words she was not just a nurse; she loved what she was doing. This is also emulated in the way she served selflessly and wholeheartedly despite the poor working conditions, the irregular working hours and the poor pay when she got employed. The patients where her first priority.

She was such strong woman that even after the death of her husband and three sons she had to keep up the family united to get through the tough times. She is such a friendly person in that she loved team work and it is through this she made most of her friends. She is also a mentor because she encouraged a number of young ladies including my mother by then to become nurses because treating the patients was a form of serving God. She is a determined lady in a way that she started a private maternity clinic with an aim of helping out women which is still operating today.

## 14 Surviving the Mau Mau uprising

Told by Simon Mugo and written by Keziah Wanjiku Mungai

*Travelling further across Africa to Kenya we meet up with Community Health Nurse Keziah Wanjiku Mungai who talked to veteran air traffic control officer Simon Mugo. He talks about his career in aviation and surviving Mau Mau uprisings.*



Kenya  
Dagoretti,  
Nairobi

Kenya is an African country lying in the scenic coastline of East Africa. It was colonised by the British government in 1920 and gained independence in 1963. Kenya is a member of the Commonwealth.

The late Jomo Kenyatta was the first President. The equator cuts through from east to west allowing almost equal hour in day and night. English and Kiswahili are the national languages. Kenya is home to warm and welcoming people.

Mr Simon Mugo talks with me Keziah Wanjiku Mungai (Kenya Registered Community Health Nurse) at Sajames Home for the Aged. I was born in 1993 in Kiambu county and I am a qualified Kenya Registered Community Health Nurse. The story is to the best of my ability illustrated below. Mr Simon Mugo was born in 1923, in a remote village in Dagoretti, as the third child in a family of seven children, four brothers and three sisters. His father worked as a mason while his mother was a housewife.

He attended his education in primary school in his early years and later joined secondary school at Alliance Boys High School. From there he went on to an international civil aviation organisation and trained as an air traffic control officer for five years. He started work in 1947 at directorate of civil aviation and retired in 1986 to become a business man. He married in 1944 and is father to seven children.

### Surviving the Mau Mau uprising

It was a warm afternoon; the whole heaven was in a white glow as we sat outside gazing at the beautiful landscape around the yard of Sajames Home for the Aged. Other residents gathered few metres from us as they conversed through the breezy afternoon. A true picture of serenity. Mr Simon was full of anticipation as I explained to him why I was interested in him narrating his life story to me. He is quite conversant with the esteemed leadership of Queen Elizabeth II. As I guided him through, he started off by telling me his personal history.

Mr Simon Mugo was born in 1923, in a remote village in Dagoretti. His father was a mason and mother was housewife. He was the second born in a family of seven children, four brothers and three sisters. He got married in 1944 and together they bore seven beautiful children. He attended his education in primary school then joined high school.

In 1947 he joined the Alliance High School and he learned more of geography. He and his family were in touch during this period although they were apart. After clearing his secondary education, he joined the International Civil Aviation Organisation and trained as an air traffic control officer.

### **A career in aviation**

He spent five years training then later was employed by the Directorate of Civil Aviation.

"If an airplane has to go to Cairo or London from Nairobi, air traffic control ensures it keeps left, like motor vehicles in Kenya, so that it can pass. It is graded by height. The pilot was guided to fly at certain heights such as 33000 ft or 40000ft so safety is maintained. The level feet or altitude must be exact and the pilot should keep at that level. The voice control system records and guides the pilot. The radio communication is switched from one point to another as the planes go from one city to another," he firmly explains as he sips down his coffee. "It was amazing how many people could board airplanes. Air traffic controllers came from England and after training in aviation civil organisation, they were employed by British Government under the Ministry of Transport and Communication. People wonder how do airplane travel at night but is due to guidance by trained personnel like me." This continues for quite a while as he seems to be really proud of his job.



**Simon Mugo (95) and Keziah Wanjiku Mungai (24)**

He reckons it is a big thing, in 1947 the International Civil Aviation Organisation is under the Colonial Government and headquarters are in Europe [Now Canada]. At this point I was so eager to know the political status back in those days.

He started off by explaining about the most important period.

### **The Mau Mau uprising**

In 1950s, there was an uprising called the Mau Mau that formed against the British Army by mostly the Kikuyu people. This resulted from the oppression and atrocities on the Kenyan people by the British militia. Most African men were arrested, including those that worked for the British Government. "My colleagues and I were taken from work by the military and held as prisoners in a military camp called Manyani in Coast region of Kenya. Our employer tried to negotiate with British Government for our release but failed," says Simon.

The security was really heightened and all Africans had a yellow uniform for easy identification in case you escaped. The Mau Mau struggled to overthrow the British Government but due to the lack of unity among Kenyan tribes, the British grew even stronger. J M Kariuki was one of the leaders of Mau Mau. "Those of us who were captured did not actively participate in the rebellion since the camp was heavily guarded. All the activities in the camp were coordinated by the army," Simon explains. Kenyans worked as casual labourers in British projects like railway construction while others were in the homes owned by the Europeans. The Mau Mau also lacked weapons whereas the British army had heavy and advanced weaponry. He says shockingly "for them they didn't even have a club but the army men had proper guns."

The Mau Mau mostly involved men in the warfare but women gradually started to join by holding protests to show their anger and they did agricultural activities to provide food for their families.

Later some of the British Heads of Government started complaining about the atrocities carried out on the Kenyan people. So much violence was not part of the plan to infiltrate the country. Some Kenyan people continued with education; this made them come up with better strategies to defeat the Europeans.

He noted that he cannot take it when young people keep saying it is better during “emergency time” because of what he went through during the Mau Mau Uprising. It is a big shame. The nights were dangerous and you could not predict what will happen next with police all over the place. He laments about how those that did not agree with the British would suffer. They used to sleep under the banana trees if they did not beat curfew, outside protecting their cows from cattle rustlers. Most of the people were trained by the British police and made to guard their fellow Africans and animals.

After several years of imprisonment, he was released after Kenya got its independence. He went back home for two years and worked as a farmer. He was able to bring up his children and see the family often. Then later went back to working as air traffic control officer in the Directorate of Civil Aviation.

Kenya gained its independence in 1963 and the late Jomo Kenyatta was elected as the first president. This led to most Britons leaving the country. They sold most of the land to the government and were compensated. Trading improved due to the better communication and transport and more opportunities were created due to the advancement in education. The new governments amended some of the laws to better fit Kenyans and promote trade.

He notes British were quite beneficial despite the challenges and notes even today the British Government is still strong. “Things were done in a more proper way, this is because the British Government was very well structured,” he says.

The British Government handled land issues very well and gave opportunities to many. When President Jomo Kenyatta took over he could request to buy certain land from British people. That was then peacefully shared by Kenyatta amongst Kenyans, but the foreigners were compensated. Business was good then, most things were under control and the whites left for the United Kingdom.

Actually Simon Mugo reckons the British were good as they were able to keep records very well and he noted that even after colonial times, post independence, most books were burnt to hide information. “Otherwise your generation would be having a lot to read about, there is so much detail lost,” he mumbles.

In 1963 British Government was fully and well established in Kenya, so many Britons had settled in Kenya. “It was a nice government, in the whole world Kenya is one of the most fast growing countries,” he said as he leans back. There was tribal division even after independence; Simon reckons people were doing better then; after working he bought his brother a piece of land because they were taught to be generous.

The most thriving jobs in those days were teaching due to introduction of education and schools by the British Government. Many African young men were trained as army men and others as nurses and doctors.



Communication was enhanced and made even easier through introduction of telephones, radios, post offices and much more.

More cars were getting into the country and roads were tarmacked; railway tracks were built, introducing new ways of transporting goods and people. The British people taught and influenced the Africans in new ways of housing through brick making and metal works.

“Kenya owes the British for the fast economic advancement it is making now,” Simon says, sitting straight and looking up as he gets lost in his thoughts. He explains this is a result of the proper procedures and laws instilled by the British Government. “They introduced money as the major currency of exchange. Money was in pennies, quarters and cents, later the first president of Kenya made “shillings” which is still used today. There was increased advancement in people registration and more Kenyans got Identification Cards.”

More foreigners started coming in, especially those who were under the British Government like Indians who engaged themselves so much with development of industries. Arab and other missionaries came in even more and settled in Kenya.

### **Leaving aviation for another career**

Simon Mugo retired in the year 1986 and became a businessman. He got into transporting goods. “It was a truck Chevrolet model KFD 955,” he says. He later bought a bus. He founded Mugo Metal Works and was majorly involved in building materials.

Eventually it was agreed to move him to a care facility for proper skilled care; his personal doctors advised him.

In January 2016, he joined Sajames Home for the Aged, founded in 2014 by James M Kinuthia as new concept in the community. He has benefited from continued physiotherapy group exercises, proper diet (EAT WELL PLATE) and other therapies. He is also actively involved in activities such as reading books from the library and socialising with other residents.

### **Author experience**

I have a better understanding on the generational changes that have occurred over the years and the different factors that have contributed to the change one of them being the coming of British government. When the British came to Kenya, so many things changed including Kenyan people’s behaviour. British being more civilised, Kenyans were ushered to civilisation. According to the narration of what was happening before the British government and then after their invasion, I now know the difference between savagery and civilisation.

My narrator Simon Mugo clearly explains the major reasons that made him successful: “Life was good to me because I pursued education,” he said. I have learnt education is the key to success hence we as young people should always strive hard to acquire proper education.

As he continued to explain his employment, Simon Mugo would mention so many procedures done in aviation. “Airplanes use degrees in latitude and the distance from the ground to get direction.”

I learnt so much about aviation that I did not know. And last but not the least, I now understand so much more about the history of my country Kenya especially the colonial times.

## 15 “Knowing about the past helps me plan for the future...”

Told by Vital Seyoyo and written by Pierre Bernhard Niyobuhungiro

*Turning back inland, we come to Rwanda. Here freshly graduated psychology student Pierre Bernhard Niyobuhungiro shares his role model Vital Seyoyo’s life experiences of being a trained nurse combined with the knowledge of a traditional healer.*

My name is Pierre Bernhard Niyobuhungiro, I’m from Rwanda, Western Province, Nyabihu district near the Mukungwa River. I’m a fresh graduate in clinical Psychology bachelor’s degree. I’m 23 years old and come from a rural area. I studied at the University of Rwanda.

The storyteller’s name is Vital Seyoyo from Rwanda. He is 91 years old from Western Province, Nyabihu District, Rugera Sector, Nyagahondo Cell, Muhare Village. He is now a widower and spent three years training in General Nursing in Uganda. He fluently speaks four languages: Kinyarwanda, English, French and Swahili. He reached almost all of the countries of East Africa (Uganda, Kenya, and Tanzania) and Central Africa (Democratic Republic of Congo) He has one child of eight children he begot and nine grandchildren. He is a traditional healer.

This life story is from country Rwanda which became an independent state on 1 July 1962. Before 1959 Rwanda was in Monarchy, and then it became a republican country. Before WW1 Rwanda was under German colonisation, after WW1, Belgium took the lead. In 1994 there was the genocide that led to a million of people dying. The current President is Paul Kagame. Rwanda is located in East Africa and is a land locked country.

### A role model

It was on Sunday morning when I went to the small house of one of the elders of our Sector, my friend, my role model: “Vital Seyoyo” an elder aged 91 years. His father was Pierre Senekerekere and Madeleine Kambibi his mother. He was born in 1926 in the Buhoma territory, during the reign of the King Yuhi IV Musinga, the King of Rwanda, who reigned up to 1934. The successor was his child King Kigeli V Rwabugiri.

Vital Seyoyo was born into a middle class family but they didn’t push him to study so he tried to follow others where they studied very far from home. It took four or five hours to get to school so he tried to strive, as he was one of the children that were given food by the priests who gave the students something to eat. As a middle class child from the rural areas, he hadn’t a chance to continue his studies like the children from the royal family but because of the support of the priests he finished primary school.

### **A varied career**

The priests sent him to Kampala where he studied medicine domains for three years. After he returned back to Rwanda and married in 1955, he begot eight children but now there is only one child and nine grandchildren. In that time he had many jobs besides being the healer, he worked in the only Hotel to be found in Rwanda in that time, it was situated in today's Western Province. Since the 1970s he continued to work as a traditional healer; which he continues to do now. Because of his level of studies he was one of the elites in his time; so he continued to heal people using his knowledge. As a Catholic Church believer, also he worked in their institutions.

In 1993 his wife passed away. Between 1970's and 2000's seven children died. So he remained with only one child. He became a widower. His life was shaped in 1953 when he started to the career of being the Healer. He likes travelling and spending time with others. He likes Rwandan tea.

### **Author Experience**

It was in my fourth year of my primary school when I met with three Elders. As I passed by them they tried to talk to me so I gave them my attention, they asked me my name and I talked to them, they congratulated me on my strive to study.

That day I began to discuss with the elders. So back through the years I think of all the time I spent with the Elder Vital Seyoyo from that day until now. I always take my time to discuss and to listen to the stories from the Elders as one of my hobbies.

I have gained so much that I realise that I can't know the future without spending time with elders. I have learned that I have to write my life so that it can be a story to the next generation to come.

And now I have joined the elders association which called "NSINDAGIZA." in order to take my time to help the elders. NSINDAGIZA is a nongovernmental organisation that helps the elders. It is very interesting to work with the Elders because it helps me to plan my future so that I can reach my dreams.



**Pierre Bernard  
Niyobuhungiro (23)  
and Vital Seyoyo  
(91)**

## 16 Involving young and old in community development

**Told by a group of older people and written by Sarah Edgar Lamba**

*From Rwanda we move to Tanzania where enterprising Sarah Edgar Lamba has founded the organisation Save Elders Tanzania. She shares snippets of the lives from a number of older people.*

I am Sarah Edgar Lamba from Tanzania the owner and coordinator of Save Elders Tanzania.

The campaign involves 80 youths from different regions in Tanzania. Together they are working hard to support the life of elders with vulnerability who are living in towns and rural communities.

We spend one year research and have met with elders with vulnerability throughout Tanzania, such as the Msimbazi Center in Dar es Salaam, Funga-Funga Morogoro, Arusha household, Morogoro Mzumbe household and the Zanzibar Center for Elders.

We found interested stories that inspired us a lot. We are a youth group with listening and speaking skills that enabling us to interact in a large community of targeted group. We have time to visit and have stories to tell since old is gold.

In many of Tanzania's communities, they don't give priority to elders with vulnerability when compared with orphanages or disabled community centres. But under our new youth campaign, Save Elders Tanzania, we are working as a solution to raise awareness of the role a community needs to take in taking care for elders with vulnerability.

Most elders in the community didn't attend school and very few went to primary school, specifically women. This experience in Morogoro where Bibi Matilda said "I did not attend school, as in those day no girls were allowed to attend school by the men in the house because they believed if you educate a man, he can help you but a women will get pregnant. Hence even working in political and other economic activities was not for girls only men since they are the head of the house. Tradition limits us from those developments more than staying home and taking care of children and husband."



**Save Elders Tanzania Team in Dar es Salaam**

Generally many of the community in Tanzania experience the same as this age group where females never attend the school but participated in informal education called Jando and Unyago. This is where groups of girls move to the villages with aged women and are trained on how to act like a women, while others experience genital mutilation.

In working life "they [women] work in a reproductive role, that is why the community of those days were more respecting, since women had enough room to take care of children and their husband than today women," stated by Bibi Sarah from Rombo-Kilimanjaro.

The most entertaining story was from Bibi Happy from Msimbazi Center who had a very nice youth and use to work as military officer. The day we visited her she shared with us a nice picture of her youth and gave us lot of story on how pretty she was. The same applied to Babu John from Doma who used to play football as a best player. For leisure they used to go an old club that played old music from traditional musicians.

Another entertaining one was from Mzee Omary from Dar es Salaam. "During our days in the club you have to dance very strategically; when you see the light switch off you have to kneel down and soon you will hear someone crying being hit with a bottle of beer," he said. He explained others go to the club to meet their enemies so they target how far the enemy dance and switch the light and throw bottles. "So if you keep standing it might hit you," he said.

Mzee Lucas from Kilimajaro, described his days of learning to drive a motorcycle."Firstly, there was only one person who knew in the whole village how to drive a motorcycle.

On day one, you will go and he will teach you only how to get the motorcycle outside from the house then he said enough for today lets meet tomorrow.

On day two he will teach you how to switch the motorcycle on, then off you go! So might take four months until you capable to drive a motorcycle. I am surprised in today's world, in one day someone he is on a highway know how to drive very well."

From Bibi Neema in Rumeru-Arusha, her most funniest day was, "during my wedding day where community and everyone was getting ready with lot of dances. I was very young in age but never knew men; my husband who used to see me walking around the street came to my parent to ask for marriage. When they asked me, I knew nothing about marriage but the man takes me for a photo shoot and we had our black and white picture. Then he take me to a doctor to check if I



**Save Elders family at Msimbazi Centre Hope of Aged**



**Team Save Elders Morogoro visited Bibi Matilda for stories**



**Meet Bibi and Babu Sarah from Rombo Olele-Kilimanjaro**

am virgin before wedding as traditional says so doctor confirm and I was excited with my parent and I get married.”

Here is the most funniest place, according to Mzee Avert, on they are days they use to get into the computer room while removing the shoes and drinking milk after looking into the screen. “No one is allowed to get into the computer room without permission, mathematics were manually calculated by using even five pages in book to find answer on one equation.”

From Mzee Honori, “In today world is mostly surprised with the world since on our days, we use to have a single TV to our chairperson where all of the community gather to watch news. But also, we don’t use to have mobile phone. We would send a letter to parents to ask for pocket money. Transport from Rombo to Dar might take two days but today we have flight and in a few second you’re in Dar-es-Salaam.”

Civil wars were the historical event happening in 1990s experienced by Mzee Pastory. He explained civil was the most influence on his life. “During civil war ‘all men in the houses’ were supposed to participate in fighting and I was worried about my family and fear of my life, but I was strong and this gives me a sense of patriotism for my national Tanzania.”

Bibi Ema from Rombo-Tanzania experienced drought that happen in late 1980s in Tanzania; she was without eating food for four days, eating cassava roots no other food available. “But God is good, we get food from neighbouring countries.”

Experience from Colonialism historical events come from Mzee Honori. “I only remembered one event during colonial period where I use to travel into the long distance for plantation and railway construction. I use to be a very strong man during my youth and was hard working,” he said.



**Mzee Lucas with Save Elders paper and his friend during International Elders Day**



**Team Save Elders and Bibi Neema**



**Team Save Elders and Mr Honori during International Elderly Day**

Experience of the socialist historical period of the 1970s come from Bibi Haika-Arusha. "In those days life was simple and we shared everything, no one was poor and no disparities like today's world under capitalism. We used to have communal shop where everyone gets served equality, government provide us food and every basic needs equally and life was very good."

Losing my kids was the saddest experience of my life says Babu Juma from Babati-Endanachan. But Mzee Honori says the saddest experience is on access to social service such as health and transport. For them is the biggest problem needed to be solved.

From Bibi Matilda, it is all about isolation and her staying alone with her big brother; both are old enough to need care. Bibi Eva says she has the big burden of taking care of all grandchild from her daughter who moved in town to find life.

Traditional dancing for all elders in Tanzanian makes them happier. "Celebrating traditional dance such as dancing for harvesting, dance for circumcision and other of alike," explained Bibi Jesca from Babati-Endanachan. She used to be a good dancer girl during traditional events in her village.

#### **Author experience**

Generally, hardworking, respect and love, humanity, unity and patriotic are the key this youth learn from aged people that influence and inspired us.



**Meet team Save Elders and Bibi Ema**



**Meet Sarah with Mzee Juma at Babati**

## 17 Dancing and singing for rain

Told by **Felistas Muhome**  
and written by  
**Khumbolane Alice Nyirenda**

*Travelling down to southern Africa, in Malawi recently graduated Khumbolane Alice Nyirenda speaks with Felistas Muhome. Felistas tells of the joy when successfully dancing for rain and finding love.*

My name is Khumbolane Alice Nyirenda, a short, 22-year-old, dark-skinned girl straight from the Warm Heart of Africa, Malawi.

Academically, I recently graduated from the University of Livingstonia with a Bachelor of Science degree in Human Rights. Upon graduating, I landed myself a job with the Malawi Network of Older Persons' Organisations (MANEPO) as Communications and Advocacy Officer.

My country is landlocked being bordered by bigger neighbours: Tanzania, Mozambique and Zambia. The two widely spoken and official languages here are English and Chichewa. In fact the name Malawi derives from Chichewa for "flames of fire" because of the incredible sunrises and sunsets that can be seen over Lake Malawi. I met Felistas on a recent field trip to her village for a project baseline survey and she was among the beneficiaries to be interviewed. She caught my attention because the moment I arrived there she kept sneaking smiles at me and just my luck I got to interview her. Since then she refers to me as her grand-daughter as I usually take time to say 'Hi' every time I am around her area for some field work.



**Khumbolane Alice Nyirenda (22) and Felistas Muhome (95)**

### **Felistas' journey of life**

My name is Felistas Muhome, I am 95 years old. I belong to the Tumbuka tribe and hail from Endingeni Village, Mzimba district but my family moved down to Kachere village, T/A Machinjiri, Blantyre in search of refuge during the First War (28 July 1914 - 11 November 1918). I was born in 1922 and raised right here in this area and I have watched it change before my eyes to become what it is today." This is how Felistas started narrating her journey of life as we sat down on a mat under a tree behind her dilapidated house.

Still looking very strong, I was very fascinated to listen to her story. Felistas Muhome is the first born in a family of two and she was orphaned at the age of five. She could barely remember anything about her parents because she lost them at such a tender age so she was left in the care of her aunt, sister to her mother.

### **A harsh upbringing**

"My sister and I had such a hell staying with the aunt. We did not have time to go to school as we had back-to-back chores and she also made us do all her garden work, we seemed not to have words which could change her mind," explained Felistas. Often times she would go to bed on an empty stomach and if the aunt was in a bad mood, she could shout and make sure Felistas and her sister felt her wrath and the tears were endless. All efforts to complain to other relatives about her predicament proved futile. Once in a while, Felistas recalled running away and she could spend the whole day roaming in the street, begging.

However, life started changing when she moved to stay with an aunt from her father's side. "As far as I can remember, I was seven years old during the hunger spell which hit Malawi in those days, so during that time we would normally just eat vegetables for lunch and dinner," she explained.

### **Dancing for rain**

Felistas recalls that sometimes the chief would organise a gathering where the whole village would assemble for a ceremony to pray for rains but it was more or less like a celebration because the women would brew local beer from different fruits and grapes so that the men could drink. Men with experience in beating drums were also summoned together as there would also be dances and singing at these gatherings.

"The songs sung were so catchy and I remember my friends and I humming along to them, I wish I could sing you one but I cannot remember the songs by heart now," she happily explained. Her aunt whom she eventually referred to as mum would dance at these gatherings and so she would encourage her to follow in her footsteps by slowly teaching her best dancing moves.

As a young girl she classified the gatherings as a party but amidst the singing, drinking and dancing she would just realise that it's actually started raining and the purpose of the "party" had been fulfilled. When it started raining, the men would roar into cheers, the singers would sing louder and the dancers would shake to the rhythm of the drums harder as a way of thanks until the day end and just like that the dry spells would end.

## **Finding love**

“What I really want you to know is how I met the love of my life, Henry. I should have been 25, at the time I was selling tomatoes at the market and he was a tailor. I was on my way to buy a packet of sugar after my days work at the tuck shop near the market, he was there by the corridor to the tuck shop working on a few garments but never taking his eyes off me as I approached him. I joked about how he would prick himself with the big needle in his hand. After I bought what I needed, he would trail me back to the route I would take to get home. It was before long when he got the courage and told me he was in love. His statement did not surprise me.”

She smiled as she explained this.

A ceremonial wedding was organised and she eventually moved out and began staying with her husband, Henry. This gave her the much waited peace of mind. Even with the little that her husband earned, he really took good care of her. There was never a day that she went to bed hungry.

“We had seven children, two boys and five girls,” says Felistas.

The quality she loved the most about her husband was that he never changed and stayed faithful till he died after being together for 60 years.

“We were really favoured to spend 50 years together marking our golden jubilee in 1997. He passed on in 2007,” she says.

Unfortunately, all her children also died due to the HIV/Aids pandemic. As the story was being recorded, Felistas lives with two orphans and life is very tough.

## **Author Experience**

It was so nice to finally have a nice long chat dedicated to wanting to know more about Felistas. I do not mean to stereotype in any way, but I never would have guessed she was orphaned because of the warmness that oozes out of her. I loved the passion she had when she spoke about her life and can truly tell it greatly impacted her for the better.

Our close to an hour chat seemed so short reminding me of the times that I spend doing the same with my own Grandma. Whenever I visit her during my holidays, even a whole day was is never enough for the stories she tells me which range from dressing to politics.

My highlights of the time spent with Felistas was when I took “selfies” on my phone and showed her, she gave me the most genuine smile. Despite her living conditions, she remains positive, energetic and ever smiling.

When I get to her age that is the aura required. Possessing such a magnetic character with an optimistic mind should be something taught to everyone.

## 18 Education opened his eyes

**Told by Clement Nthawanga and written by Khumbolane Niyrenda**

*Still in Malawi Khumbolane Niyrenda enjoyed speaking with Felistas Muhome so much she decided to spend time with Clement Nthawanga. He is of the Yao tribe on the Malawi Zambia border, and he tells of being a traditional dancer as a young man and how education opened his eyes.*

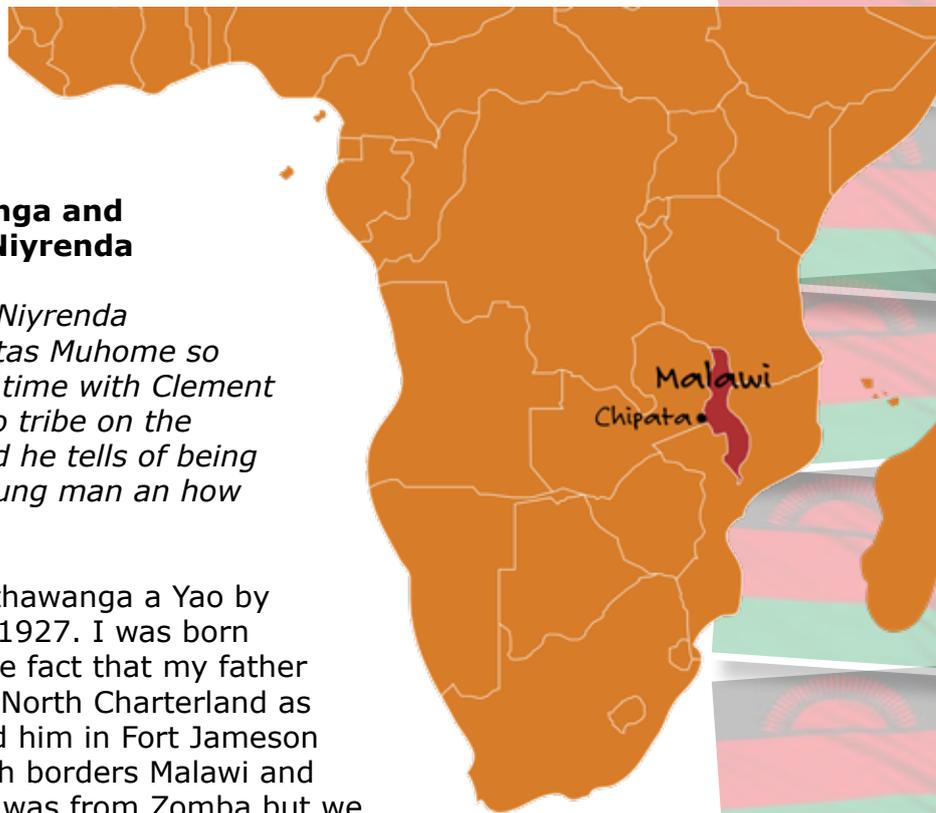
"My full name is Clement Nthawanga a Yao by tribe but born in Zambia in 1927. I was born out of the country due to the fact that my father worked for an Estate called North Charterland as an accountant, which placed him in Fort Jameson now known as Chipata which borders Malawi and Zambia. Originally my tribe was from Zomba but we relocated to Somba village."

That is how Clement proudly introduces himself to me before we go any further with his story. "Our tribe was Islamic but after the relocation we changed to Christianity and became Presbyterian. Being the first settlers here my clan headed this village and my grandfather became the chief of the area popularly known as "Che Somba" in 1910 and ruled for 30 years till 1944 when he passed away."

### **Importance of education**

When asked about his education, Clement says he pursued his primary school education in 1940 at Somba Primary, which is now Chipapa FPE School where he completed sub-standard classes 1 to 6 in 1946. He goes on to add that he further pursued secondary education at Kapeni DEC but only went as far as Form 2 due to financial constraints.

On a happy note he says "I am so grateful for the opportunity to have had gone to school because the education was of such high quality it opened my eyes to new things and it is very easy to understand things these days because I am literate and know how to frequently speak English."



**Khumbolane Niyrenda (22) and Clement Nthawanga (90)**

As we continue our chat he tells me how in 1949 during the time of hunger in Malawi he got his first job as a clerk at Central East African Railways, formerly known as Malawi Railways, where he worked for 18 years till 1967. He left in search of greener pastures.

### **Finding love**

It is in February of this same year that he met his beloved wife Selina. "Oh Selina was a nice girl of the Lomwe tribe. She had just finished her primary education at Blantyre Girls School which is where we met because I had been attending a graduation ceremony there. After eight months of courting we finally got married later in the same year. Our first of eight children was born in 1971 and we named him 'Masankho' (Chichewa for Election) due to the fact that during that time in Malawi we were phasing out of Colonialism to Independence," Clement happily recalls with a smile on his face bringing out a dimple on his cheek.

"As a young boy of between seven and ten years old, I used to enjoy playing with my friends all the time. Almost every day we would also go into the mountains for an adventure. During our adventures we would climb all sorts of trees and eat different fruits and sometimes jam. When we were lucky enough to get a lot we would take some home to share with our families" he chuckles while explaining. He also adds that in the same mountains they would set bird traps to catch the birds to keep as pets or to eat as relish and back then the mountains were thickly covered with trees unlike now with the deforestation and high demand for trees for charcoal or firewood.

### **Traditional dancing**

"Now as a young man I became a dancer and was part of the "Mjiri" dance group, which was a co-dance mixing us with the ladies. For entertainment sake I enjoyed watching the 'Likwata', strictly meant to be performed by women," he says. He explains that these dances were part of traditional celebrations such as weddings, initiations ceremonies and when there was a full or new moon. Apart from dancing he narrates that he did part-time fishing but was fully committed to school unlike some of his friends who grew up to be fishermen by the Somba River.

In that time it was easier to fish because there were a lot of trees by the river making it easy for water to be conserved to have fish ponds. Now the river is close to dry. At that age he also grew the passion to play football for even though he did not go further with it, he played a few friendly games with teams from the Police, Kapeni and Ndirande football clubs.

"My saddest experience to date is the time I lost my grandfather, I loved him so much and he guided and gave me advice for every situation I was in. He treated everyone equally and portrayed good leadership to his people. What touches me the most is that his tombstone is laid by the roadside close to the Soche CCAP Church so every time I pass by it I get flashbacks of the time we shared, it saddens me but I cannot avoid it."

At this point Clement is explaining teary eyed but clearly holding back the tears. "We were trading in Falken, half penny and one penny," Clement explains when asked about how they would trade back then. "The pennies had King George's face on them and the currency was strong. If you were able to save up even six pence, you had a lot of money. People would go shopping for clothes and shoes with just four shillings and still be able to cover their transport fares as well as food cost with that amount. Life was so easy and everything was fairly priced. Food was cheap; imagine we used to buy bread at six pence? And we would buy fish at two shillings and this is a very big 'chambo' fish that could last close to three days as relish not like the tiny ones you have today."



Clement says back then people were very healthy if they took care of themselves wisely. There was no need to even put fertiliser in gardens so the food was 100% organic; this could also be why it was healthy as well.

“I am not excused from this healthy bunch however, two years ago I was working as a truck driver for the Fattani Company and I missed a step getting off the truck which cost me a knee fracture and hip dislocation. Fortunately I was under a medical scheme and was attended to very quickly at Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital (QECH) in Blantyre. The doctors initially said I needed to be operated on to put a disc in to bring all the joints together but my jumpy blood pressure issues due to old age meant it was advised and I should rather use stilts to aid me when walking,” he explains not looking defeated at all of his stilt ridden condition.

As we came to the close of our chat he made it clear that he is friendly towards everyone whether older or younger, always avoiding fights or arguments and maintaining his peaceful and humble nature up to this date.

## 19 Missing the old way of life

### Marrion Ngoma reflects on ageing in Zambia

*From Zambia, Marrion Ngoma tells how older people in Zambia perceive the difference between modern life and that of their youth. Talking to Matthew Mulenga, Marrion finds he misses the old way of life with its traditions and sense of order.*

Anyone aged 60 years and above is called a senior citizen in Zambia. Most of these senior citizens are older than the independence of Zambia and were present in and during the colonial rule. Most of them say that during their time life was very well lived without all the technology and present day foods. They all lived in villages where they were ruled by a chief who oversaw everything that happened in the village.

The men spent their time hunting for wild animals while the women would help cultivate the fields. Education at that time wasn't privileged to everyone and thus most weren't educated as hard labour was the main source of income that helped put food on the table.

Every young man was taught how to hunt and cultivate so that he can grow up to be a hardworking man and well able to provide for his family. The young women were taught how to cultivate weave and provide certain things for their households. They were also taught to be obedient to their husbands as things such as gender equality didn't exist.

Many languages existed and each tribe spoke a specific tongue that only they could understand and as a result of this there wasn't much communication between the people of the different tribes and this often led into one tribe speaking out against another.

The different tribes never shared much amongst themselves, they hardly even crossed each other's territories to enter another's land. Marriages were also arranged for the young men and women by the elders in tribes such as the Tongas in Zambia. The senior citizens went on to talk about how traditional ceremonies were held on a regular basis. These ceremonies included practices such as drinking animal blood, dancing, beating drums and boat cruises.

The most respected people were the elderly as these have lived long and are considered to be wise. But others bought up superstitions of witchcraft among the elderly men and women in their 60s. They believed those who looked very old were practicing witchcraft and that being the reason they lived long. As the men and women of that generation were growing older, some of the beliefs and practices started to fade away.

The colonial rule had a great impact on the people that even after gaining independence some still continued to live with the new habits taught to them such as adopting a western way of dressing, talking and also eating. And as time



continued to dawn on them they lost some of their friends whom they shared that time with and little by little the culture that they held true and dear started to slowly disappear as the new generation started to spring forth.

Mr Matthew Mulenga, an 84-year-old senior citizen living in Bonano Township in, Ndola Zambia said: "The old are no longer respected as they should and no longer considered wise but foolish. Most of the traditions have been twisted and are not practiced the right way. Only the worst beliefs such as the elderly being considered to be witchcraft practitioners have been passed on."

The First Republican President of Zambia Dr Kenneth David Kaunda who turned 93 years old in 2017 has at many times and at various platforms echoed that whenever a senior citizen meets a fellow senior citizen, it brings them joy to meet someone who shared that time with them and can talk about how they lived. In the current days that the senior citizens are living in, they cannot recognise anything from their time that has been passed on to the next generations.

"Everything has changed from the environment that has changed," he says. "There are so many buildings where there was once a bush filled with all sorts of animals. The number of animals has reduced so they don't get to see much of them around."

### **Changing technology**

Technology has had the most effect on them; in their times televisions were viewed in black and white and only owned by the rich. But now everyone can own a television and view it in colour.

During their time landlines were the most common phones to have in a house and even then only the rich would afford it. But now mobile phones that can be carried are used and owned by anyone as they are now cheap.

It is, however, most unfortunate that the senior citizens struggle with using the modern day gadgets such as phones, televisions and for others who did not receive education but spent their days labouring to feed their families.

The current dress code is another thing that has drastically changed for them. They, however, perceive this drastic change as a negative change. As most women nowadays do not dress appropriately and respectably but dress to be seen displaying their half-naked bodies. Such dressing was not acceptable in their time as every child was taught in the right way he/she should go.

### **Author experience**

The senior citizens still try by all means to educate the children of today to respect their elders and the right way to go. These senior citizens do try to cope with current day activities but truly miss their days and peers who they shared their lives with.

## 20 The power of witchcraft

**Told by Sophia Ngoma and written by Donald Mufalali**

*Also in Zambia high school student Donald Mufalali from Lusaka talked to his grandmother Sophia Ngoma, who tells of witchcraft and the blessings she has experienced in life.*

Hello Commonwealth family! My name is Donald Mufalali and I was born in August, 2002 in Kitwe, Copperbelt Province, Zambia. I am in Grade Eight at Chunga Secondary School in Lusaka, Zambia's capital city.

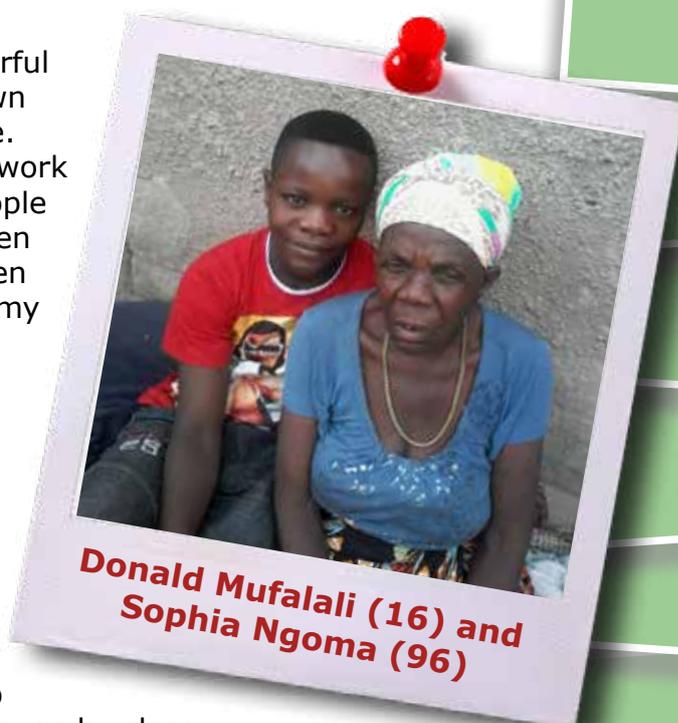
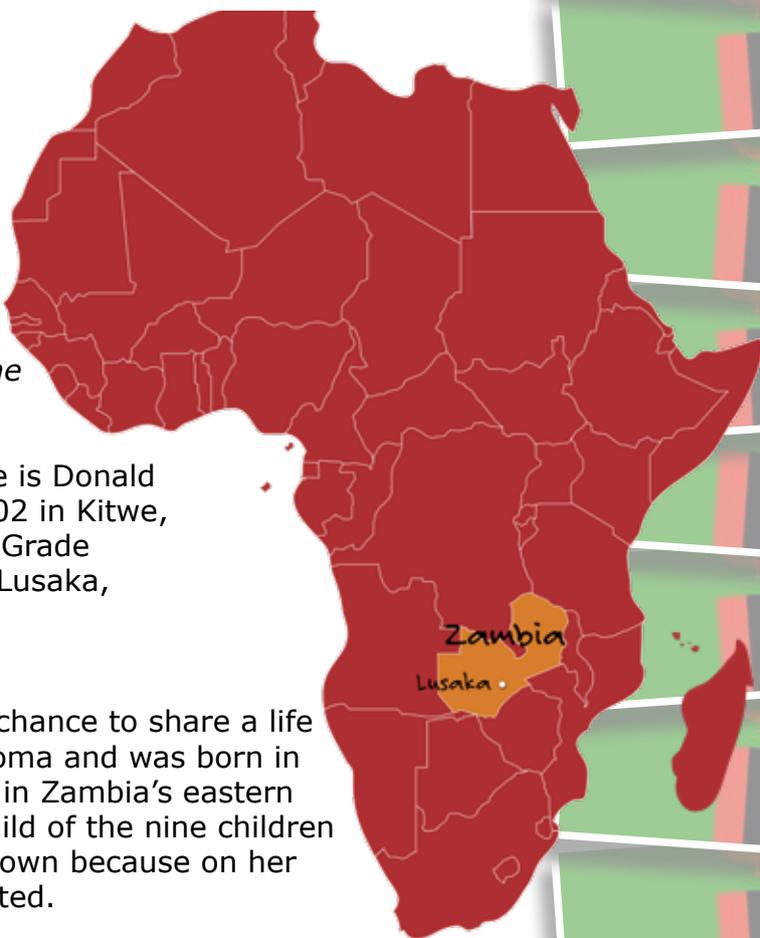
### **A thankful life**

It's a great opportunity to be given a chance to share a life story of my granny. She is Sophia Ngoma and was born in 1924 in a village in Lundazi, a district in Zambia's eastern province. My father is her last born child of the nine children she had. The date of her birth is unknown because on her national registration card is not indicated.

One day I asked her about how she feels to be an old woman and how people in the community treat her.

"I thank God that I have a son who keeps me well. He's married a wonderful wife who takes care of me like her own mother. They are a blessing in my life. I am old and have no money. I can't work and have no husband many aged people live in object misery and they beg even when they have children. Most children have neglected their old parents but my case is different," she sadly told me.

"In Africa aged people like me mostly are accused of being witches. I have been called one and it is so painful. However, I have been very strong and have contained it because I have children who comfort me and, above all God's been the greatest comforter. Always remember that time is the greatest healer of all deep wounds. I have been called a wizard even by close kin and folks," she added. My father always takes care of granny. Each time he is out for work mum looks after her and I and my siblings love chatting with her.



**Donald Mufalali (16) and Sophia Ngoma (96)**



"I thank God that I have a son who keeps me well. He's married a wonderful wife who takes care of me like her own mother. They are a blessing in my life. I am old and have no money. I can't work and have no husband many aged people live in object misery and they beg even when they have children. Most children have neglected their old parents but my case is different," she sadly told me.

Granny has no friends of her age. Her only friends are my family. She rarely falls ill and eats without difficulties despite she has lost all her natural teeth. Dad bought her some artificial ivory teeth which she sticks on her gums when going to church on Sundays.

Also, grandma stoops when walking with her walking stick and her voice breaks when talking. Because of old age her eyes are sunken and her hair is white as snow but she can hear me when I whisper.

"I'm very old now. I want to rest from earth someday. I have seen the good and the bad days and all my children are old and married. I have seen their children and their childrens children. I pray God can bless you with good health and bright future. Follow the instructions of your parents and always go to church.

Avoid doing bad things, try doing good things to please everyone and you will grow old like me. Work hard after you finish school so that you can enjoy a good old age. It's so sad to be a beggar and homeless when you are old. I'm blessed because I have your father who loves me. Very few of my children are like him," she said one day.

#### **Author experience**

Well, that is the little story about my dear grandmother. I hope it will make you learn something about the challenges old people encounter. We have to take care of them because who knows we too will be old like them and will need the care they want from us now!!

Of all my friends she is the fairest for she tells me a lot of inspiring tales where I draw lessons to live long and see old age like herself. I really want to be old like her so that I can be a wise person and grandpa.

## 21 Facing life with courage

**Told by Emma and  
written by Joshua  
Matakwan**

*In the third story from Zambia Joshua speaks to Emma, who tells of losing her daughter and contracting the HIV virus.*

In or out. Abscond it if you want to. How about facing it with courage? The moment a life begins, a trail is set for it's been said and done every beautiful thought's been said and done. This could be another one of which we get to see how one has a trail set for her younger generation. It is a great honor to be alive and able to tell another life story.

I am Emma. A Zambian citizen who has lived to be 87 years of age. I have seen, experienced, doubted, believed, wronged and told it's an endless life. At the moment I just let the memories play on my mind. I was born in a family of three, two girls and one boy.

My father was a miner and my mother a nurse. The little wages they got as salary fed us as well as gave us the necessities of life. Although education was free by then I never completed my secondary education. It could have been because of how easily some things would fall into place.

I attended high school for two years only and decided to go to college. I was able to do a typing course and by the grace of God I got a job as a typist at a company called Harrisons Company. At the age of 16 I got pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. I recall her being my source of joy.

But things became worse. I had so much on my mind. Her medication was expensive. I had to sell some properties to keep her alive. But unfortunately she couldn't keep up with me. She left me. That was the time I felt like the world was the wicked place.

As if that was not enough my husband and I divorced. Everything was literally eating me up. I decided to go back to college so that I could study nursing. After my course I got a job as a Care Taker Nurse. I was given an old white man to nurture. He was from a family of warm and kind hearted people and he was a man with a very big heart. He was in a critical condition. Little did I know that he had the virus HIV/AIDS.

I was so furious with the people who assigned me to take care of him because no one ever mentioned it to me. Since I used to take care of him I also washed his sores. I eventually contracted the disease. It was more like my life had taken a very strange turn. I would have given up. But in life if you have something to live for it keeps you going.



There was something I learnt. If you want to be happy tie your life to a goal, not things or people. This way you'll have something pushing you more like a driving force. Being a single mum I had to strive hard for the sake of my children and the generations to come. It is like I was supposed to remove the thorns out of the pathway for them I feel I did it.

You see life is this journey you embark on. The relationships you get to have with people. The bitterness, the courage and the joy that fills you after an achievement.

I am a Christian and I love God. We ought to know that there is a greater being. Ever thought for a pen to exist someone had to make it. Same as for us there is a greater being who watches over us. I feel God made me strong and patient and showed me ways. I went in and out of things. I had too many challenges and I am not worried because with all I did I know that there is a trail set for my family.

## 22 A well-travelled man

**Told by Bernard Emmanuel Phungula and written by Sthabiso Mzobe**

*The trek through Africa continues to Durban, on the edge of the Indian Ocean in South Africa where freshly graduated social worker Sthabiso Mzobe has been speaking with Emmanuel Bernard Phungula. He talked about his urge to continually better himself and his experiences of visits to England, Canada and the United States of America.*

My name is Sthabiso Mzobe born in the lower South Coast of Port Shepstone, a rural area called Ezingolweni. For means of better education and due to places of employment, my parents relocated to Durban, which is, where I studied from primary until secondary school.

Then I pursued a career in social work at the University of Zululand where I obtained my honours degree in the year 2017. I am unemployed and currently volunteering as a social worker at Issy Geshen Home of the Old Age.

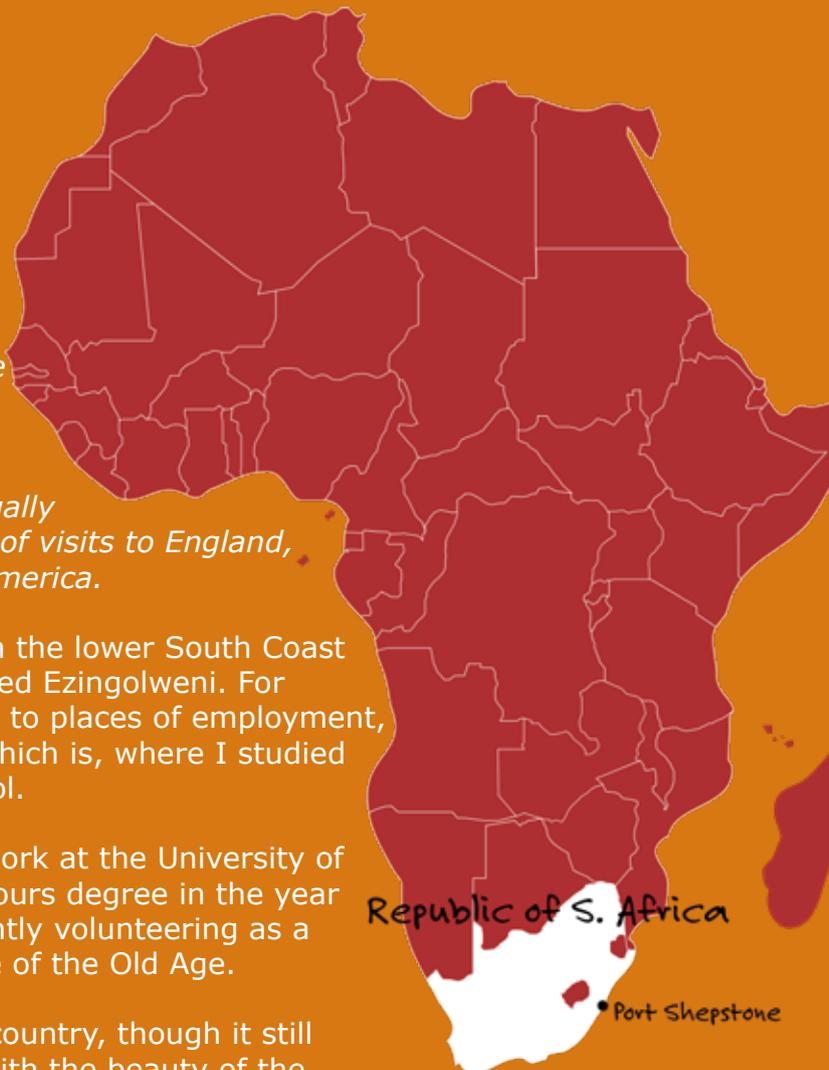
I owe my life to the beauty of my country, though it still developing but has rewarded me with the beauty of the gracing me with the mountains and rivers and a nation rich in culture. I pride myself as a South African because today through education, I hold the key to my future, and through the stories of the elderly, I find inspiration to better myself.

Mr Emmanuel Bernard is a 90-year-old who was admitted at Issy Geshen Home of the Aged in 2004. Bernard was born and bred in KwaZulu-Natal Durban in the township of Lamontville. Bernard managed to complete his matric [qualification to attend university] at a time where most black people saw less need to be well educated blaming the system of apartheid. Bernard later in his life, after working for years, harvested the fruits of his labour and travelled the world.

### **Blessed by his grandparents**

Mr Bernard Emmanuel Phungula was born in 1927 in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal at McCords Hospital. Bernard says that the hospital is known for treating patients well. After Bernard was born, his parents took him to his grandparents, which was a norm at that time so he can get blessings from his grandparents. The Phungula family lived in the Msinga area in KwaZulu-Natal. The Phungula clan come from the great Dlamini Sibakhulu clan. The families separated after sometime and his grandparents relocated to Umzimkhulu.

Umzimkhulu is an area situated in KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. The town lies 243km northeast of Mthatha and 18km south-west of Ixopo. This is where Bernard's father grew up. Bernard's grandmother was a strong Roman Catholic



woman and wanted Bernard's father to become a pastor, but when his father grew up, he got a job at Bantu Native Affairs. He was considered well educated because he had finished standard six at the time.

Bernard had an elder brother by the name of Alan Sakamuzi, and two sisters, Caroline and Penelope Khanyisile - all of whom are deceased. Bernard's father owned a farm at an area called Sawoti in KwaZulu-Natal by Mzinto, which is where they stayed for some time before Lamontville was established.



**Sthabiso Mzobe (25)  
and Bernard  
Emmanuel Phungula  
(90)**

### **First residents in Lamontville**

In 1934, Lamontville was established, and at that time, it was known as Umlazi Native Village. His father managed to get a house there and the Phungula family was one of the first residents in Lamontville. At the time, there were only 100 households in Lamontville. There were no schools in the area; the community of Lamontville shared the Phindangene Hall. The Phindangene Hall served as a multi-purpose centre; it served as a church, school and an area for community meetings.

The highest standard obtained at Phindangene Hall was standard six, and since Bernard grew up in Lamontville and studied there, he attended there until standard six. His parents wanted him to study until matric so he could go and apply for a job. At that time, he was regarded as someone highly educated. He therefore enrolled at Marian Hill College, which is where he completed his matric in 1946.

### **Working in Durban**

Bernard's elder brother studied up until standard six and got a job right after, but Bernard only started to look for a job after having completed his matric. Bernard landed a job at Ndaba Zabantu (Bantu Native Affairs), which dealt with black peoples legal matters during the Apartheid times. Its office was situated at Stanger Street in Durban.

After some time working in Durban, in 1949 Bernard was transferred to Johannesburg. In that same year, Bernard lost his father. He was 21 years old. He had to oversee to all the expenses and responsibilities of the funeral, as his elder brother was not much of a responsible person. Bernard was the families' carer and his brother was getting married with women and having children.

### **A variety of careers**

After some time working in Johannesburg Bernard left Bantu Native Affairs and found a new job at Robert Construction. Bernard was adventurous and liked exploring, and did not like being at the same place for a long period. He enjoyed travelling, so he was bored with the job after a few years and looked for a new adventure. Bernard got a new job with an insurance company, which he also did not stay very long with and decided to move to Port Elizabeth.

Bernard loved Port Elizabeth. He still admires the beauty of the countryside and the city. Bernard stayed in Port Elizabeth for a period of four years working there and unfortunately had to come back home due to family obligations. He could not run away from his responsibilities at home because he had people who looked to him.

### **A love of education**

Bernard returned to Durban and worked for a few companies including the Bantu Investment Co-operation (BIC). As Bernard was working, he also started to study part time. He pursued a career in B. Com Accounting, but Bernard was unable to study very far, he had to drop out because he could not afford to be in school and to look after the family. The expenses were too much. Bernard had already done five courses of the programme. Despite that setback, Bernard loved education and again looked to other fields, which bought him to studying personnel management, and completed all the courses.

### **A craving to travel**

Bernard later then got a job at Ramiespulp Bus Terminals. He actually got the job there due his experience. He worked there for a long period, and after sometime working there, he realised he still craved to travel, so he decided as he has seen most of South Africa perhaps he should travel abroad. He had been working for a long time and Bernard could afford the travelling. Bernard applied for a passport, which was all that was required at the time. To his surprise Bernard says he had no difficulties applying for his passport, bearing in mind it was still during the Apartheid times.

Bernard had one place in mind at the time, which was a place he always had read about, England. Bernard packed his bags and made contact with some people he knew whom stayed in the United Kingdom and flew to Sheffield, England. Bernard was in his early 50s when he first travelled abroad, which was in 1976.

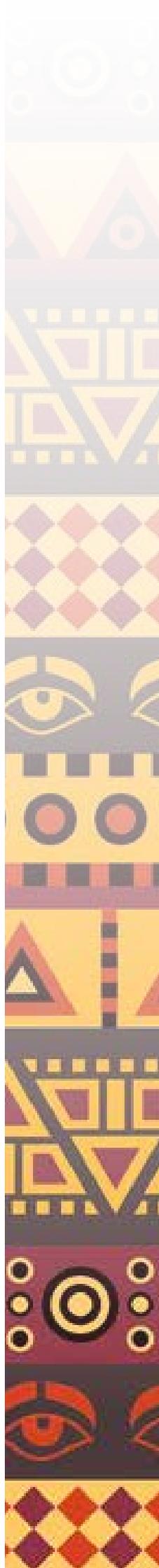
### **Experiencing Britain**

Bernard says England is extremely cold compared to South Africa but the most beautiful place ever once you have settled. The first thing he did when he got off the plane was have coffee. He stayed at a hotel in Sheffield for two nights before travelling to London. He went around the city of Sheffield, which is beautiful and clean and the people there do not talk much like South Africans.

Bernard admires the manner in which England people carry themselves. He says in England you can never get lost because the police are everywhere and are willing to assist people and it is safe. He says there are poles placed in the street of England which if you are lost you go to and you see where you are and where you want to go.

In Sheffield Bernard got telephonic guidance if he needed directions, he would call people at Sheffield and they directed him over the phone where to take the train or bus and how to go about his travels. Bernard travelled alone around England.

Bernard took a train to London from Sheffield to visit a family he knew from South Africa that stayed there. Bernard says the countryside of England is extremely beautiful and noted the country is highly industrialised.





Travelling by train afforded him the opportunity to see the beauty of the countryside for a few hours. Bernard says the farms are well fenced in England; the cattle are not all over and not in the plantations and almost each city has its own industry. The land is well utilised and occupied unlike South Africa.

When he got to London, his relatives were already waiting for him at the train station so he had no difficulties once there and they welcomed him and took him in for a few days. Bernard toured around the city next day, admiring its beautiful old looking building, and clean streets.

He says he remembers thinking that the post office was someone's house. He says you would pass the building if you did not know because to him it look like someone's beautiful home, but again when you step inside you realise that it actually the post office. Bernard also got the chance to meet a few people from South Africa in England who were very happy to meet him.

He then ended his vacation by travelling to New York from London, which was the biggest city he ever had seen but could not stay long and returned to South Africa.

### **Experiencing America and Canada**

Bernard travelled back to New York City in 1984. This time he wanted to see all the places he had learnt and heard about. Bernard had researched a lot so it was much easier for him to move about as he was familiar with some of the places. Bernard travelled by bus to see the famous Niagara Falls, which is the best sight-seeing ever he says.

Bernard thereafter saw Canada's biggest city Toronto - but he says it is nothing compared to New York City. Bernard saw many big and small cities, and also visited Washington and saw the White House. Bernard went as far as the Mexican border. He loved Mississippi and wished he could stay there but it was not to be.

He knew of many South Africans who went to the United States to visit but ended staying there for good. He remembers places like Hallam, Ohio, New Jersey and Philadelphia. He says it was the best place and was an experience of a life-time. "I would not trade the memories for anything," he says. If he could, he would do it all over again but many years have gone by- maybe it would not be the same he ponders.

### **A single man**

Bernard has never been married nor had children but he says that does not trouble him that much. Bernard gets joy from his 'grandchildren'. His brother and sisters have passed away; he is the only one left. The children take care of him, he does not stress much.

Bernard has had women in his life that he loved, and who loved him too. He still even remembers the first woman he felt in love with. She was from Lamontville, the woman's name was Jwala Mhlakwana, and Bernard still remembers her with a smile. He had a number of others after her but some are married now and one stays in New York.

He says he mostly dated nurses and at that time, it was important that you be with an educated person as it is now just so that life could be easier. Bernard says he figured that marriage was just never for him and in life, there are just some things, which are not for some of us, and we still function well without those things. It just a misfortune that for him it was marriage and children, he is well and alive.

## **A healthy life**

Bernard says even throughout his childhood and adult life he was never the kind of person who has health issues. It is only now that he is experiencing health problems, which he figures it related with ageing because God has blessed him with many years. Bernard says: "Not many live for so long but I do not know the secret to such a blessing, I am just thankful for each day if I knew better I would also advise others."

After Bernard had retired from work, stayed with his family at his brother's home, but the house was too small and the children were just too much to bear with. Bernard liked being alone and just having that peace of mind. Bernard had known of Issy Geshen old age home for a long time. Bernard decided to consult with a social worker at Issy Geshen whom helped him to move into the home. Bernard says at home his biggest issue was that the children are very careless and he was losing most of his stuff; his grandchildren also made a lot of noise around the house, which he could not stand even at night.

Being at Issy Geshen for him was the best decision. Bernard has what he wanted the most, which is peace of mind. He is well looked after with nurses around on a daily bases in case of health issues as he is old, he is living a stress free life. Bernard's admission at Issy Geshen Old Age Home was in October 2004 and since then life has just been comfortable for him.

## **Author experience**

Sometimes when the question of 'who is your role model' arise to us young people, we tend to think mostly about celebrities, while the most influential and most inspiring person can be the one person you least expected. Through Mr Emmanuel Bernard Phungula, I have learnt so much and took on a new perspective of the world and the importance of education.

With perseverance and a strong backbone, nothing is impossible, but through all that, one has to work hard in order to achieve his/her desires. That is what I learnt from Bernard. No matter the situation, you might be living under but the key to better yourself is within you.

Growing up during the apartheid times Bernard would have taken any direction in life or ended up no way but blaming and pointing fingers. Bernard loved education and travelling and at some point wished to adhere to that dream, which after years of hard work Bernard travelled the world. At the same time, Bernard had responsibilities awaiting him at home, which he managed. Bernard was not only about bettering himself but he also elevated his family as he covered all the expenses of their livelihood and education.

To me that is a role model.

## 23 A life shaped by dancing

**Told by Freda Waygood and written by Kimberley Gemmel**

*Further inland from the coast of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa, young schoolgirl Kimberley Gemmel has been chatting with English immigrant Freda Waygood in Pietermaritzburg. She hears about life during WWII and how dancing was a part of Mrs Waygood's life in both England and South Africa.*

As a 16-year-old girl, passionate about both history and literature, I was truly delighted to embrace the project of sharing the life story of Mrs Freda Waygood. Not only am I in awe of Mrs Waygood's spirit of generosity by giving back to the community through her passions of Folk Dancing, song and orchestra, but also due to the fact that her life was influenced greatly by being an evacuee from London during WWII.

I myself am fascinated by this time period as my grandfather was a prisoner of war, who escaped from a Concentration Camp in Siberia during that time.

Mrs Waygood's life was shaped dramatically by moving from England to the breathtaking country of South Africa, where both Mrs Waygood and I both reside in the 'sleeping city' of Pietermaritzburg in the province of KwaZulu-Natal. Mrs Waygood strongly believes that it is because of her family's constant care, support and kindness that she has lived to the 'ripe old age of 91' and that family should never be taken for granted as through thick and thin, they will always be there for you.

Similarly, being one of six children, I consider family to be one of the most important foundations on which my life is built, as regardless of our countless squabbles, I am certain that I will always be able to count on them.



**Kimberly Gemmel (16)**



**Mrs Waygood (91) surrounded by friends**

## Life in England

Born in August 1926 in the city of London, Freda Pash was only 13 years old when the news of the war broke out. Miss Pash was evacuated to Oxford with her fellow peers from Burlington high School, completely abandoning her three siblings, mother, father and the once trouble-free life that she had grown so accustomed to.

It was in Oxford, encouraged by her maths teacher, that Miss Pash and the other schoolgirls fell in love with English Folk Dancing, which in essence, not only helped to take the children's minds off of the horrors of war, but to cope with their own personal demons of homesickness too. Miss Pash's passion for dancing began when she was 16 years old at Cecil Sharp House, the headquarters for 'English Dance and Song.'

Miss Pash recalls vividly how in August of each year, the English Folk Dancing group used to perform at Stratford-upon-Avon and process through the streets in the afternoon to well-known dance pieces, which the public were able to participate in too. Due to the fact that she was separated from her family and was only able to visit her siblings and parents occasionally, the close-knit dance community became Miss Pash's family away from home and gave her purpose to continue living.

Miss Pash ended up living in Oxford for a period of six years during the duration of the war. She strongly believes that it is during this time and through the entire evacuation process that she realised the true importance of family and the vital role they play in one's life and upbringing.

Miss Pash's passion and talent for dance also allowed her to represent the English Folk Dancing team in Holland, Denmark, Ireland and many other prestigious festivals held within England - her favourite being those attended by Princess Margaret at the Royal Albert Hall.

During the war a friend of the Pash family and her son became evacuees in Cape Town, South Africa. However, at the end of the war, she returned back to England to continue to manage her book shop in Cambridge; she asked for someone to go to South Africa and continue to teach Folk Dancing as a part time job.

Due to her passion for dance, Miss Pash eagerly took up the position, moving to a country which she had never in her wildest dreams imagined visiting, let alone living in.

It was in Cape Town that Miss Pash met her husband, Paul Waygood, who had also emigrated from England, where he had served as part of the British Navy during the war. Once married, Mr and Mrs Waygood moved to the province of KwaZulu-Natal, where Mrs Waygood continued to teach Physical Education and Folk Dancing as an extramural activity in schools.

Although moving from England to South Africa was an extremely drastic change, Mrs Waygood claims that she could not be any happier living here, and that she is glad that she had taken up the opportunity to move to a new country and experience the variety of people, cultures, languages, religions and opportunities that this diverse nation has to offer.

Mrs Waygood also enjoys the vast landscapes, wild animals and developing nature of the country as she feels that each morning is an opportunity to experience growth as a nation. Mrs Waygood feels privileged to have experienced many positive changes within our country such as the end of Apartheid and the rise of a democratic government system, which aims to represent all individuals living in South Africa, regardless of their race, gender, beliefs or religion.

Throughout Mrs Waygood's life, she has contributed to and personified the Commonwealth theme of promoting a holistic and inclusive education system, which aims to unify specifically high school children from all backgrounds through a common love of Folk Dancing, synchronised swimming, orchestra and song.

Mrs Waygood's legacy at Epworth Independent High school for girls will not only be remembered by the generation of women who have been privileged to have been taught by her, but also by the generations of young women who she will continue to inspire.

Mrs Waygood believes that a country's future prosperity depends, to a great extent, upon the quality of education of its people. Therefore, she continues to help at Epworth high school with the belief that equipped with a well-rounded academic syllabus promoting excellence in not only sport, but culture and academics too, that the girls will become relevant, resilient and ethical leaders who will continue to contribute to our ever-changing world.

### **Author experience**

By writing Mrs Waygood's story, I was made aware of two critical concepts. Firstly, that the situation you are in can be overcome if you are determined to succeed and achieve your goals, regardless of how severe the problem seems to you at the time and secondly that, every generation has its own set of problems.

Although the 21st century problems may revolve around keeping up with the development of technology, entertainment and social media, it does not make the problems irrelevant. Instead, it means that we need to become more adaptable to work on finding solutions to keep up with our rapid-changing world.

Most importantly, by writing this essay, I learnt that being a part of the Commonwealth family requires a country to uphold racial equality, liberty, justice, democracy and human rights, which in essence will help one's country to move forward and prosper as a single, cohesive unit with the same purpose; to embrace world peace, as well as global unity.

## 24 Love and devotion

**Told by Mrs Josephine Asher and written by Sibahle Ngcengula**

*Also in KwaZulu-Natal in a Durban Care Home intern Sibahle Ngcengula, a student from the Eastern Cape Province, spends time with English born, former nursing sister Josephine Asher and her husband Peter. She tells of her experience of life in England, her many travels and her love for her South African husband.*

I am Sibahle Ngcengula, a 22-year-old woman from the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. I currently live in Durban. I have four brothers and three sisters. I lived with my grandmother from my mother's side of the family until I was six years old; she died when I was eight years old.

I don't know really know my grandmother from my father's side of the family as I only met her when I was almost 19. I have completed my Public Relations Diploma and am due to graduate in 2018. I met Mrs. Asher through The Association for the Aged, where I have been doing my integrated learning work from 3 April 2017 till present.

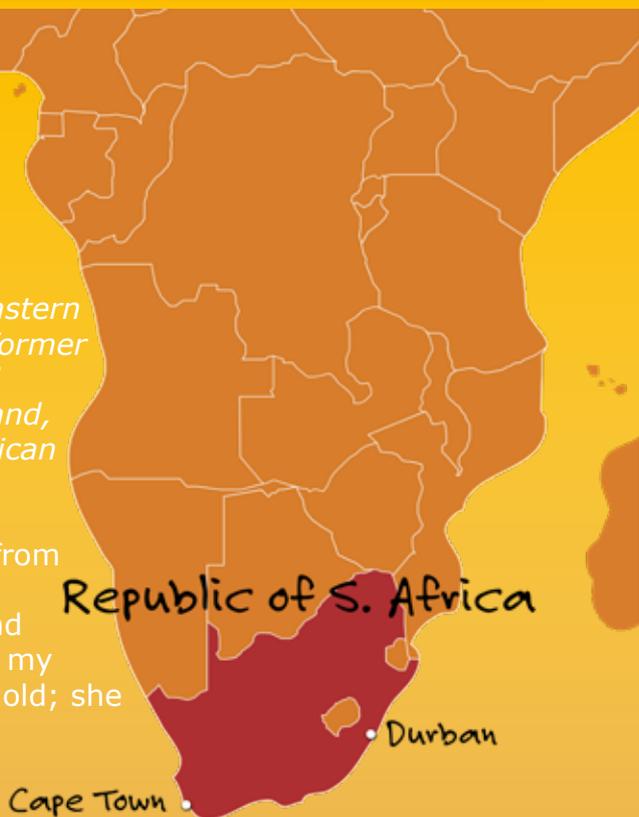
### **The life of a centenarian**

Mrs Josephine Asher was born in one of the famous holiday destinations of England, the Lake District, in the year 1916. She fondly remembers the Lake District, located in the county of Cumbria, and famous for its picturesque lakes, forests and mountains.

She grew up with two sisters, Muriel, who has passed away, and Pamela who still lives in England, in Buckinghamshire.

Josephine, as she insists I call her, lived with her family in an eight bedroomed house on an orchard farm with sheep. The family often picked fruit, explains Josephine, who includes apples, pears, cherries and raspberries as favourites reaped in the farm's harvests.

"During those times," she explains. "The technology hadn't evolved as it has now, cars were costly and owned by very few, rich, people. Special days like birthdays, anniversaries or holidays were always an eventful time and every cousin, aunt or uncle would visit."



**Sibahle Ngcengula (22) with Josephine (101) and Peter Asher**



**Josephine Asher in uniform**

"For us the children, there was lots of excitement. The aunts caught up on lost time seeing as travelling or passing messages back then was not as easy or fast as it is today." Thinking back on her childhood, Josephine remembers her favourite foods, which included everything cooked, roasted or baked by her mother who, in Josephine's opinion, was the best cook. She also recalls her love of reading, and dancing in her youth; her favourite dance is the waltz.

According to Josephine, life on the farm was peaceful and quiet; there was no running water or electricity, but she says there was indeed plenty to do. It's difficult for me, as a member of the current generation to comprehend how Josephine grew up without cell phones or telephones, fridges, television or radio, computers or washing machines. She learned how to drive at 18. So I ask her how she spent her time instead.

"I went to Linslade Girls School and was a very obedient student who played netball. I never had a pet, but my family owned sheepdogs that were used to control sheep". After school, Josephine studied nursing in college and was one of the expert nursing sisters in WWII, and worked at St. John's Ambulance and British Red Cross – which had regrouped under the name of the Joint War Organisation nursing the troops from the war. Josie says that the experience she got from working as a sister in the war is an experience she would have never gained operating in an average hospital.

### **Finding love**

Josephine met her husband, Mr Peter Asher through a South African Air Force Officer, who was part of the Commonwealth team that was dropping off supplies to Berlin; and then they met again at a club in London. Peter was with his mother, Mary (the first chairperson of The Association for the Aged, a very well-known non-profit organisation based in one of South Africa's renowned cities; Durban).

Peter and Josie fell in love, he courted her, and three months later, in September 1949, they were married and have now been married for 68 years.

Peter and Josephine had two sons; one died at forty-five years of age due to heart disease and the other; Anthony Asher is a professor in the University of New South Wales, and currently living in Sydney, Australia. Mr Peter Asher, a proud father, tells me that his son is an Actuary - well known for his interest in ethics in professional life, particularly the social impact of actuarial work, and is currently working on a book about ethics.

"Anthony has three sons; Robert, John and Michael who studied for a PhD at Wales University. All of our grand-children are married, successful and live in America and Australia," explains Mr Asher.

The Ashers, Josephine and her husband's family, have been associated with TAFTA (The Association for the Aged, the care home they are living in) following their union, for 58 years, two years shy of the organisation's 60-year history. They have been involved in various charity projects, and have worked with Rotary to raise funds for financially disadvantaged elders in the KwaMashu region, just outside of Durban.

One of Josephine and her husband's proudest achievements is the Paul Harris Awards they received from Rotary for their 55 years of involvement in charity work, in particular, their TAFTA related work.

### **Seeing the world**

During her married life, Josephine was lucky enough to travel a lot, having visited many countries in all over Europe; she has lived in America for six months, and I tell her how envious I am of that fact.

But she says her favourite destination is Switzerland; with cities that look medieval, and landmarks like capital Bern's Zytglogge clock tower and Lucerne's wooden chapel bridge, ski resorts and hiking trails.

Josie says: "When I first came to South Africa, I was homesick, yes, but I didn't have any regrets. I was amazed by the beauty of this country, its diversity of cultures, languages and religions." She liked that it had the most upbeat, humorous and warm people you can hope to encounter and she liked the way the people carried themselves.

She sees Cape Town as the most beautiful city in South Africa with Table Mountain, Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens which offers the unique Cape Floral Kingdom, and beautiful old vineyards. She also loves The Cape of Good Hope where 'two oceans meet' and Robben Island; the prison site of late president Mr Nelson Mandela, now a museum and a World Heritage Site; and The V&A Waterfront.

### **Memorable life experiences**

I then ask Josephine about her most joyous life experiences and she mentions the birth of her sons. "The saddest moment was when one of my sons died, but with the help of my husband, I have overcome this grief."

Another memorable time in her life was the celebration of her 100th birthday where her son and grandchildren visited to celebrate and share this fantastic milestone event in her life. TAFTA, with the hotel group Tsogo Sun, arranged a huge party, and her family also took her out to a Country Club.

Recalling her funniest life experience, Josephine says: "The funniest moment was just last year when a young girl was staring at me for a long time. When I asked why, the girl said to me: "I've never seen anyone who's over 100 years in my life," she laughs.

Josephine credits her husband Peter, a generous, loving, caring and intelligent man for her longevity. They have faced both emotional and physical challenges in life, but they don't let that get them down.

Mr Asher has been blind for 15 years, and Mrs Asher has been using a wheelchair for ten years. They still see the beauty of life and nature. They have had a wonderful marriage and have been a great support for each other through all the ups and downs of life, in joyful and sad moments. They are best friends and family to each other.

### **A strong faith**

The people who have had the most significant influence in her life are her parents and grandmother, but what has influenced her most is her belief in the Lord and she puts him first in everything that is part of her life.

I then ask Josie if she could change one thing about the world, what would it be? She tells me she would love to see people embracing each other in spite of the differences that they have and treating each other equally. She has tried to live her life by the Prayer of St. Francis – Make me a channel of your peace.

The couple, who reside at one of TAFTA's residential homes, Robert Storm House in Cambridge Gardens, situated in North Ridge, Morningside, are extremely content. They own a lovely flat that overlooks a view of trees in nearby Mitchell Park, and have been living there for the past 17 years.



As I prepare to take my leave of the now tired Mrs Asher, she reminds me to remember that her husband is a wonderful man, and she leaves me in awe of their union. I hope only someday to myself share such a content union and to love and be loved as much as the Ashers' love each other.

**Author experience**

From Mrs Asher's story, I have learned that it is important to put God first in everything that you do. It's important to live your life to the fullest and to love freely. It's quite amazing that she put all of her trust and faith in Peter's love for her and moved with him to his home country, a country she'd never been to, and it shows that she is brave and free-spirited.

Her love story is inspiring. It is also quite moving how much the Ashers cared about other people. They've dedicated most of their time to helping others. Life was very different when she was my age. I will be adopting the Prayer of St. Francis in my life because of her.

It has been a great honour for me to be the one who tells Josephine's profound story.

## 25 Defying stereotypes

**Told by Mrs Nomusa Marry Khuzwayo and written by Fisokuhle Hlongwane**

*On the outskirts of Durban, KwaZulu-Natal, South African university student Fisokuhle Hlongwane met with Nomusa Marry Khuzwayo who experienced the challenges of apartheid and surprised him with her energy and enthusiasm.*

I am Fisokuhle Hlongwane, a 22-year-old male from KwaZulu-Natal Province of South Africa. I was raised and currently reside in a city called Durban. I grew up in a township just outside Durban called Ntuzuma. I was practically raised by my grandmother Smangele Hlongwane who passed away in 2014. She was more than a grandmother to me; she was like my mother and father at the same time; her passing was one of the hardest things that I've had to experience in my life. I have completed my Public Relations Diploma and am due to graduate 2018.

I met Mrs Nomusa Marry Khuzwayo at an organisation called The Association for the Aged (TAFTA). She is a resident at one of TAFTA's buildings called John Dunn House, situated in Wentworth, just outside of the Durban CBD. As I prepared to interview her, I spent much time considering the kind of questions I would put to her. The first time I saw Nomusa, I saw an old woman who was frail, and I said to myself 'this is going to be a long interview'; most frail people find it difficult to speak. I, later on, discovered how wrong I was when we started engaging.

I was struck with shock because she was nothing like who I had expected. She was full of energy, smiled a lot, and she did not have any difficulty when it came to speaking. She spoke a lot which made things much easier for me; one would argue that I was interviewed as much she, as she asked as many questions of me as I did her!

She was very excited at the thought of being interviewed; opening up and telling me all that I needed to know.

### **A poor childhood**

Born in Inanda Mission, rural KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, in 1928, the 89-year-old faced various challenges growing up, mainly because she grew up in the apartheid era. Nomusa is the third born to Mr Wilfred and Mrs Anna Ncala.



**Fisokuhle Hlongwane (22) and Mrs Nomusa Marry Khuzwayo (89)**

“Growing up,” she says, “It was challenging since my father was the only breadwinner of the family; he was a minister at one of the missionaries in Inanda and had an income that amounted to 5 Rand a month. He made use of the garden they had and sold the produce so that he could support his family.”

Nomusa says these experiences have taught her to become a person that appreciates the little things in life and to always look for other options when life challenges present themselves.

When I asked her about her educational background, Nomusa stressed that I should take every opportunity I get when it comes to my studies and that I should appreciate the exposure to opportunities her generation never had.

She was pleased when she heard I’m currently waiting for results that will determine if I would be awarded my diploma in Public Relations Management.

Nomusa went to Inanda Mission school, which is where she attained her Junior Certificate; “I do wish that I could have studied further as my interest was in biological studies and I had hopes of becoming a nurse in the future.” Due to conditions of the apartheid era, however, she could not continue her studies, and her dream of becoming a nurse faded away.

### **An unhappy marriage**

Another point that she emphasised was that, in life, you should always make sure that you do not make life-changing decisions without fully understanding the impacts of it. She, later on, explained the reason why she kept repeating this to me.

At the age of 20, she got married to a Mr Ngcobo who was older than she was. “The marriage changed my life,” she explains. “I had hoped that it would be for good but, later on, I found out that it was for the worse.” Nomusa’s in-laws did not treat her well, and what hurt her the most, she says, is that her husband always took their side.

Her marriage with Mr Ngcobo lasted for nine years, and in that marriage, she bore four children; to her the only blessing to come out of the marriage. To survive, Nomusa found God who saw her through all the challenges she faced. “It was hard for me to go back home after the divorce from Mr Ngcobo, especially because in an African household, divorces are a sign of disrespect and failure.”

### **A strong faith**

Having her relationship with God made her strong, and Nomusa was able to face all of the challenges and criticism that came her way. She made do with the little income that she received from working in the kitchens of the neighbouring suburbs to care for her family as a single parent.

### **Happiness in a second marriage**

After five years, God blessed her with another husband Mr Khuzwayo who also took in her four children and raised them as his own. She describes marriage with Mr Khuzwayo as a huge blessing as it lasted for 40 years. “My life changed for the better when Mr Khuzwayo became my husband; my children received the best education.”

But Nomusa’s life took a drastic turn when her husband passed away in 2007; that’s when she had to move to TAFTA. She describes her stay at TAFTA as one of the best things to have ever happened in her life. The hospitality she receives is very much appreciated and throughout the years she has found a new family and a place she can call home.

While moving to TAFTA brought joy to her life, it is bittersweet, explains Nomusa, as she has since lost touch with her children, having not heard from them in years. "What hurts the most is that my children have abandoned me," she solemnly states.

Nomusa tries to stave off the sadness by keeping busy, and she started a vegetable garden at John Dunn House where she is currently residing. "Gardening helps me relieve the stress and also keeps me busy," she explains.

I was very moved when she then begged me, with tears in her eyes, that no matter what happens and wherever I end up in life, I must never neglect my parents because that's one of the most painful things a parent can ever endure. Being a person who firmly believes in God, she says she forgave her children a long time ago but does wish they came to visit her one day so that she could also meet her grandchildren and be a good grandmother to them.

Nomusa is quite popular at John Dunn House, she's well known, and everybody speaks highly of her and her love for the vegetable garden she tends to. If she is not in her room reading a bible or having something to eat at the Wellness Centre, you will always find her in the garden, it's said.

She says it's where she finds peace, and it's also a way for her to clear her mind. Her story touched me, and I did not understand why her children would abandon her like that.

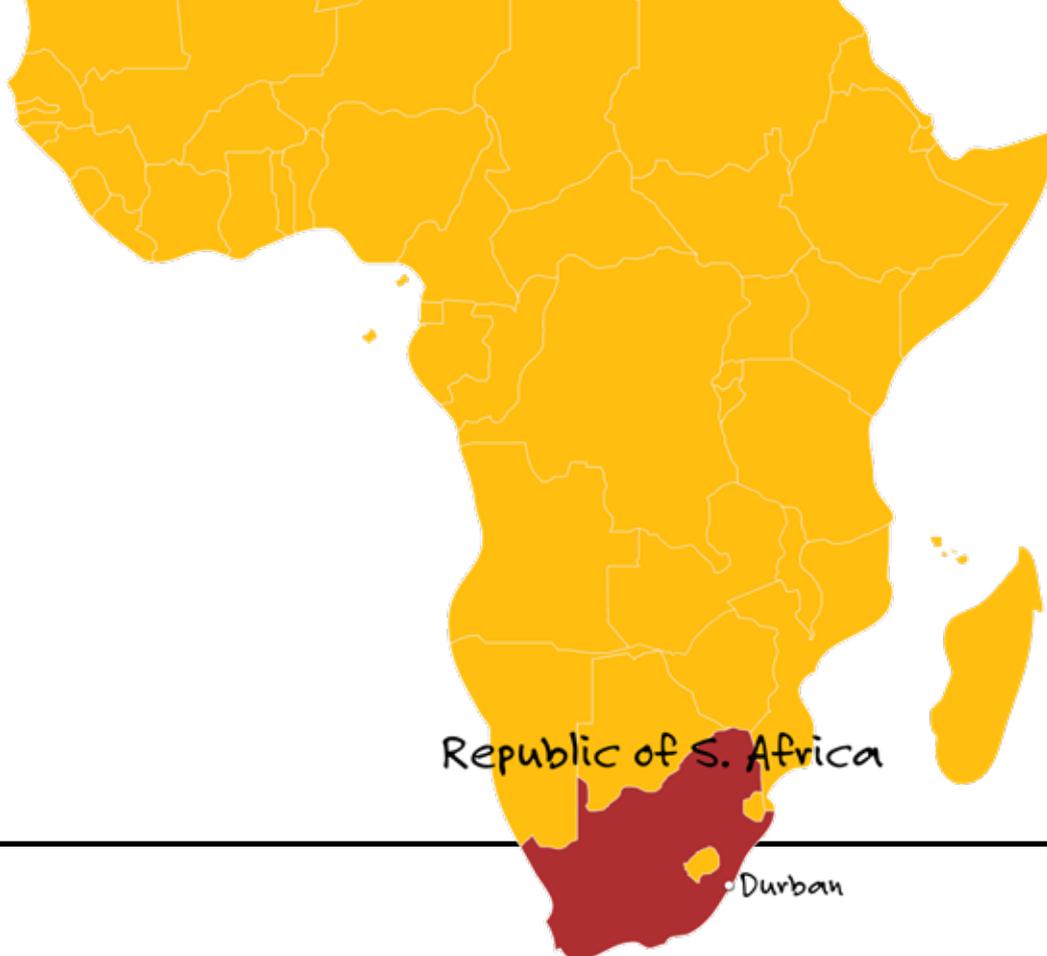
### **Author experience**

Listening to her story, I learnt that as a person you are responsible for your happiness and that you should not do things that benefit or please other people while suffering in silence.

I also learnt from Nomusa to appreciate family and that, taking care of your loved ones, more especially parents, even after you have a family of your own, is very important. She kept on implying that I should always look after my mother, this was because she was neglected by her children when she started residing at TAFTA many years ago.

After my interview with Nomusa, I was left feeling inspired and hurt at the same time, inspired because she went through a lot in her life and what kept her going is her faith in God and also believing that there is always a chance to do better.

I was hurt because I saw how the situation with her children affects her; when she talks about them, she'd always shed a tear. I now value my family more than anything, and I would never neglect them after hearing Nomusa's story.



## 26 Creating extraordinary results

**Told by Senmathie Pillay and written by Taresh Harreeparshad**

*In the last story from South Africa, Taresh Harreeparshad spoke to Senmathie Pillay. The story is an insightful glimpse of life experienced from the strong Indian community perspective in Durban and its crucial role in creating the Republic of South Africa.*

I am a journalist in South Africa who enjoys telling stories of people who try to make a difference in society. I work for SABC (South African Broadcasting Corporation) News in Durban. I have done some work with TAFTA (The Association for the Aged) in Durban and was eager to tell the story of Senmathie Pillay.

Senmathie Pillay is a 96-year-old woman who believes that hard work keeps her going and she really enjoys being independent. I feel that her stories illustrate how the elderly play a vital role in South Africa.

### **Still weaving her legacy**

"Why you never tell me you were coming today, I would have made veddas for you? Senmathie Pillay greets me with radiance and energy you wouldn't usually expect from a 96-year-old woman.

Elegantly draped in her silk sari, not a strand of her wisdom-whitened hair out of place - she explains to me that she loves to keep busy.

"So much vedda I made the other day, it got finished. Even that sweetmeat with the rice I made - not many people can make that, you know?" And I immediately knew- that the world may make many things - but it wouldn't be as special as the treats made by the hand of Mrs Pillay.

She alongside her 13 siblings lived happily in Durban's West Street in the 1920's. But soon they swapped the hustle and bustle of the city for the farm in Edendale, Pietermaritzburg that her grandfather bought. And from that time Mrs Pillay learnt the tricks of the table; helping the ladies in the kitchen.

### **An arranged marriage**

She married Candasamy Gopal Pillay in 1939. She was 18 at the time – and reluctantly said yes to the arranged proposal because, "Well I couldn't immediately say yes!" she giggled like a little school girl with me!

He was an educator and together they raised three children, placing great emphasis on the value of education. Yet Mr Pillay earned but five pounds a month. We couldn't live off that," her eyes narrowed, as she surely relived the difficult times she had to face.

But by now we all know that Mrs Pillay cannot merely sit by as a passenger while her life travels through bumpy terrain. She started sewing clothes and curtains in their Asherville home. And oh yes- she made those famous sweetmeats. For Mrs Pillay life represented an opportunity to do something extra to create extraordinary results.

### **Providing refuge**

It was the late 70s. Banned political activity was heightened as African National Congress cadres hid literally from pillar to post trying to mobilise support for the liberation movement.

One night, Mrs Pillay's second born Dhanapalan Pillay told her "Ma, somebody's downstairs". She replied "They going to stay tonight and go in the morning. Put all the blinds down."

"Now I don't know who I'm going to meet? Oiy when I met them- they looked so lovely: So calm Pravin and Billy looked," she describes as she tells me how she provided refuge to political activists Pravin Gordhan and Billy Nair.

The ANC was banned at this stage and if these activists were caught by the apartheid Security Branch their lives would be in grave danger. And so they traversed the system on the underground - seeking hide-outs as they moved from meeting to meeting.



**Taresh  
Harreeparshad (33)  
and Senmathie  
Pillay (96)**



"I made them good meals and told them to sleep upstairs," she says. Her eyes soften as she speaks from her maternal heart. "Every night Billy Nair will put on his big stache and glasses and would go for meetings."

She adjusts her sari now. "They called me ma. They'll never forget me."

### **Living under apartheid**

Mrs Pillay tells me how she had no answer to her three children when they asked her: "Ma why are there only two seats on the entire bus for us?" Here's a woman – who like several other South Africans stayed silent every time the whip of apartheid cracked. "When we would go shopping, if a white person was behind us in the queue, they used to still get served first. What could I do?" she asked me.

Something.

And that's exactly what she did when she provided refuge to Pravin Gordhan and Billy Nair to help them do another days work to deconstruct the apartheid system.

### **A self-sufficient widow**

Before Mrs Pillay turned 50, Mr Pillay succumbed to a heart condition. And here too she intensified her efforts to remain a full self-sufficient widow by continuing her sewing and sweetmeat making. Her children Punidespari, Dhanapalan, Devasaruby were gladly happy having this busybody around.

But, 17 years ago when she was 80 Mrs Pillay made a decision: she wanted to go to an old aged home.

"My grandchildren were growing up and they needed their space and I wanted to be independent." she explains her decision.

At TAFTA in Durban Mrs Pillay quickly became part of an organisation called Squirrels (aptly titled for this efficient worker). Here alongside several other residents she would organise and sew donated clothes which could be put to a sustainable use.

"I have a group of my own friends here; sometimes we get up to mischief. But I can't tell you the words we use!"

Clearly, I was a little underage!

### **Keeping active**

But now, as she turns 97 this December, she has decided to tone down her activities and no longer works at Squirrels. But do you think she has stopped working? By now I'm sure you know the answer!

"Now whatever my family asks me I do. Other day, my connection had one function, they sent the bhajia mix, I made all the bhajia. Anything anyone wants, I'll make it for them."

For Mrs Senmathie Pillay growing old in South Africa means doing things. Supporting causes. Keeping her senses stimulated by completing tasks that will ultimately benefit somebody. It's with this affirmation that Mrs Pillay continues to thrive as she approaches another birthday.

And what will you do now Mrs Pillay?

"Well I can still thread a needle." And so she keeps weaving her legacy.

Mrs Senmathy Pillay glided down the hall to her room at the old age home. And she turned over her strong shoulder and said: "Must tell me when you coming for the vedda, I'll make it and keep."

**Author experience**

I was in awe of her stories of apartheid and that showed to me the role everyday South Africans played in this time. It was a deeply awakening experience to hear the treasure chest of information the elderly South Africans have to share.

She also taught me how daily contributions to the lives of people helps uplift the nation.

## 27 The joy of eating ripened mangoes and hearing birds singing on the long, bare footed walk to school

**Told by Mr Laurence de Seram and written by Santhusha Mahishan Mallawatantri**



*Now arriving in Sri Lanka top ranking student athlete Santhusha Mahishan Mallawatantri from the Gampapa District of Sri Lanka describes her grandfather Mr Laurence de Seram's tenacity in gaining and sharing education along with some of his childhood memories.*

My name is Santhusha Mahishan Mallawatantri. I am a 16-year-old Sri Lankan. Born in 2001, I am a full time student athlete and an interactor who pursues a dream to make a world a better place to live in. I am one of the top ranked swimmers of my country and have hobbies for collecting foreign currency, playing the guitar and photography.

Being a very active and a spiritual person it is one of my most common practices to help and aid older people in society. Mr Laurence de Seram has been devoted in teaching English and English literature to the children in the village.

He is also a person who has challenged all hardships in life. Irrespective of all the difficulties he has had to face he has looked after his mother. We live in the Gampaha district in Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is an island surrounded by the Indian Ocean. Gampaha District is one of the 25 Districts of our country. The older population in Sri Lanka is rapidly increasing and currently represents 12.2% of the total population. Total population of the country is 21 million.

Mr Laurence de Seram is a Sri Lankan born in 1946. He is the fourth son of a family of seven siblings. Two of his younger brothers have passed away in their teens. He has two elder sisters and one elder brother. His mother Mrs Seram 'nona', was a housewife who passed away last year at the age of 95. His father was a farmer who passed away when Mr Laurence was a teenager.

They lived in a small house, which was situated close to paddy fields in the Gampaha District. Gampaha District is a highly populated district in Western province of Sri Lanka. Even though there was a rapid urban and sub-urban development, he grew up in the friendliest environment learning and nurturing all the skills that enabled him to rise as a radiant character through his childhood.

### **A poor upbringing**

Following the death of Mr Laurence's father they had to undergo many economical and social difficulties and hardships as his mother was a housewife and they didn't have fixed monthly income to fulfil the family's day to day requirements. But with the guidance of his mother irrespective of their hardships they were enthusiastic to continue their studies.

Following his father's death his mother has taken over the responsibility of continuing farming the few family owned paddy fields. But they didn't have the needed equipment/tools for farming. They had to hire those tools from nearby stores. Most of the time they didn't have money to pay the hire. To find the money to pay the hire they had to do many odd jobs like washing plates, pots and pans at nearby houses and hotels.

With all those hardships he continued his studies. He was blessed for his studies by his two sisters. Mother gave them encouragement but she was unable to help them with their studies as she has not gone to school and she was unable to read or write.

Mr Laurence continued his studies in English, which was a rare opportunity during that time. Even though he lived a life of pure difficulty through his childhood, Mr Laurence de Seram was an outstanding student in his school days with a high intellectual capacity and an ability to study English and English literature.

### **Walking to school**

His school was situated far from his house at town area. There was a bus service for people to travel to town area. But poor Mr Laurence didn't have bus fare to go by bus to the school. He used to walk to the school with his two sisters.

He is very proudly expressing his views how they enjoyed their daily walk from home to school and back. He says while coming back to home from school they used to stop in front of many fruit trees specially mango trees and enjoyed ripened mangoes watching birds and listening to birds singing. According to his description the most enjoyable days were the rainy days. They used to make paper boats and keep them at the roadside rain water collection places.

Mr Laurence recalls his memories of school days with great pleasure. He was a very active child who devoted his school life to studies as well as to sports and balanced all the activities to the prime of achievements.

Many times Mr Laurence highlighted that during his childhood he greatly enjoyed being with the nature and he didn't have mobile phones or any other electronic devices to use. He strongly believes that nature and good friends around him gave a strong positive mental stability to cope with his hardships.

A calm environment helped him to concentrate his studies as well. He did not have shoes or slippers to wear. He went to school with bare foot. He didn't do any fuss or complains for not having school shoes or slippers. He says that utilising the maximum out of things that are available is more important than crying for things that are not available.



**Santhusha Mahishan  
Mallawatantri (16) and  
Mr Laurence de Seram (72)**

### **Duties at home**

Soon after he returned home from school, his next duty was to go the paddy fields to help his mother. He worked in the paddy fields with his mother and brothers till late evening. Once returned back home from paddy lands he used to do his studies till midnight.

They didn't have electricity at that time. He used to study by candle light. He was a very good person and a prefect of his school and a great student all-round. He pointed out that time management is an essential success factor that everybody should learn from childhood.

Mr Laurence has got through his Ordinary and Advanced level examinations successfully. He was selected to the university for his higher studies. But he has decided to do a job due to financial constrains. His mother was sick during that time there was no one to look after their daily needs. Therefore instead of entering into the University for his Higher Studies he decided to do a job.

He quotes always that he never regrets the decision he took to look after and support his family sacrificing his future.

Finally he became a teacher in English language and English literature. As he is a kind hearted person teaching is well matched to his character. He is devoted to teaching and still he does teaching to students and adults on a mainly voluntary basis.

### **Finding, and losing love**

At the age of 35 years he got married to a lady named Chandrani. After his marriage, he lived happily with his wife and mother. Mr and Mrs Laurence had a son to their nest. One year later his wife was pregnant again and delivered a daughter. Unfortunately and unbelievably at the time of second delivery his wife Chandrani passed away due to heart failure.

Young Mr Laurence was helpless with two children. He couldn't bear the grief as it was sudden, unexpected death. But for him there was no time left to spend crying. God has given a challenge to look after his two children. His mother was the only relief he had to support him. His sisters and brothers were married and lived far away. He found the courage, stood up and faced to the challenge. He taught students and worked twice as much in order to raise his children without any unfulfilled requirements.

### **Caring for his family**

He says that he used to analyse things in a broader aspects, as a result of it he believes himself strongly for having abilities to cope with situations and look forward. He brought up his son and daughter well with the blessing of all. But continued his teaching activities. With the time his mother became older and older and more feeble and sick. Frequently she had episodes of asthma. She had swollen joints, which made her restricted of doing her own activities of daily living.

Gradually Mr Laurence has taken all the responsibilities of looking after his mother, two children and all household activities. He fed his mother, he showered her, washed her cloths, combed her hair, took her to the toilet and cleaned her, dressed her, took her to the temple and he cooked food for his mother.

During their leisure time, he made some paper crafts with his mother. He always accompanied his son and daughter in caring of their grandmother. The biggest problem they had was to find water because their well was situated far away from their house. But anyhow Mr Laurence managed to do all work without failing.

### **A writer and story teller**

Mr Laurence is an excellent writer. Each day he used to maintain his personal diary to record important incidents happened during the day. He used to prepare notes to his students. Always updated his knowledge by reading many books, magazines and newspapers during his leisure time.

His knowledge on current political background is vast. He is a Buddhist and visits to the temple very frequently.

He is an excellent story teller. Village children love him very much and they are fond of listening to stories from him.

### **A proud man**

Mr Laurence is has a fair complexion with silver hair. He is tall and always very particular about his dress. Very clean well ironed simple cotton dresses. Therefore most of the villages used to call him "white grandpa". Small children love him very much because he is a very popular storyteller.

All the people remembered him for his famous saying "always handy and trendy but empty pockets". He never once told anyone about his difficulties and faced all problems head on but he never let anyone notice his hard life as he always woke up with a smile and went to sleep with an even bigger smile.

Still he is engaged in his teaching activities. Initially his teaching was confined to his home village but now he has expanded it to other nearby districts for the children and adults on a voluntary basis. He emphasises that teaching for him is to make people better and polished in the society than doing it for personal accumulation of wealth.

### **Working for the community**

Once he was appointed as the deputy mayor to the area urban council by the village. During his term as a deputy mayor he completed many projects to the village. He renovated the abandoned library into a free public library that people of that area can come and improve their knowledge.

Also, he built a community centre for the area. He always gave to the society even with his economical ups and downs but never once expected anything in return. Even during that time, he continued his English teaching activities. He loves to meet his old students and speaks very proudly about them.

### **Enjoying life**

Currently one of his widowed sisters is living close by his house. Mr Laurence loves to sit with his sister at the courtyard of their house and recalls the incidents and happenings during their good old days. Such brother sister conversation run for hours and hours but at the end they will have laughed many times and also shed many tears.

Mr Laurence has two granddaughters. Both children love him very much. Some days Mr Laurence takes them to the school. Two children love to go to school with Mr Laurence because on their way back to home they get ice cream from him.

Even though all his siblings are scattered around the province that never stopped him arranging a small gathering for his sibling to offer offering at the local temple and graveyard for their parents and their deceased siblings.

Mr Laurence `s younger brother lives far away, but Mr Laurence visits him frequently as he is suffering from multiple non communicable diseases. Family bonding of these family members are amazing.

No matter how occupied he is, every morning he performs all religious activities as a Buddhist and prays strength and health to his family. He is also a very spiritual person. He prefers to live by the sacred Dhamma of Lord Buddha. He always takes his elder sister with him to the temple to listen to the sacred teachings of Dhamma and improve knowledge and understanding of life so that he can guide all his children in the way of righteousness.

Mr Laurence is a close relative to my family. As one of his loved grandchildren, I am fortunate enough to learn English literature from him.

Top of all I highly admire Mr Laurence as a kind-hearted human being. His main vision is to live productively without being a burden to any person or the world while the enjoying all the things that life has to offer.

I love his way of living, which is very simple, peaceful and helpful to others. We all wish him a good health and happiness.

### **Author experience**

There were many things and experiences that I have learned and gained from my session with Mr Laurence de Seram.

One of the main things that I have gained from him is to be optimistic about the things in life.

Also I have learned:

- To look forward to the bright side of hope when all the things go wrong and to help those in need of love and care.
- To help people with a good heart and make them lead a better life.
- To make the people better educated by sharing knowledge on unconditional terms.
- To never back down from a problem in life that come suddenly crumbling all faith.
- To be happy and satisfied even with the little things in life and be positive towards what I have instead of complaining about what I want and don't have.
- To persevere with hardships in life. That is to be objective toward the targets and ambitions in life.
- How time management makes one's life success.
- To be a nature lover and its advantages which we would obtain by living with nature.

Top of all, the way of caring elders and satisfaction what we obtain through caring of elders.

## 28 "Never let a stumble on the road be the end of your journey"

**Told by Mrs E M C Silva and written by Hirushi Chamodi Mallawatantri**

*Whilst waiting to commence life as a medical student, Sri Lankan Hirushi Chamodi Mallawatantri took a trip down memory lane with her grandmother, Mrs E M C Silva, who told her about losing a child to polio and reaching for her dream of being a teacher.*

As years go by we realise that memories are perhaps the greatest and most priceless of treasures one can possibly possess. Each older person is an individual and each person has valuable memories of their own life story.

I am Hirushi Chamodi Mallawatantri, a young aspiring female writer seeking the precious knowledge and memories stored inside the living libraries of our elders. I'm a 20-year-old Sri Lankan student; reading and writing has always been a great inspiration to me.

While I present my ideas with words, sometimes I use my camera to capture the fleeting but beautiful moments in life. I have completed my primary and secondary education in Sri Lanka and United Kingdom and I am waiting now, to enter university for my higher studies in Medicine.

My ambition is to become a doctor to serve mankind. I am the eldest in my family and I have a one younger brother. Both my parents are medical professionals.

Today, my 87-year-old grandmother Mrs E M C Silva, is my story teller. She is my inspiration role model and guiding light in my life.

Sri Lanka is an island in the Indian Ocean. There are 9 provinces and 25 administrative districts in the country. We live in Colombo District in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.

### **Defying stereotypes to attend school**

My grandmother Mrs E M C Silva, first opened her eyes to this world like a freshly bloomed rose during the early spring of 1930. Her mother was a housewife and her father was a farmer. She was the fifth born in her large family of seven siblings.



**Hirushi Chamodi Mallawatantri (20) and Mrs E M C Silva (87)**

She had an elder sister and five brothers. Due to an unfortunate illness, which spread throughout the village she lost two of her brothers at a very young age. Amidst financial issues, she grew up to become a bright and cheerful girl. At that time girls were expected to stay at home with their mothers and learn to do household chores and to look after the children in the house but her parents were determined to provide her with a good education.

She has been a bright and talented child since she was young which led her parents to enrol her in a highly reputed school. She has completed her primary education and her secondary education under the shade of her alma mater. "The most enjoyable time in my life was the time I spent with my friends at school." She truly treasures the memories and moments of her school life.

Since her school was a good distance away from her home, every morning she had to wake up early in the morning around 4.00am She would then get ready quickly and help her mother with the housework before running off to catch the bus on time. Her mother used to prepare morning snacks for nearby pastry shops to fill out daily household expenses. She had to deliver those snacks early morning to pastry shops while running to catch her bus to school. She has been a hard working and dedicated student.

Though her family lived in a small house with a roof thatched with coconut leaves it was a lovely and cosy place for her, filled with happy memories. Even to this day she smiles happily as she recalls and walks down the memory lane with me. Through many hardships she studied hard and excelled in her studies. She was determined to make her parents proud and at the end, she was successful in making her parents' dreams as well as her dreams a reality. She graduated from high school with distinction for all the subjects in her final exam.

### **Reaching for her dreams**

Growing up in a large family with five siblings has made her heart five times as big as the others. Being a mature young girl for her age, she saw the struggles her parents went through to provide a good education to all of her five siblings. Inspired by her parents' willingness to sacrifice so much for their children, her dream was to become a teacher and provide education to children who had financial difficulties and to make their own dreams come true.

### **A mother and a teacher**

At 19 years of age she entered the Teaching Training College to fulfil her dreams. One day on her way to college, she stumbled across a dashing young man who was studying on the platform while waiting for the train; that's how my grandmother met my grandfather. At the age of 20 she got married to him.

They were a loving couple who supported each other and faced the hardships of life together. They started building their own little nest and with time small nestlings appeared. After two years the first chick was born. My grandmother was 22 years old when she delivered her first child who was a lovely baby girl who is now my aunt. Within this time, my grandfather started his own laboratory and became the superintendant of Medical Laboratory Technology. According to my grandmother, he always came home and looked after all her needs even though he was busy with work.

At the age of 23 she got qualified as a teacher and she was lucky to receive her first post at her own school. She was appointed as an English language teacher for students in grades seven and above. She was delighted to finally be able to teach the children regardless of their social status.

At the age of 24 she conceived her second child and gave birth to a chubby little baby boy who grew up to become my uncle. They were a happy and a successful family and both were proud parents of two healthy children.

### **Unexpected darkness**

*"The magic fades too fast the scent of summer never lasts the nights turn hollow and vast but nothing remains...nothing lasts."*

Sanober Khan

The perfect and bright moment suddenly became clouded with an unexpected darkness. Her son suddenly fell ill. At that time regular nonmedical professionals like my grandmother were not fully aware about illnesses. They have simply thought it to being a regular fever. Then hospitals were not fully developed and equipped with new technology like today. Though various medication was given the child did not get better.

With the passing days the child's condition got worse and during a thorough checkup at the hospital he was diagnosed with Poliomyelitis. Sadly during then, the vaccine for Polio Virus was not available. It was a heart breaking time for my grandmother. But she never gave up and tried various treatments including physiotherapy from different health professionals.

After a certain period of heart-breaking emotional agony, the child started to recover but the deadly disease has left its mark. The child's left leg has gotten slightly weak and couldn't support the body weight. At this time my grandfather received a special scholarship to study and work in the United Kingdom but he gave up on this opportunity to support his family.

With his help, my grandmother stood up strong and worked even harder than before to educate her children. She is a strong woman who never wavered to the hardships which were thrown her way in her life.

She would always quote "When life throws lemons at you, you go and make lemonade out of it." She has a special ability on coping stresses and work accordingly.

She continued her teaching career while educating her own children, being a reliable mother and a faithful, supportive wife. She would wake up early in the morning, cook for her family and get the children ready for school and help her husband to open up his laboratory.

She will drop the children at the school and go to school to teach her other children. She was a dedicated teacher from her heart. Even during weekends she would ask students to come to her house if they had any doubts about the lessons. She was not only a mother at home but also a beloved mother and a true friend for the children in her class.

At school, she was the teacher in charge of her own class and she would teach English and Home Science.

### **A woman of many talents**

She is a talented cook and her cooking is a work of art. She was especially talented in drawing and sewing. Her fine needle work is true mastery. Even when I witnessed some of her work, I was too shocked because it was so breathtaking. The fine needlework was truly amazing for me as I ran my fingers over the thousands of stitches in different colours and shades. She has a special skill in selecting colours to match with the sceneries of paintings.

She was a teacher who was both respected and greatly loved. At the age of 30 she was transferred to a government school and she continued her career there for over 20 years. She was not only popular with the children but was a respected member of the staff. She is naturally polite and kind natured.

### **Devoted to her family**

At the age of 30 she conceived her third child and gave birth to a playful baby girl who grew up to be a beautiful young lady later and become my beloved mother. The family was a one big happy family but certain hardships never left the family. Supporting three children was not an easy thing.

My grandmother had to work twice as much to make the family financially stable as well as twice as hard to become a responsible mother. With the help of her husband, she provided a great education to all her children.

Though her second child had certain scars left due to his illness, she always encouraged him and pushed him towards his future goals. Due to the determination and dedication to her family, her children grew up to be fine adults. Her eldest daughter became an English teacher, her second son excelled in academics as well as sports. Irrespective her son's disabilities she urged him to do sports and he became a good badminton player.

Her son entered into the university and graduated as a special degree holder in Chemistry. Her youngest daughter became a specialist doctor. She became a proud mother of three successful children.

At the age of 55 years she retired from her teaching career but she never gave up teaching. She would still teach the students who showed certain weaknesses in her subjects at home. Even today these students praise and thank my grandmother for being a great teacher to them.

She is a religious lady and after retiring she has become more absorbed in living the life according to the religious teachings. Whenever possible she would go to the temple.

### **Inspiring others**

She would donate her pension for the betterment of the society. She loves to take part in social events and she would always step forward to help the less fortunate. She never let go of the opportunity to provide a fulfilling education to a child.

She provided scholarships and financially supported the children who were less fortunate and she still continues to do so. She is another Mother Theresa in her own way and I truly respect her. Even after losing her husband she never left us to feel his absence.

### **A love of gardening**

She loves gardening both flowers and vegetables. She started it from her younger age and still continuing. All the vegetables that she grows are organic. She never put artificial fertilizers other than compost. She herself makes compost fertilizer using all degradable household waste.

She selects the crops which are matching to the local climate; ladies fingers, long beans, brinjals [aubergine] and many varieties of green leaves are common vegetables that she grows.

She prefers to grow white colour flowers mainly as she could take them to the temple. She used to spend morning hours admiring her garden. Many birds and squirrels are eagerly waiting to see her in the morning as they all know that she brings their breakfast.

She looked after us since when we were small and added many valuable memories and teachings. When we were small kids she used to do outdoor games with us. She enjoys her life being with kids.

My grandmother is very particular on her dress. Frequently she wears saris. She wears it very neat and everybody tends to appreciate the neatness. My mother has developed that practice from my grandmother. My grandmother is very keen to teach me the way of wearing a sari in a proper way in order to maintain the process of training good practices from generation to generation.

My grandmother is a dutiful daughter, a faithful wife, a devoted mother and a successful career woman. She is proud in what she has achieved even if it was decades in the past. Behind her kind and confident smile was a life story like no other. We all love her. She is a blessing to all of us.

### **Author experience**

At youngest we are the most pure; at oldest most experienced but at both we are the softest at heart. I have learnt many things while walking down the memory lane with my grandmother.

One thing I learnt is that reaching your goals is simply not enough. We should use those goals to help the people in need from our inner heart. Whatever hardships life throws at us we will be able to overcome them if we are truly determined to reach a certain goal in life.

As my grandmother always says, "Never let a stumble on the road be the end of your journey." Though she has been very close to me for 20 years this opportunity allowed me to glance at a different side of her life which I did not see before.

I always think that our elders are a gift sent to us from heaven just like my grandmother.

In our lives there always comes a unique person who adds great values and attitudes. Their stories and teachings lead us towards the success of life. For me my grandmother was my guiding light. She is an iron lady who made her faith into her destiny.

## 29 "Old and young, past and future, far and near ..."

**Told by Rohani Binti Ahmad and written by Nur Hanum Binti Fauzi**

*Travelling to Malaysia Nur Hanum Binti Fauzi tells about her time reminiscing with her much loved grandmother Rohani Binti Ahmad. Her grandmother tells her about selling eggs on a train as a young girl, and Nur reflects on life experienced in the past compared with life today.*

Old and young, past and future, far and near, all have their own stories. How about me? Do I have a story to be told? Others will think that I want to tell my story, the stories from the young ones. But, how about the ones older than me? Do they have stories to share? But, what if there is no one there to hear them, listen to them? Most of the young ones seldom hear the talks of the old ones, right? Although even they live together with them, do they listen to their talk always?

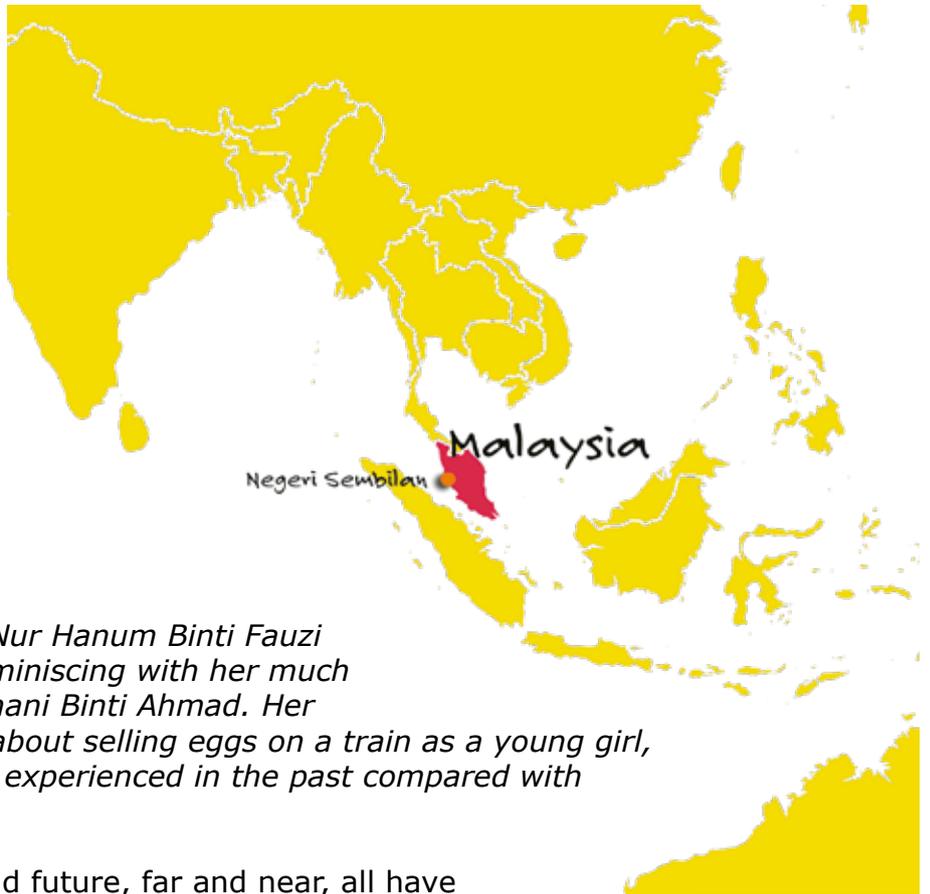
On a hot day, I manage to sit and think. Questions pop up in my mind. What? Who? Where? Why? When? My aim is to write something for today. I need to deliver something through my sword, which means my pen, my words. Who is she? Why do I meet her? Why does she tell me all these stories? What are the reasons behind all those stories? Well, before I answer all the questions I would like to introduce myself.

Hi there, my name is Nur Hanum; a 21-year-old Malay girl came from Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia, a country that has become an independent country since 1957.

Now, back to my questions, how am I going to answer them? It seems like I am meeting someone, right? Yes, you are right! I am meeting someone. A Malay lady aged 72 year old lives in a village called Kampung Mendum, also at Negeri Sembilan. From this old lady, I learn something. Through her life stories, from time to time, I know how grateful I am when I am able to talk and listen to her.



**Nur Hanum Binti Fauzi (21) and Rohani Binti Ahmad (72)**





### Then and now

I ask her, 'What is the difference between now and before, grandma?' While making some tea for me to drink on that evening, she says...

"I still remember when I was only eight year old, I stayed near the railroad and my father was the train shunter (the one who connected the carriages to different engine that headed to different places) in that time. What I saw on that time was hardship. I saw how my mother needs to use a pass to buy some rice [ration book]. Not like today, we buy ten kilograms of rice easily without being caught if we buy more. I also saw some transformation in this country. From no electricity and water system, I now can just switch on the light to see in the dark and turn the pipe to just see running water come through it.

At that time, my mother would always ask me to go to the river to wash clothes. Even though there is pipe; it was only one in the whole housing area. I still needed to go there, carrying my pail just to collect clean water to drink and wash. There are a lot differences from today and the past, when I was younger."

As I take a sip of my tea, I ask her more, 'Grandma, what are the trains looks like on that day? I heard that on those days, the trains were different from now. How about school? How did you get there? What kind of school did you go to? How as the school environment? Is it the same as my school?

The lady just takes some biscuit and gives it to me while she adds: "In my time, the trains were not like today. They still used coals to make it move. I will see black smokes coming from the first carriage, where the engine was and I would have some black soot on my face. The train in those days did not have seats like today. The seats looked like a long wooden bench.

I would take that kind of train every day from eleven o'clock in the morning to go to my primary school and I take the same train at six o'clock in the evening to go back home. My school was quite far from home. Although the journey was quite long, I was able to see how my dad worked.

Every day, I would collect eggs from the barn and sold them in the train secretly in order for me to have pocket money. We were not allowed to sell things in the train, you know. But, I had to. Just now you ask about school, right? My school was still made of wood and was not on the ground. They made it a bit higher off the ground like a double-storey house but the ground level does not have walls, just poles.

Can you really imagine it? It did have chairs and tables but most of it made of wood. I learned a lot there. I learned how to read and write. I did not stop just at primary school. I continue studying till Form 3, Secondary School.

After that, I cannot pursue further studies because my family cannot afford it. So, I quit school. I just stayed at home helping my mother. I also have a brother who was twelve years old and younger than me. Every day, I will help my mother raise him. After I quit school, I never intended to get a job.

I was so shy because I am a girl. Not like today, in the past, there was not much work that can be done by a girl, especially in a poor family. They just stayed at home helping their parents doing some chores. They said that if a girl tries to find a job outside, they were actually finding a man to be their husband."

### **Moving to Negeri Sembilan**

As I listen to her, I take a bite on the biscuits that she gives me. Then, I ask her, 'Grandma, how you end up being here in Negeri Sembilan? I thought before you stayed at Tapah Road, Perak.'

She drinks a sip of her tea too before she answers and says: "My father worked in a railway station so, as the trains went; my father will went there too. From Tapah Road, my family go to Ipoh then we went to Port Swettenham which now being known as Port Klang. I also remember that we had been living in Gemas also. Gemas was one of the train stations that I know. In the end, one day, my family decided to come to their hometown which was this place, Negeri Sembilan. I got married to a guy here too.

After getting married, I still go to other places such as Bentong, Pahang and also revisited Port Kelang. I had two children with him and not even one of them was born in Negeri Sembilan. Such a lot of place that I already went, right?"

### **Sharing more memories**

I am amazed. She loves to talk although she never admitted it. Sometimes, so suddenly she will just say she remembers something from the past. At times like that, she will say: "I remember what my dad did to me. If I say my bicycle broke, he will repair it for me. Although my mom was always nagging him, he would just listened and not even complained. What a patient dad he was."

One day, as I follow my grandmother to the orchard, she suddenly tells me about her experience being rob at that place. She says: "I usually went there to tap the rubber tree. As always, after the rubber latex which had already hardend and was being collected, I will wait for the man who is going to buy the latex. But on that day, as I waited, a man riding on a motorcycle approached me. He asked me about a person and the direction where that person lives based on an address that he told me.

I said to him that I did not know where it is. He said that he was from the community welfare; want to give financial aid to the person that he mentions before. Without thinking, I am letting him near me. I never knew that he was aiming for my gold bangles that I wore most of the time even when I went rubber tapping. It all occurred so suddenly.

The man takes my axe and pointed to me. Then he said, 'take off your bangles and give it to me if you want to stay alive!'

I was so scared. I took off my precious gold bangles. Three of them and I gave it to him. I also said softly to him, 'how dare you to this to old me!' After he had the bangles, he pushed me until I fall on the ground. It was hurt but my heart was more broken. The man left me soon after he got what he wanted.

I was left there still on the ground. I was so scared and sad. With a small cut that I got because of the fall, I went back home. I called my family. I cried. I was so sad that I lost my gold bangles. I never knew that I would be robbed. I made mistakes that time. I talked to a stranger. I wore my jewelleryes to the orchard. After that day, I did not do rubber tapping. I was even too afraid to go to my orchard. For some time, I left my orchard unmanaged."



## 30 Learning about life with Alzheimer's

**Told by Mrs Anjali Bhattacharya and written by Soumil Chowdhuri**

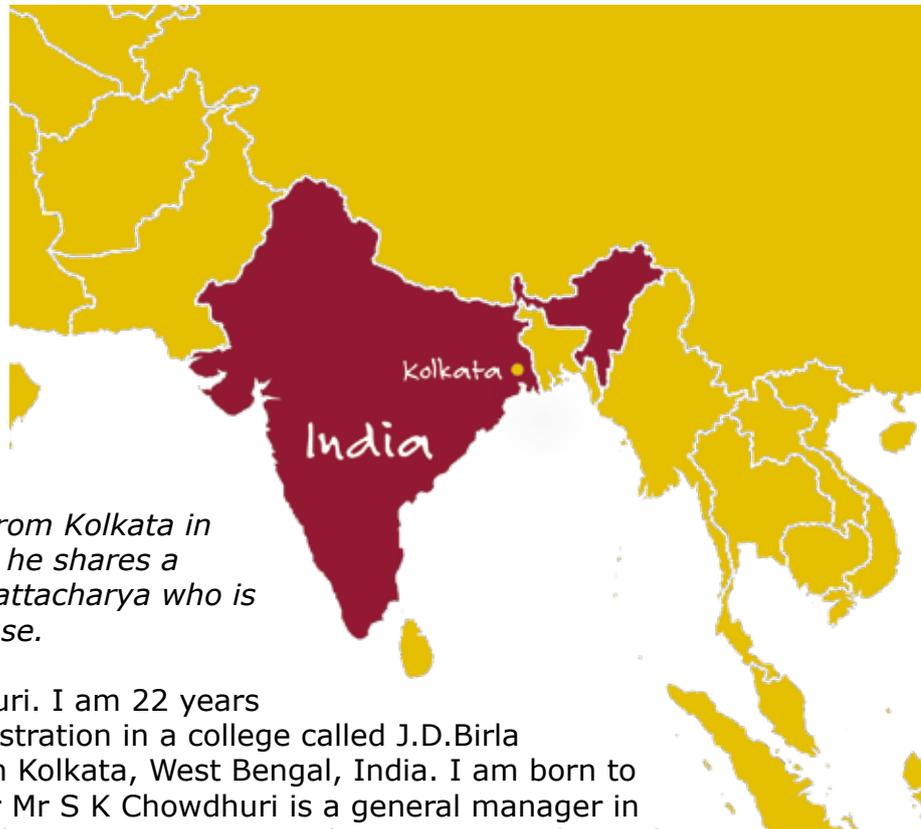
*Transferring to the Asian subcontinent we encounter Indian business administration student Soumil Chowdhuri from Kolkata in West Bengal, who discovers he shares a love of music with Anjali Bhattacharya who is living with Alzheimer's disease.*

My name is Soumil Chowdhuri. I am 22 years old. I study business administration in a college called J.D.Birla under Jadavpur University in Kolkata, West Bengal, India. I am born to educated parents. My father Mr S K Chowdhuri is a general manager in a public sector company in the power sector in India. He is a mechanical engineer by profession. My mother, Mrs Deboleena Chowdhuri is a high school principal. I am blessed to be born to very educated and well to do parents. I am the apple to their eyes as I am their only child!

I have always been a better than average student getting good grades all my student life. I would like to pursue my studies in one of Ivy League Universities of the United States of America. Apart from academics, I am a fairly good sportsman and have keen interest in cricket and badminton. I like to go to the gym and swim to stay fit. I learned Indian classical music as a child and am musically inclined.

I dream that someday the whole world would appreciate my music! I write songs that I sing, and I immensely thank the almighty for endowing me with a voice quality that every one finds melodious. I am very passionate about the artist in me. As regard to my nature I am a simple soul with great compassion for the needy, poor, underprivileged, aged and the sick. I am sympathetic and empathetic human being and want to improve myself to be a better soul.

The subject of my story is Mrs Anjali Bhattacharya, also from Kolkata, West Bengal, India. She is living with Alzheimer's disease and she attends a day centre. She is unique in her personality, a blend of rare qualities, a fusion of reality and fiction, virtual in mind but physically real. She has been



**Soumil Chowdhuri (22) and Mrs Anjali Bhattacharya (age unknown)**

a victim of country divide, when partition happened in India and a portion of Bengal went to Pakistan. India is a wonderful country, a mélange of diversities in religion, language, communalities and geography too. But despite all diversities we are united in nationality as Indians.

### **An obsession with education**

Every soul has a story to tell. Some stories are probably heard, some never told and some are lost. I am preparing to pursue my doctoral studies in the US and hence to aid my admission status, I wanted to do social work. I did not have to strive too hard through a family connection, I landed up in an Alzheimer Related Disordered Society of India (ARDSI) day care centre in Kolkata not far away from where I reside.

On a sunny Sunday morning, I spent some time with the patients in the day care, interacting with them, trying to make them happy singing, laughing and chatting. It is there I spotted her.. Mrs Anjali Bhattacharya, living with Alzheimer's but firm in her ideals and values and most importantly her love for education and music. She immediately caught my attention.

Born in an educated middle class family, now in Bangladesh (which was a part of Bengal earlier), she came over with her family to Calcutta. Anjali said she graduated from City College Calcutta, under the University of Calcutta. She will probably be an octogenarian, but stated that she was forty; the caregivers at the society centre mockingly and compassionately urged her to increase her age in years but alas! For one, who is falling with a ravaged memory, the numbers fail to signify the years she lived on the face of this earth.

Anjali said she was married into a family of Sanskrit [a language of ancient India] scholars, her father-in-law being a stalwart in the subject, who had authored many books in Sanskrit and bestowed with titles related to the subject. She was repetitive about this fact. She said her sons were both professors in the Indian Institute of Technology teaching Sanskrit – this made no sense to me.

Sometimes Anjali was hilarious in her perception of education; sometimes she was incoherent and illogical but there was no doubt that she valued education as the essence of living. She even said that the day care she came to was an institute for educated people, she was almost insistent about the fact education is the mantra of living.

### **A connection over music**

In her frail physical frame, her eyes shone when I questioned her about her passion; without a thought it was singing. Somewhere I found a connection. I was intrigued by the fact she doesn't remember her life events. She fails to recall so much vital day to day information, family, career, marriage yet Anjali mentioned so many varieties of music classical, folk, modern songs and not to forget the much loved songs of Tagore, like every other Bengali.

I am completely unfailingly very, very passionate about music and she is from a different generation with an imbalanced mental makeup, but we shared the same emotion over music. Yes, she touched my life and hence became my choice to essay her story to the world.



## 31 Having a role model

**Told by Gurajada Venkata Lakhmi and written by Chodavarpu Sankarshan**

*In Hyderabad, India, undergraduate student Chodavarpu Sankarshan speaks with his grandmother who tells him how she broke with tradition by getting an education and not being a child bride.*

My name is Chodavarpu Sankarshan. I am studying BA LLB in Hyderabad, India. I love to serve the needy as an advocate in future. The Indian Maintenance and Welfare of Senior Citizens Act 2007 is observed more on papers than in practice. A reason may be the senior citizens themselves. They love their children very much; that is why they are silently suffering and not filing cases against their children.

I want to work for older people who are in trouble.

**“A house needs a grandma in it....”!**



**Chodavarpu Sankarshan (20)  
with Gurajada Venkata Lakhmi (83)**

Yes it is true, I cannot imagine my house without her. I love both my paternal and maternal grandparents very much. So, after reading about the CommonAge project I decided to interview my 83-year-old grandmother. When I told her I will interview her she laughed and said “Your grandma is not a celebrity to interview and write, she is an old lady of 83 years, except experience, she has nothing.”

I kept quiet and left the room.

### **The author’s formative years**

“Grandmas hold our tiny hands for just a while but our hearts forever” is a very good quotation. My maternal grandma took me to her lap as soon as I took birth. Ours is a joint family and I am happy to share. I enjoyed

love and affection from my paternal and maternal grandparents.

My parents were living with my paternal grandparents along with my elder brother. But at the time of my birth my maternal grandfather had health problems. My maternal grandmother lost an eye due to the negligence of the eye specialist and they both had a very bad time.

So my paternal grandparents told mom and dad to move to my maternal grandparents home to help them. They are very simple and superb people and are very practical. With their advice, only mom and dad moved with us to my maternal grandparent's home. Mom took care of all of us.

We (my brother and I) both used to play, chat and eat with our grandparents. Grandma's stories, grandfather's sports tricks helped us to develop. We used to share everything with them.

They are the best baby sitters. They cared and pampered us more than our parents. Our grandmother taught us to love and serve the elders. She took us to Old Age Homes and taught us to extend our hands to help the society in a smaller way.

Both grandfather and grandmother accompanied us to our schools, extra activities classes, cultural programs and many more activities.

Now Grandma has become aged so she is not going out of home. Every evening she waits for us to return. If we are a bit late, she stands before the window. If we bring something to eat, she feels so happy and tells about it to her sisters. Grandfather is no more and our paternal grandparents have also left us, so we are having only one precious grandparent.

That is why I interviewed her.

### **My great great grandmother**

"What do you want to ask me?" she questioned me with curiosity.

"I want to know about your grandparents..." I said.

Grandmother felt very happy to talk about her grandmother. She spoke about her continuously for 15 minutes. Her name is Sooramma. She lost her husband at the age of 25.

At that time, she had only one daughter. As per our Hindu custom of those days her head was shaved and by then she started wearing only white saris and lived throughout her life with a shaved head.

She searched a good family boy as the groom for her daughter. After her daughter's marriage, she moved to her daughter's house. There she looked after everything. She was the best manager. She helped her daughter in her pregnant days and in childbearing days.

Her daughter Perindevi had given birth to five daughters. Sooramma looked after them very well. She taught religious matters, tradition, customs etc. She also greatly influenced her son-in-law in the matter of her granddaughter's studies.

### **By the eighth year**

In those days, in India women's education was not encouraged. Women were supposed to stay indoors until the age of eight. Ashtavarshaat Bhavet Kanya, (by the eighth year), is the Sanskrit sentence Indians always believed.

Every father should see that his daughter gets married at the age of eight. If the marriage age is extended father has to face the criticism of the society.

### **Breaking the tradition of child brides**

Being the father of five daughters he thought of fulfilling his responsibility fast by selecting good grooms. He did that for his first daughter. Soramma nearly fought and sent them to school. She loves education. She hated the thumbprint of this tradition. She does not want her grandchildren to be like her. Illiteracy and child marriage are the reasons behind the backwardness of women. Were they to be stopped, women will be happy was Soramma's opinion.

She woke her daughters up to study fresh in the morning, looked after them when they are sick, played with and pampered them. They got married after attaining high school education. She had seen their marriages and also helped in the deliveries of her granddaughters.

"My granddaughters are educated and got married to boys who are educated and young. There is no child marriage with an old person in our family.

There is no meaning in my life. I married at the age of 5, had given birth at the age of 15, I lost my husband and lived as a widow until now. There is nothing more to say about me, but now I can proudly say that I am behind my granddaughter's education.

I am behind their marriage with young boys. So now I will die with the satisfaction of doing these good things."

She often shared these sentences with her relatives in a proud manner.

### **Role models to motivate the next generation**

"Motivate children as good citizens of the society. If grandparents do that with love and affection then the grandchildren will shine like stars."

"There is nothing to say about me. Please write about my grandmother who is my role model," concluded my grandmother.

It was a very happy experience to listen the story of my grandmother's grandmother. Always grandparents appreciate and elevate grandchildren. Grandchildren will do that if the grandparents are famous persons. Very rarely grandchildren highlight grandparents, who are role models to them like Sooramma.

Hats off to my grandmom and her grandmom.

### **My grandmother's life**

My grandmother told me stories of Indian leaders and social workers and motivated us to help the needy. She advised us to help the back benchers who are weak in studies. Now she told me the real life story of her grandmother.

So I thank all of them who are behind the Life Story project. Because of you all I heard the story of my grandmother's grandmother. Thank you very much.

I like one Mexican proverb. "Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are". Yes, it is true. But I want to modify it like this:

"Tell me who your grandparents are and I'll tell you who you are."

I conclude with a small sentence, "Behind every good grandchild there will be a good grandparent."

### **Author experience**

1 It helped me to know about the problems women had in 1930s and 1940s.

2 This is my grandmother's first interview; this made her happy. As happiness is key to healthy life, she psychologically felt healthy.

3 This project will be like a bridge by covering the gap between the two generations.

4 It made me realise money doesn't give satisfaction to the elders but spending quality time with them does.

5 A Sanskrit quotation "Vrudhorakshati Rakshitaha" which means protection of trees, they in return benefit us in several ways. Similarly, protecting the elders will help in conservation and preservation of customs, heritage and culture.

6 This project provides a platform to take down the views and problems (abuses) of the senior citizens by providing them a right to express their feelings.

7 It also shows that elders are a piece of unrecognised and unnoticed encyclopaedias.

8 This project has given me sight to see a world without technology.

9 Most importantly, every elder wants someone to listen to their stories, experiences and feelings.



## 32 Nine decades of a life

**Told by Yakuti Ahmad and written by Prianka Sultana Hema**

*Moving to Mogbaza in Bangladesh Prianka Sultana Hema found out about the life of nonagenarian Yakuti Ahmad; although deprived of an education, Yakuti was proud of her daughter's education. Yakuti had vivid memories of both family life and experienced the challenges of living in a difficult political situation as Bangladesh gained independence.*

I am Prianka Sultana Hema. I am 22-years-old and a student of Department of Population Sciences, University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. I live at Mogbazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh with my parents and a brother. The old woman whose life story is taken by me also lives at Mogbazar for about 40 years. She lives with her sons and daughter-in-laws. She is 93 years old. She has four daughters and two sons of her own. The lower portion of her body has been paralysed through a major stroke in 2000, when she was 76 years old.

Our country Bangladesh is a country with so many cultural heritages such as Buddhist Bihar in Bandarban, Moynamoti, Salbon Bihar, Mohastangor, Cox's Bazar and Kuakata Sea beaches and so on. It is the country which has experienced a dramatic decline in fertility. In the next 30 years this will result in a high proportion of older people in the population.

The majority of the population are Muslims, second majority are Hindus and the Buddhist and Christian are low in number. Many other problems Bangladesh faces include high population density, environmental pollution, prevalence of poverty and inequality. The increasing population of older people will be a demographic problem in the near future as Bangladesh is not ready to treat so many



**Prianka Sultana Hema (22) and Yakuti Ahmad (93)**

old people properly with appropriate treatment facilities, sufficient number of care facilities and an adequate social safety net.

### **An education curtailed**

It was the time of about 1934, Yakuti Ahmad remembers that she was a student of Class 4, enjoying a nice life going to school, meeting with friends, gossiping, playing and so on. Within the ending of Class 4, her father declared that Yakuti's study had finished. "There is no need to go to school as Yakuti is large enough now. The girl learned to read and write. This is enough for a girl," her father stated.

Yakuti was only 10 years old on this time. She was shocked to know the father's decision. She was in the top position in the class. Why did she need to leave her study? This was the first shock in her life but not the last.

Three years later her parents arranged her marriage with Ashrafuddin Ahmad who was Yakuti's brother-in-law. She had not agreed this in her mind but her parents' argument was as her sister had died, she should take responsibility of her sister's child and so had to be married to her brother-in-law. Thus she became someone's second wife and became her sisters replacement. She felt a great sorrow and she thought it was selfish of her parents. But she had no power to give her own opinion.

Yakuti remembered the cultural setting and norms at that time supported the silence of the female in any decision irrespective of age. Raising the voice and giving any opinion infers the girl has been spoiled.

In 1938, Yakuti started to lead a new journey in her life with Asrafuddin Ahmad and her four-year-old step daughter named Hiru. Though she assumed that she would be never happy, the reality was different. Within a few months of her married life she realised that she is one of the happiest people. She was then in Bera, Pabna District. With the sincerity of her neighbours and relatives, having a beloved person of her husband, she became very happy.

### **A love of music**

Knowing her affection to song, her husband gifted her a gramophone. This gramophone belonged to her until 1972. She also liked to sing songs and also a harmonium in her parents' house. 'Kanon Debi' was her favourite singer.

### **A growing family**

Yakuti experienced the feelings of motherhood for the first time in 1941 through the birth of Hashmat. This gave her a new identification as 'Hashir Ma'. Within the next five years she became the mother of two daughters of her own, Taslima and Sadeka. The happiest moment came to her in 1950 with the birth of her eldest son, Boshir. She and her husband became very glad to have a son after the births of three daughters. In her married life she has given birth of three daughters and two sons. She experienced a busy life with the rearing of all the children, teaching The Quran to them, teaching songs to them and helping in their study.

### **Finding joy in her daughter's education**

Sometimes, with her all the household chores, she took a long breath and thought if she could run her study. One consolation for her was the fulfilment of the study of her daughters. All of her own daughters have graduated with a good result. So, she has fulfilled her aspiration through her daughters. Her whole life has passed taking care of her children and her husband. Her life was surrounded by her children. Still, she has a fulfilled life with her sons, daughters, daughters-in-law and the grandchildren.

### **Religious discrimination**

After the birth of her eldest son in 1951, her husband was dismissed from the Raninagar Primary School in Pabna because he was a Muslim. The authority showed the reason was that the school had no fund to pay his salary and so they would have to dismiss the teacher, the main cause would have been hidden. Yakuti and her husband faced a great troubles with so many children. In search of a work, her husband reached Calcutta and with a great trouble got a job in Barakpur Primary School of 100 taka per month.

### **Living through genocide**

Within the meantime, Yakuti with her family came to the Mogbazar, Dhaka where she now lives. In the time of 1971, she was in Mogbazar. The Pakistan military set up their office in the Telephone and Telecommunication office commonly known as T and T office, which is only half kilometre from her house.

She saw the horrible night of 25 March. Rajarbag EPR (East Pakistan Regiment) has been attacked by the Pakistan Army. The experience of fire and sound of the mesingan [machine gun], in the surrounding area of Rajarbag including Mogbazar, was a shock. She with her young boys and girls all were afraid so much. They left Mogbazar in the next day of this 'Black-night' and took shelter in the Alubazar in the old town of Dhaka where all 'Biharis' were lived and so was a safe zone for the Muslim. She felt safe for some months but she did not know what had happened in her parents' house in Shahebbazar, Rajshahi.

Yakuti was the daughter of the Fazr Monjil house in Rajshahi. Pakistan military had killed eight members of her family in a day. Through the letter from her brother in 1973 she was informed about such a grievous matter. This was two years after the declaration of independence. At that time there was no communication media in Bangladesh except the letter. Mobile phone, land phone all were absent at that time. Recounting the sad news, she also remembered the early days of her life.

### **Transport in the 50s**

After her marriage she went to Rajshahi from Pabna by train. Train was the only transport for the long distance destination in the fifth decade of the twentieth century in Bangladesh. She had to go Ewardi station from Bera via the boat crossing the river Padma.

Then had to climb in the train. It would take about five hours to reach Rajshahi, even though Pabna and Rajshahi were very closely situated. She even visited her parents' house in Dhaka in the time of about 1965 or 1966.

It was very tough at that time to make a visit from the Centre to the West of the country with the children, bags and baggage. She visits her parents' house only once from Dhaka but it was a terrible experience. Bangladesh is a river based country. Waterways were the main way in those days. She had to cross about four rivers on the steamer. Having to change one after another with so many bags, baggage and all the children. It had took one day and one night to reach in Rajshahi.

### **Under British rule**

She has also remembered that further back, they were in Calcutta. At that time the British government had divided the whole Indian subcontinent according to the geographical location which resulted in both the Hindu and Muslim community in a one part.

In about 1932, a great riot between the Hindu and Muslim had been created and so many people had died in both communities. All the Muslims in Calcutta had to flee away and most of them take shelter in Muslim based community. Because of having her maternal grandfather's house in Rajshahi, Yakuti and her family came to the Rajshahi where she explored a new world of solidarity of Hindu and Muslim. Very quickly she got so many Hindu friends who make her life more beautiful.

Though, after the marriage she had detached from her friends. There was no chance to communicate with them mainly because the absence of any kind of communication medium except the letter. It is also true that many of her friends also engaged in the married life and were confined in the household chores and went to the in-laws house and so there was no chance to communicate with them but still in the age of 90, she feels her friends and remembers those days.

### **Post-independence struggles**

Yakuti can also remember the days after the independence. It was a terrible time for Bangladesh. So many people irrespective of age had faced the pain of hunger. Hundreds and thousands people were standing in a line for the relief. People stood in a line from the midnight for a one plate of rice. How cruel it was!! Fighting for surviving!! Thousands of people did not know what would be eaten in the next day. Yakuti's husband witnessed in his own eyes that, in the train station a man pick up the rice from the vomiting of other and eats the rice one after another. Hearing this Yakuti felt why the earth is so cruel!

### **Sudden widowhood**

Yakuti Ahmad's major shock in her married life was her husband's death, loss of co-fighter of her life. It was 2 February, 1981. Her husband was used to go out for working by touching the forehead of Yakuti with love. Like all other days, her husband went out from the house by touching her forehead. She did not imagine the death of her husband. Her husband died through the road accident in Water Lily Avenue, Dhaka.

A severe brain haemorrhage gradually lead to his death. Her husband's death made Yakuti mentally very shocked. Within the same years of her husband's death, relatives on her in-laws side demanded the land where Yakuti and her children lived. They finally forced her to leave her land in Mogbazar and she took shelter in another place.

### **Fighting traditions**

Fortunately, all of the daughters had been married and in those times, her two sons were able to earn a living. Yakuti tried her best to get her land back and ultimately in 1999, with the help of the Arbitration Court, they compromised with the rival group and regained half of the land. Now Yakuti lives on this land with her sons.

### **New challenges**

But when all the fight has come to the end, she has started to fight with her body. The problem of 'becoming the whole body white' is not the problem of her whole life; it is the problem of her old age. This problem is not faced by any of her relatives but has to be faced by her.

Not only is the external problem, so many internal problems are faced by her. Through a major stroke her lower portion has been paralysed. She has to impose on her younger son Sahabuddin and the younger daughter-in-law.

Still sometimes she goes back to Sahebbazar, Rajshahi through her imagination, to a time where there were no difference between the Hindu and Muslim, and there was solidarity of all religions. It is where she passed a joyous life through playing, singing, gossiping and so on.

She is still happy in this life with her sons, daughters, daughter-in-laws, and the grand-children. She has a fulfilled life with all of these members of her family. She knows that death is inevitable. Her one and only lament is she will live through her family members and her own blood generation, not through the whole generation of the country through her own work.

If there is a chance to develop her potentiality in the earlier time, she will do many things for the generation through her writings. Also, she can be a famous singer which was another of her dreams.

### **Proud to be a woman**

Yakuti feels proud about the modern generation of women. She thinks that they have been able to break all the restriction of society. It is also true that the cultural norms have also changed but she gives the more positive role to the modern generation of women. She thinks changing social norms has been possible through the strong desires of the women, not that society has changed spontaneously.

She wishes that her children and grandchildren always lead a happy life. She also wishes that all women might fulfil their dreams. She wishes a world of peace where no war, no tear, no losses, no riot exist. She wishes for a world of solidarity.

### **Author experience**

It was very interesting to talk with the older woman Yakuti Ahmad who is 93 years old. I think she is a very talented woman.

Her experience of the riot in 1930s and famine in 1974 shocked me. The riot of 1932, freedom fight of 1971, famine of 1974 – all has been seen and experienced by her. Though I have known about some of these events through textbooks, I realised that reality was tougher than the descriptions in the text books.

I am surprised that though she has little institutional education, she knows more than me about the history. Not only those events but also the struggles in her life also surprised me. How much patience is needed to struggle throughout the life!

Her memory surprised me. Although the mobility of the lower half of her body is limited, her mental mobility is very sharp. Through the listening to her life story, I feel that I have taken back to in the 20th century with this older woman.

A realisation that has come to me, is that we are fortunate girls today as we have a chance to explore our full potential. It is a great blessing of God to us that we are not confined within the households like previous generations of women in our country.

### 33 Never losing interest in botany

**Told by Dr Ahmad Shamsul Islam and written by Sharazad Hassan**

*In Dhaka, Bangladesh university student Sharazad Hassan spoke to internationally renowned Botanist Dr Ahmad Shamsul Islam who describes troubled political times and how he never lost sight of his interest and career as a botanist.*

Let me start my story by introducing my country - Bangladesh. Located in South Asia, it has a collection of six seasons, which makes it different from almost all other countries. It is a small developing nation, but the hearts of the people are generous and benevolent. I've been born and brought up in this emerging independent country.

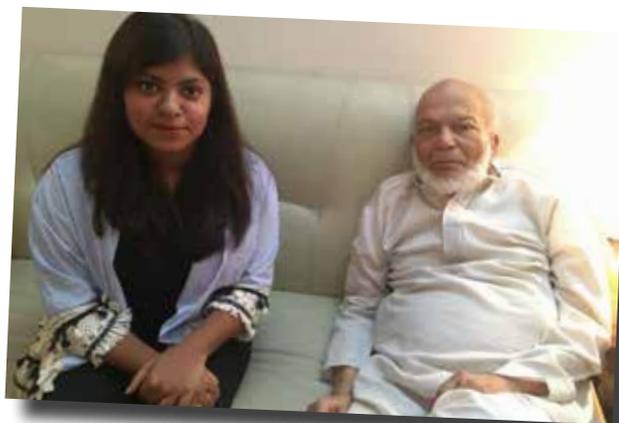
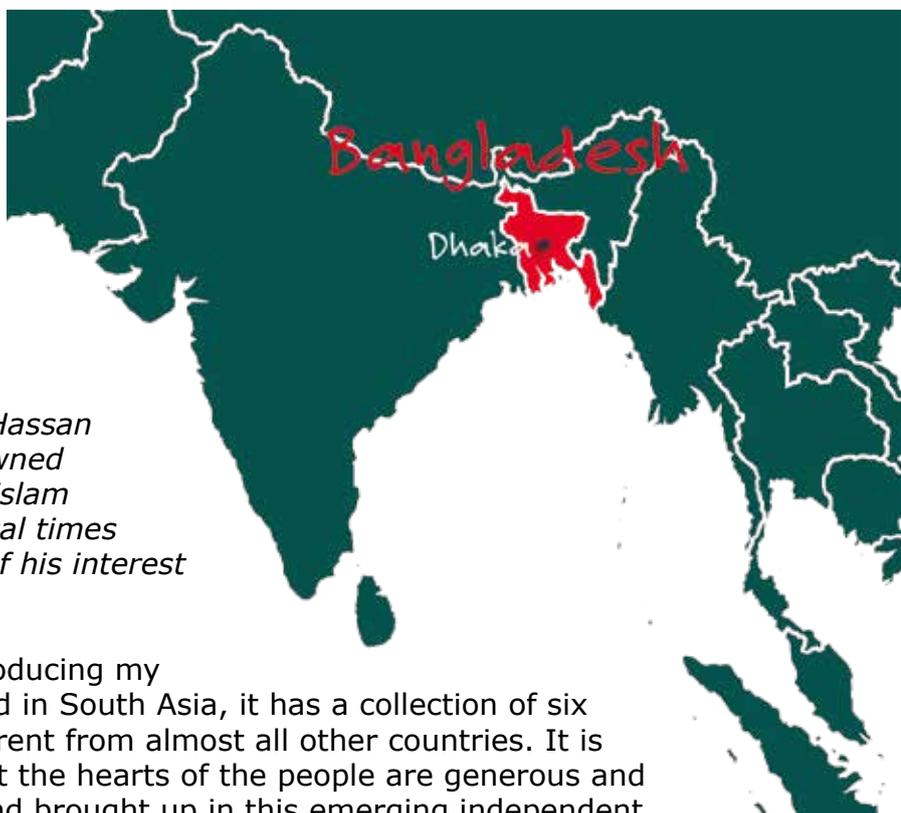
On a bright August Sunday morning, I was scrolling down my news feed and I suddenly came across this post in my Facebook which advertised the CommonAge Competition.

That post caught my attention, and the first person that came to my mind was Dr Ahmad Shamsul Islam. A botanist by profession and a nonagenarian, he is famous for his research and contributions in his field of work. I got to know about him in one of the events arranged by the British Council last year.

After contacting the British Council, they arranged a meeting for us and the humble man readily agreed to meet me at his residence in Dhaka.

#### **Formative years**

Dr Ahmad Shamsul Islam was born in 1924 in Meghnapur at his grandfather's home, which became a part of India after the partition. He spent his childhood in Rajshahi, then in East Pakistan, where his father was a professor of Arabic. He went to Kolkata to study Honors in Botany in Presidency College at the age of 19. He completed his Honors and MSc in Botany in 1945 and 1947, respectively.



**Sharazad Hassan (23) and Dr Ahmad Shamsul Islam (94)**

One thing I realised from the way he narrated his stories - he is a poet by heart. Dr Islam had a poetic flare to all his stories, something that makes people sit back and listen to him a while longer. Even at such an age, he had an impeccable command over the language. He spoke with much clarity and lucidity.

### **Witnessing harrowing times**

He has witnessed the Great Calcutta Killings, where the Hindus killed the Muslims and vice versa. He was somewhat, if not directly, related with the struggle. He expressed his gruesome experience of the massacre in a way that somehow dragged my soul back into the time. Dr Islam has also witnessed the end of the British rule in India.

Dr Islam outlived some of the major historical milestones this world has witnessed. Born in the early 1920s, he lived through the time of the independence and emergence of India and Pakistan, WWII, the Language Movement in East Pakistan in 1952 where the Bengalis fought for their mother language and the Liberation war of Bangladesh.

He was in Kolkata studying in Presidency College during the World War II. During the time everyone was told to take shelter whenever they heard a siren. One day, Dr Islam and few of his juniors were crossing the river on their way to Shibpur Botanic Garden in Hawra, also known as one of the largest botanic gardens in the world, and suddenly heard the siren. His juniors decided to ignore the siren and continue on their way. Fate had other plans, right after they anchored their boat on the shore the place was shelled with massive bombs by Japan. They were saved by luck.

After he finished his Masters, he came to Dhaka and applied in Dhaka University as a teacher in early 1948. There was a vacuum in position for teachers in Dhaka University as all the Hindu professors left the province due to the partition of India.

He got the job in the department of Biology immediately after applying for it. While sharing the memory, he stated with a very jolly voice, "The job was waiting for me, rather than me waiting for the job." He is the first person in the country to get an academic scholarship from the British Council and travelled to Manchester University for his Masters in Botany in the year 1951.

He got married after coming back from England in the year 1954 to a beautiful lady named Humaira Islam, an arts graduate from Eden College. He is also a true romantic. Whenever he spoke about his late wife, there was always a dreamy nostalgia to it. When I asked him, at an age of 94, how he would describe his life in few words, he answered, he has lived a happy; content life except that he lost his beloved wife eight years back to cancer. They used to wake up at five in the morning and do yoga together. He misses his beloved wife dearly.

Dr Islam joined Sindh University as Professor of Botany at the young age of 30. He spent two years of postdoctoral research experience at Cornell University, Ithaca in the United States of America and helped to introduce a Ph.D. program in the university. He worked at Sindh University in Pakistan for 15 years. After coming back to Dhaka in 1970, where he joined the University as a professor.

He is someone who radiates intelligence and brilliance. If I were to list all his achievements of his lifetime then I would have to add more pages to this piece. To do little justice to his accomplishments, here is a short list amongst many:

- he introduced a PhD program in Botany in Dhaka University. Till this date, under his supervision, 20 students have completed their PhD
- he introduced a PhD program in Botany in Sindh University
- he worked as a visiting Professor of Botany in Dar es Salaam University, Tanzania and University of Nairobi, Kenya
- he received a Gold Medal by the Bangladesh Academy of Sciences
- he is the Editor of Bangladesh Journal of Botany and Journal of Plant Tissue Culture and Biotechnology
- he was awarded with Ekushey Gold Medal (the second highest civilian award in Bangladesh) for his outstanding contribution to education.

The whole conversation lasted for more than an hour, and I enjoyed every moment of it. He shared jokes, quotes and sometimes taught me a few words in Urdu. He had a long, successful career with great achievements.

My late grandfather used to say, the more people achieve in life, the more humble should they become. Dr Islam is the living proof of that saying. Throughout the conversation, he kept on saying 'I was lucky'. In this current age of the internet, our lives are heavily invested in it. Whatever little success we achieve, we boast about them in the social media. Dr Islam was more about provisions, principles, morals and integrity. These are the lost qualities that we, the youth of the 21 century fail to realise.

### **Author experience**

One thing I've learned from Dr Islam is the gift of gratitude. He has lived his life well. A happy man of age 94, Dr Islam has been kind to me from the moment we met. He was a very polite and gentle host, made me feel at home at once. His willingness to pass down his stories to the younger generation is worthy of appreciation.

Another thing I have learned from him is the virtue of discipline. Even at the age of 94, he still does yoga every day; eats his meals in a fixed time and in measured proportions; offers his daily prayers on time. Upon asking his secret behind his long age, he answered healthy food and yoga has helped him all the way along.

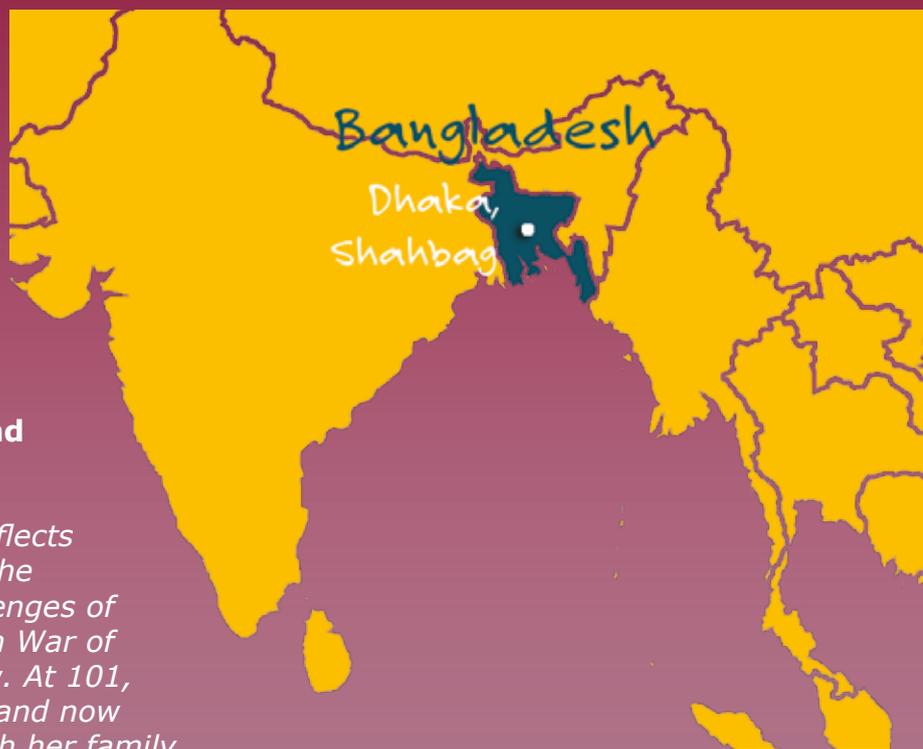
Such a gentleman, he is someone you will love and respect in your first meeting. As he unfolded his stories of success and achievements with me, I've come to appreciate his humbleness and self-effacing personality.

His achievements are something Bangladesh will always be proud of. He inspired me to work hard and attain my dreams. At my old age I would want to be like Dr Islam - successful, content, happy and inspiring.

## 34 Joyous events are considered as medicine to forget all of the saddest events

Told by Majeda Begum and written by Sharmin Rima

*In Dhaka, Majeda Begum reflects on her life as a child bride, the changes in Dhaka, the challenges of living through The Liberation War of 1971 and becoming a widow. At 101, she has put this behind her and now treasures the time spent with her family.*



I am Sharmin Rima and I am in my fourth year studying BSS at Department of Population Sciences, University of Dhaka. I am from Bangladesh, a country of 152.51million people and one of the most densely populated countries (1015 persons per km<sup>2</sup>) in the world. The population ageing is an emerging issue in Bangladesh [Population & Housing Census Report 2011]. In Bangladesh, those who are 60 years old or above are considered to be elderly. According to the census 2011, the percentage of elderly population in Bangladesh is 7.7 percent. They are highly vulnerable population. Among the elderly people in Bangladesh, about one third are illiterate (15 percent) or under primary (17 percent) and half of the elderly population have only primary education [BBS-2015]. So there are different socioeconomic backgrounds of the older people of Bangladesh which determine their lifestyle.

Now I am going to tell the story of an older widowed woman named Majeda Begum who is 101 years old. She lives in Shibbari, Shahbag, Dhaka, Bangladesh. She is a woman who was the eye witness to many changes and a significant historical event. She has struggled a lot to survive or maintain her family.

### Majeda's family

Majeda Begum is a widow. She was born in 1916 in Manikganj, Dhaka Bangladesh. She had two brothers and one sister. Her father died at an early age. As a result, she was married at a very early age when her menstrual cycle had not started. Her husband's hometown is Barisal, but he worked as a peon [unskilled worker] at the University of Dhaka.



Sharmin Rima (22) and Majeda Begum (101)



**Majeda Begum**

That's why she had to come to Dhaka after her marriage. She had three sons and one daughter. Unfortunately, she had lost her husband, one daughter and two sons. Her husband died in 1975 and her elder daughter died 25 years ago, her elder son died 13 years ago and her youngest son died 3 years ago. Only one of her children is still alive. But she has nine grandchildren and they are her pleasure and happiness. Now she lives in a small house at Sibbari, Shahbag, Dhaka in Bangladesh. She stays here with one of her grandchildren's family. They take care of her well; because she is well cared for, she has only a disease, diabetes. She thought that God is too kind, that's why, she is thankful to God for her longevity.

As she was married at very early age, she couldn't continue her study after marriage. She has only primary education. She had done only household works in her life. But now she can't do any work, she loves sleeping and gossiping with her relatives at her leisure periods.

When her grandchildren visit her house and meet her, it makes her happy. She loves to gossip with her grandchildren about the memory of her husband and their life together. Her grandchildren also love her, those grandchildren do not live with her, but they don't forget to communicate with her. They are in contact regularly with their grandmother through using their mobile phone.

#### **Dhaka: then and now**

It was approximately 90 years ago, when Majeda Begum came to Dhaka City. She is an eye witness to the remarkable changes of Dhaka city from the perspective of the technological developments in transport and communication. Before 90 years, Dhaka city was not known as a densely populated city. Then the population of Dhaka city was less than 1 million; there were no large buildings or roads in Dhaka city. There were a very few vehicles in Dhaka city.

There was no traffic jam and there were large fields, ponds and trees. People were able to take fresh air and escape from acute sound pollution, water pollution and air pollution. In that period, there were also some problems that people could not communicate with others easily and the medical system is very poor which impacts on public health. As a result, most of the people died due to communicable diseases like Tuberculosis (TB), Diarrhoea and Cholera.

But now the situation is completely changed in Dhaka City. The city is known as the most densely populated in the country. About 15 million people live in Dhaka city; there are only large buildings and building works everywhere; there are no large fields or ponds in the city.

It has turned into the city of the traffic jam and the city of pollution. But the technology of Dhaka City has been developed, people can go from one place to another within a short duration of time but 90 years ago, people could not imagine it. People can even go to other countries by air which was not possible in 90 years ago.

Medical technology has developed; doctors provide for the treatment of communicable and non-communicable diseases in Dhaka City. People even have no need to go other countries for the treatment of life threatened diseases like heart diseases or cancer. There is a capability of doctors to provide the treatment of the life threatening diseases in Dhaka City. At last, Majeda Begum was smiling and said, "Now people can't die without any treatment or the lack of medicine in the city."

### **Living historical events**

The Liberation War of 1971 is a significant historical event of Bangladesh. The duration of the war was nine months and we fought bravely against Pakistan. Up to three million Bangladeshi had lost their lives and two hundred thousand women were raped in the Liberation War. They are the freedom fighters, to show respect to them we bow down our heads in front of our National Martyrs' Memorial. Only because of sacrifices of our freedom fighters, was it possible to create Bangladesh on the world map.

Majeda Begum is an eyewitness to this important historical event. It was the dark night of 25 March; she and her whole family were in Sibbari besides the campus of Dhaka University. At midnight, they heard that Pakistani soldiers fired on the Jagonnath Hall, Dhaka University. They were scared and ran away from their quarter and hid themselves in Dhaka Medical College. In the morning, they went to Keraniganj and took shelter in their relative's house. But when the Pakistani soldiers came to the Keraniganj, they ran away again and took shelter in their village home, Barisal.

It was here that in May 1971 Majeda Begum's husband received a letter from the Pakistani Government. The letter was ordering him to re-join his job within one week; otherwise, he would lose it. The mother-in-law of Majeda Begum can't leave her son.

But Majeda Begum said to her husband, "You may go. I am waiting for you. I believe, the red sons of Bangladesh will take rifles in their hand against Pakistan and our country will be independent soon. Then you will not have to obey the rules of the Pakistani Government. We can live together in the independent country, Bangladesh. Don't get tension about us. I will save my children and your mother sacrificing my life."

Ultimately, a mother's belief won and Bangladeshi red sons took rifles against the Pakistani soldiers. On 16 December 1971, Majeda Begum was in Dhaka and was witnessed the glorious victory of Bangladesh. She is very proud to be an eye-witness of the glorious victory.

### **Rebuilding lives**

In the post-war period, Majeda Begum started to reconstruct her household with her husband and her children. Everything was quite good, her husband had re-joined his work and her children were studying. She was happy to be an ideal mother and an ideal wife.

In that time, she came to know that her husband was suffering from TB. There was saying among the local people of Bangladesh, Jar hoy jokkha, tar nai rokkha meaning those who are attacked by TB, they never escape. That's why she was scared and thought, "There is no hope". As Bangladesh was very recently independent, it's structural system was too poor. Naturally, there a food shortage and lack of medicines in Bangladesh in the post-war period.

## **The challenges of widowhood**

As a result, Majeda Begum lost her husband due to the lack of proper treatment. It was 28 August 1971; she can remember the day. It was one of the saddest events in her life, when she had lost her life partner forever and she started to cry and share the saddest event with me. It was too heart touching. That day, she couldn't talk with anyone and turned into a stone. She was greatly shocked to lose her life partner and the most loving person.

From the perspective of Bangladeshi women, having a husband was the main means of survival in the 70/80s periods. That's why, when Majeda Begum lost her husband, she was in a fix and could not think what to do. This sad event had a great influence on her life. In the post war period, a country is usually very economically disadvantaged and lots of problems have to be faced.

In that time, it was impossible to Majeda Begum maintaining her family, as she was very less educated woman. She also started to face a lot of problems like financial problems and she was passing her days through lots of psychological problems. But there is a well known proverb, When sorrows come, they come not as single spices but in battalions. This was true for Majeda Begum.

One month after her husband's death, there was an order from the authority of the University of Dhaka to leave the official quarter; otherwise they had to stop the substitute or pension of her husband's job. She was thundered to hear the news because she had no permanent shelter in the city.

That's why she took a strong decision not to leave the quarter to save her family. It seems to her, "It was a new war to me where I tried heart and soul to maintain my family."

But she didn't lose heart, she started to work in other households and one of her rooms was rented to others so she would have more financial support. After four years, when her elder son got a job, her struggling life started to decline. When her three sons were involved with jobs and got married, all of her sufferings were over.

## **Joyous life memories**

Joyous events are considered as the medicines to forget all of the saddest events. There are some joyous events of Majeda Begum which make her pleasure. As she was married at very early age, she could not do any household works. But her husband loved her so much; he helped her for doing household chores.

She said, "My husband was my world. He loved me so much because I am too pretty." When she shared with their love story, her face was very bashful which reflects her happiness. In the weekend, her husband loved to ride cycle with her. As she loves churi [bracelets], her husband brought colourful churi for her. It gave her a lot of pleasure. Her husband was too romantic. He liked to surprise her by giving many gifts. He gave to Majeda Begum a surprising gift, ankle bells at one of her marriage anniversary. She loved to wear the ankle bells all times. This memory is the best joyous memory of her life.

Majeda Begum is now happy with her family. She is passing her life with her grandchildren. She loves to gossip and play with her grandchildren. In the recent times, sleeping is added into her loving habits.

## **One regret**

As she is very old, she has some physical problems like headache, back pain, diabetes etc. Without some complications, she is well and she is thankful to God for her physical well-being. Majeda Begum is too much positive; there was a hidden wish of her which is to read more and to achieve higher education.



## 35 Win or lose with dignity – words from a freedom fighter

**Told by Rahima Begum and written by Md Mahir Faysa**

*Another post graduate student Md Mahir Faysal in Dhaka, Bangladesh learned about the experiences of former freedom fighter Rahima Begum.*



The author of this life story is from Dhaka the capital of Bangladesh whose dream is to be a gerontologist, which is rare in his country. In Bangladesh population ageing is an emerging issue. Although the country still hasn't yet experienced a significant increase in the population of older people it is to be expected in the future.

According to the government report in 2017, Bangladesh is facing only 7.5 percent of elderly population but the country is presently one of the top countries in the world in terms of absolute number of older people. Furthermore, this number is likely to almost triple by 2051 and reach an increase of 37.1 percent by 2100.

One of the older people now living in Bangladesh is our respected story teller Rahima Begum, a freedom fighter, aged 84 years and currently living in care home in Dhaka. Care homes are not a familiar sight in Bangladeshi culture, although having six well-off children and being a freedom fighter her move into a care home was really a sad story in her life.

Population ageing is considered as a by-product of the demographic transition in which both mortality and fertility decline from high to low level. This ageing process in Bangladesh is taking place at such a time when the country is experiencing modernisation, changing pattern of life style, comparatively weakened kinship bonds and undergoing rapid transformation of family composition.

That is the reason older people are deprived of enough care, service and support from the family and society. In Bangladesh, persons aged 60 or above are considered as elderly.



**Md Mahir Faysal (23) and Rahima Begum (84) with friends**

But in reality people become older before the age of 60 because of poverty, physical hard working and, inability and illness due to malnutrition and geographical condition in Bangladesh. Many older people in the country spend their lives in poverty and it is one of the main reasons for ill health and less security, which are major risks for an ageing population.

It is obvious people become more susceptible to chronic diseases, physical and mental disabilities in the last stage of their life. As age advances, because of the deteriorating physiological functions, the body becomes more prone to illness. Being poor and suffering a lifetime of deprivation makes our older people more susceptible to ill health, social isolation and poverty.

Older women are even more vulnerable in the context of a developing country like Bangladesh. Rahima Begum is one of the vulnerable older women from Bangladesh. Now I am going to tell you her real life story, which will obviously make you emotional.



First time I met Rahima Begum was just one year ago in a research project where my study area was in care home. I saw a very old woman was sitting in a dirty bed with a smiley face. She called me to her and said she is interested to be a part of my research. From that day I know her.

Sometimes I used to go to the care home to meet her and the other old people who lived there. I was pretty much sure that she was educated and belonged to a respected well off family. I never asked what she may be thinking because it might have hurt if I asked about her memories. But for the purpose of this essay I asked her about her previous life memories. She told me her sad story with tears

**Rahima Begum** in her eyes.

### **Born into poverty**

Rahima Begum was born in a poor family in a little village at Rangpur, a poorest district of Bangladesh in the beginning of 1930s. She cannot remember her exact birthdate because of her now weak memory.

Her father was a poor businessman who used to sell vegetables in the village markets. Her mother was a housewife. There are 12 siblings. Rahima Begum's family had no land of their own. They lived in a small house, which belong to her uncle who was a kind man and gave that land to his poor brother and his family.

They used to live hand to mouth. Her poor father could not afford this huge family pressure. So he decided to go to Dhaka the capital of Bangladesh leaving behind his family in a village in search of better opportunity. Rahima Begum's mother and her family said him goodbye.

After her father's leaving, Rahima Begum's mother started to sell vegetables instead of her father in markets. Her mother was concerned about education for her meritorious children. So although it was so tough to bear 12 children's education cost she did not complain.

### **Losing her parents**

Her father totally disappeared after going to Dhaka. From that day they never heard about him. Rahima Begum passed secondary school certificate exam with a brilliant result like all her siblings although living in extreme poverty. Then one day her sick mother died. Rahima was the most junior member among the siblings. One of her aunties took her to Dhaka. She used to help them in household works. Actually she was treated there as a maidservant, but the good thing is that her aunty did not stop her education.

Rahima was admitted into a local college in Dhaka and completed her higher school certificate with excellent result. Then she was admitted into Dhaka University the best educational institution of the country for higher study. She came from her aunt's place and used to live in the girl's hostel. After completing her honours degree she joined in a school as a maths teacher.

### **Becoming a freedom fighter**

She got married to a banker at the age of 22. Her husband was a very good and kind person and belonged to a respected well off family. They started their new life happily. After one year their first son came to their house. Then the second one after two years and it continues. When she was pregnant for the sixth time, the Liberation War of Bangladesh from Pakistan started.

It started in March 1971. Her husband joined the freedom fighters. She also decided to join to free her country from the enemy. Both she and her husband joined in freedom fight in sector Number 2 (Districts of Dhaka, Comilla, and Faridpur, and part of Noakhali District).

She continued the freedom fight until her sixth month of pregnancy. Then she returned to her home. It was September she got the news that her husband had died in the Liberation War; he was killed by the enemies. In December 1971 the country was free from Pakistan.

### **Post-war years**

Rahima Begum started her new innings of life with her six children. Her children were also meritorious like her. They all cut a brilliant result in their own areas of study. She has four sons and two daughters. Three among the four sons are doctors and one is an engineer. Her one daughter is also doctor and another one is a housewife.

The sad story is that although all of her children are well established but no one wanted to keep her with them. They used to take it in turns to look after her. Each keeping her for three months and then passing her to another sibling.

It hurt Rahima Begum's self-dignity and she decided to go to an old persons home willingly. Her children were pretty happy to be free from her. She doesn't take any money from them. She pays the care home cost from her pension and government allowance. She also knows handcraft. Now-a-days she makes homemade hand craft and with the help of someone she tries to sell those in local market.

In conclusion it can be say that Rahima Begum is still a very independent woman despite being almost 84 years old. She is an example for those who think women cannot do anything in their life and raise questions about women's empowerment. On the other hand, she is also an example for those who think old people are nothing but a burden for family and the society.



## 36 "Sitting idly is like a curse for me..."

**Told by M. Shamsul Haq Majumder and written by Tasnim Shams**

*Maintaining intergenerational relationships within the family is important to Tasnim Shams who chose to speak to her grandfather who grew up in Jammura, a small underdeveloped village of Comilla in Bangladesh. She learned how he successfully gained an education, survived the war and raised a family during challenging times.*

I am Tasnim Shams, a 23-year-old University student. I am from Bangladesh, a small peace loving country of South Asia where many people live in poverty or other critical situation. Still they try to find happiness in small things.

My country is famous for its hospitality. It has a diverse culture and we celebrate various types of festivals throughout the year.

The Language Movement of 1952 and the Liberation War of 1971 are the most important events in our country that give us an identity in the world. In recent times, noticeable changes have been seen in the family structure and social system in our country. Even then, people of Bangladesh try to maintain strong kinship with their families and treat older members of the family as one of the most important decision makers. I also live in an extended family.

My grandfather is the oldest person in my area. Here I will try to share some notable events of his life and what he experienced during his lifetime. He is a 79-years-old retired government officer. At present, he lives with his children in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.

"I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution." Those words were pronounced by Santiago, one of the creations of Ernest Hemingway, who might not be strong enough to work like before due to his old age but his experience, intelligence, wisdom were enough to help the boy.

My grandfather is just like Santiago. His experience and valuable suggestion shows us the way is every difficulty. At this age, he prefers to do his own work. "Sitting idly is like a curse for me," he said with forceful words.



**Tasnim Shams (23)**  
**M. Shamsul Haq Majumder (79)**

My grandfather's name is M. Shamsul Haq Majumder. In Arabic terms, 'Shams' means Sun. He is just like a sun who always tries to provide the light of knowledge, show the path of truth and righteousness to his families, children and grandchildren.

### A desire to fly

He was born in 1938, in Jammura, a small underdeveloped village of Comilla. He started his education in a local school. At that time his day was spent by playing, fishing and kiting with friends.

During the Second World War, he saw the aircraft of British soldiers and from that time on, he had a strong desire to fly in the sky. But, a poverty stricken family with six siblings and later on the consequence of the partition of the country changed his life and dream. He had to leave his house right after completing his school in order to search for a job. After the partition, it was very difficult for a Bengali people to find a decent job. He did some small business at that time.

He got an opportunity to receive training in the Pakistan Air Force and went there in 1957. Beside this, he chose to study in Political Science and completed his graduation in Karachi University, Pakistan. Staying away from his parents at a young age, a new environment and most importantly, the discriminatory behaviour of the co-workers made his life miserable. Even then, he continued his work by thinking of his family. He also participated in the Indo-Pakistan war in 1965.

In 1971, in the middle of the Liberation War, he left West Pakistan. Despite being offered a good opportunity to lead a better life and to serve West Pakistan, but he decided to come back to Bangladesh, then East Pakistan. At that time, he helped the freedom fighters by providing food, money and technical support.

The Liberation War of 1971 had a great influence in his life. He thought his sorrows would be reduced after the independence, but he had to stay unemployed for three years in a war-ravaged country. He tried to be involved in few small businesses but all of his efforts failed.

### Opportunity in America

Even then, he never accepted defeat. As results of his relentless efforts, he got an opportunity to train in the United States.

"Maybe it is a simple matter for all, but from where I was belonging and the struggle and sorrows that I have seen in my life, this type of achievement was like a blessings of Allah for me," he explains with teary eyes.

After retiring from the government work, he then joined a private hospital and served at least 10 years. He proudly stated, "The word 'retirement' is not for me. I had an opportunity and I grab it. I had the ability that's why I did it. If you have ability and enthusiasm you cannot tie yourself by excusing that you are aged."



## Family life

Mr Majumder has three children and seven grandchildren. In 2015, he celebrated his 50th anniversary of his married life. He is very fond of his family and tries to celebrate all the festivals with his dear ones.

"I feel happy when my children and grandchildren stay with me. But sometimes my ideologies contradict with their present situation. Sometimes they cannot understand me; sometimes I cannot explain to them properly," he says.

## Witnessing change

In his opinion, family structure is changing. "In the past most of the people try to maintain extended family, but at present they like nuclear one," he says. Though he feels sad about this change, he totally understands the fact that in our country, it is difficult for a person to maintain a large family as living cost is increasing day by day.

Throughout his life, he has witnessed many changes. "Our life was full of enjoyment. We go to school, studied 3-4 hours and after that played whole time. Life was so simple. There was consensus among the people. At present, life becomes more complex. Everyone has a packed schedule. They have a little time for their families. Most of their time is for improving themselves to cope with the changing world. Children are busy with their studies and there is always been a competition among them with an aim to achieve high position."

In his time, there was no electricity in their village. Jatra (a type of play that had been performed on stage), puthipath (traditional Bengali music) were his favourite entertainment. Now, these do not widely exist but in his childhood, he eagerly waited for these during whole week. In his working life, he bought a radio and passed his time listening to the news, music etc.

He also loved hunting and fishing. But now if he feels well, he spends most of his time watching television and reading newspapers and religious books. He has an interest in politics and tries to know every details of it. He is an asthma patient. He cannot walk for a long time properly and feels weak and needs support, but he still likes gossiping.

## Changes in communications

Although it is not possible for him to go another place to meet with his relatives and friends he always tries to keep contact through a mobile phone. In this context, I ask him about the communication process during his time. He simply stated "very difficult".

He further added, "There is no jam in the street like present time but transportation facilities were not good. People need to walk a long distance to reach his destination.

Though people were dependent on bus and train, they were limited in number. I often sent telegram and letters to my family. It took times. I wanted to hear my children but it was not possible as a telephone was not available in my village. But now life becomes very much easier. I can contact with my near and dear ones whenever I want. It also helps to pass my time."



**Birthday celebrations with the family**

My grandfather feels his past wholeheartedly. From his conversation, I can realise that we have lost many good things that were actually a part of culture in our country. He mentioned about 'Nobanno' (a social festival of harvest celebration), village fair etc. These celebration brought people together. Not only in village but also in city, people share a good relationship. "If my neighbour cooked something good, he came to us and shared them with us. We also did the same."

### **Thankful for his life**

I asked about his sorrowful event in his life. With great satisfaction, he claimed that he is happy in his life. At this moment of age, he is accepting those sorrows as a small part in his life; in the year 2003, he learned that his beloved wife had breast cancer. "That time I was so frustrated. I have never experienced that type of feeling before. But thanks to almighty, he cured her."

From his words, I realise that staying with your dear ones is the most joyous events of life. He has no further demand in his life. "I am happy with my life. But when I watch television, I feel sorry for those people who are just like me but cannot get proper care, stay in the old house [care home]. You don't know how we feel when you keep distance from us."

I eagerly wanted to know how he feels after passing so many years. He was quiet for a while. Then started, "though I believe that where there is a will there is a way, you have to surrender to the law of nature. You have to accept that you cannot do certain things when you're 60 or 70 years old. There was a time when I did not need anyone's help. I helped others. But a few days ago, I could not sign my cheque properly. My hand was shaking. I was so upset."

He again stopped for a minute. "But I am happy with me. Now people give respect to me as an elder person, they asked for suggestion. I think this is an inevitable consequence for all. No one should feel that he/she becomes a burden for a society. And every youth should think that they have to face this stage in future."

My grandfather is an inspiration for us. At present, we, the young generation, accept defeat in small failure. We end our life due to slightest difficulty. There was many ups and downs in his life but he struggle all well and woes with devotion and honesty. I wish him long life and good health.

### **Authors experience**

I am very glad that I got the opportunity to interview my grandfather. At the time when he heard that he needed to share his life story, he was so excited and tears came from his eyes. I think not only my grandfather but also every aged people need love, attention and support from us.

Although in most cases these people cannot contribute in the productive work but they can show us right direction.

We will try to help them to pass their remaining life peacefully.

## 37 Having children is not always a reliable safety net for later life

**Told by Aminur Rahman and written by Sadiya Afrin**

*In the penultimate story from Asia, Aminur Rahman explains the changes he has witnessed over his 97 years to post graduate student Sadiya Afrin. Describing how despite experiencing blindness for 27 years, he continues to keep up with local and world events.*

About myself, the older person and my country: I am Sadiya Afrin and I am 23 years old. I am Bangladeshi and the last among the three children of my parents. It's a great opportunity for me to write an essay on the life of a senior citizen of our country named Aminur Rahman who is 97 years old.

There are a lot of things which we may learn and feel from his life story and it's really a big opportunity for me. As a student of Population Sciences Department, I feel delighted to participate in this project. It's a huge opportunity for me to share the conditions of older people in Bangladesh through the story of an older men's life.

His life story covers the socio-economic status, culture, changes in traditional life and transportation systems over the years. Now, Bangladesh is going through the third stage of demographic transition. It is to be expected that the number of older people living in poor socio-economic conditions and needing mental support will increase considerably.

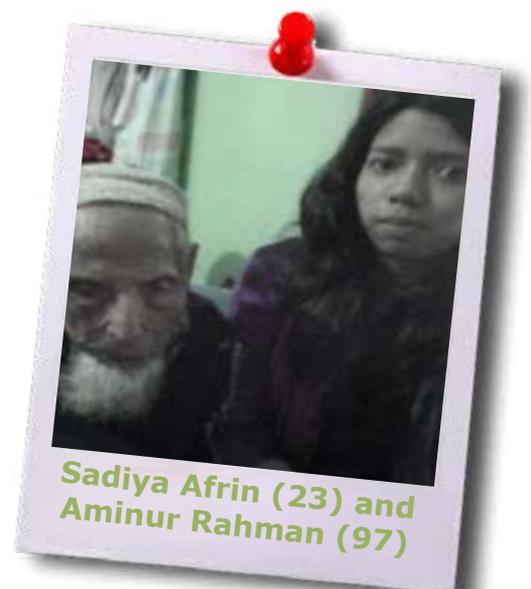
### **Growing up in a poor family**

Mr Aminur Rahman is a 97 years old man. He is a senior citizen according to the law of Bangladesh. He is the third child among his eight siblings. He was born in 1920 approximately. He can hardly recall about very early ages of his life.

However, he can recall about his life at school from childhood.

There was lack of the environment to study. It was very difficult to study at that time because of the lack of a transportation system. There was also a very limited number of literate people, so even if it had existed, they had very little chance of an education.

However, his father wanted him to acquire knowledge and there were two jaigir, (people who stayed in other people houses due to lack of financial support



**Sadiya Afrin (23) and Aminur Rahman (97)**

and transportation system), to his family. People were generally poor and schools or colleges were very limited in number. Transportation was hardly seen.

So he learned from class one to three from two jaigir who were in class five and six respectively. When the second jaigir also had to leave his house, there was no other educated person in their house; thus he could not continue his studies staying at home. So he was admitted to a high school, which was 24 miles away from his house. As he had to go there on foot, he also had to stay as a jaigir. Through struggling he attained entrance to education.

Despite it being so tough to continue studying, he successfully came through all difficulties and became a well-educated person.

### **Providing for his family**

He was a government employee. He had six daughters and one son. Being a conscientious person, he was also very likely to educate their children and his children are indeed more or less educated. Though he had to maintain a huge family being the only earner of the family, he could manage the marriages of his daughters.

Throughout his job life, he had a vast experience working in a diversified field. He started his job as a headmaster of a primary school. After retirement, he worked as a deed writer for one and half years to pass his day without post retirement trauma, which may affect his life expectancy. Later he found it not so much satisfactory to continue. Then he took a rest for one year. After that he joined in a high school as clerk. He worked there for six years.

### **Losing his vision**

Then a physical problem made him unproductive to formal jobs. That shock was being blind at the age of 65 even after his eyes had been operated twice. As the medical science was not so much improved that time, he had to be blind then which led him to pass the critical time of his life. The first six months of his blind life was the most critical time to him. He could not take it easy for a long time. He had to fight with his own.

His night and day was hardly passed. Thus, he could not enjoy the entertainment and leisure activities he did in his early life. As he was dedicated to study, he passed his leisure time by reading the novels, drama of renowned writer Rabindranath, Kazi Nazrul Islam and so on. He also enjoyed movies and played football in his early age.

Despite being blind he stays updated by listening radios, news read by others at daily basis. He also taught his grandchildren even though he was blind. He helps to correct when any of them make mistake during reading. He tries to entertain his grandchildren telling different stories which give them very good lessons on life. He also tries to picture the life he has gone through in his early age through the stories. He motivates them to prosper in life. He likes to gift or offer money to his grandchildren during their exam for their financial support.

### **Changes in transport and technology**

Technology has evolved a lot now. As there was no modern transport till 1950s, a cow cart was used in the village and horse cart in the town. Many people were accustomed to walk for the lack of transportation. Gradually, transportation developed and roads developed into his areas in approximately 1961.

At the times of his retirement at 1985, there were numerous available transports. Gradually radio, television was also developed. Thus, people got a very good idea on the occurrences both within the country as well as outside the country.

At that time, delivering anything, including news took huge time to be delivered to the receiver and also to the sender to get back the reply. To him, at present there is a huge means of communication through the mobile and internet.

### **The influence of historical events**

He was eyewitness to the historical events such as the British period and the Pakistan period and also the Independence of Bangladesh. Thus he can compare the merits and demerits of events which must have influenced life through different jobs, transportation and communication system. Getting a job and also changing the jobs were very easy with what we have already discussed in the context of his life as people were less engaged in job due to ignorance.

### **The saddest and happiest times**

The saddest experience in his life is to be blind. The first six months of his blind life were unbearable to him. He could hardly adjust to his life. However, gradually he became normal and comfortable with his mental strength.

Most joyous experience and pleasure to his life was reading books of a prominent writer during leisure when he could see everything. According to him, the main thing influenced his life was blindness. He has to struggle for it day after day. Then he could not do any jobs. But he learned to adjustment through it.

Now, it is 27 years of his blindness and he is almost comfortable to it. He himself could do many works before even being blind. He could go to washroom using wire. He himself could take bath. He didn't like to take help of others in every issues. He tried to manage everything. But now he always needs help of others to go for washroom because of physical inability to walk.

As he was blind at the age of 65, he must never have thought that he should pass the long time being blind. Thus, it was a sudden shock to him and his family. But the shock is most huge for himself, in a way that no family member or society can feel.

### **Optimistic about life**

The most important thing about his life that he is very optimistic. He managed and tried his best to take it normally. Another strength of his life is the money of pension he gets every month. He has never depended on his children for anything. The weakness of him and his spouse is that they don't have a shelter of their own where they can live freely. If they had a shelter of their own, they could live more respectfully, peacefully than the present condition. They had to face many difficulties, and neglect, because of it. He could avoid these if his male children were responsible to the family.

Though he was a concerned guardian, he could not teach his son accordingly. He thought that his son would be educated and engaged in income earning activities and should take care of the parents in their later age. As boys generally take care of their parents at their old age in the traditional society like Bangladesh. But his dream didn't come true.

After SSC (Secondary School Certificate) completion, he tried to go abroad with the help of others by selling land but failed. It brought frustration to his son and he did not concentrate to his own family.

Gradually he lost his property by selling and at last he had no land to sell or cultivate. Then he hardly could manage his own family. He was also used to gambling. As he was indifferent to his own family, he didn't take care of his parents, though they needed very little support.

Meanwhile they went to stay with one daughter. Then they went to visit their other daughter who lived in Dhaka. At that time their roof based cottage got damaged due to heavy rain. They had no place of their own to live as their boy had already sold a tin-shed room along with some portion of housing residence.

Then their two daughters strongly told them to stay with them forever, as there was no other place to stay. Their brother seems harmful for them as he did not do anything and was engaged in malpractice like gambling. So they started to stay with their daughter.

### **Feeling like a 'burden'**

There his old wife had a double burden, doing all the household chores of big families along with taking care of her blind old husband. Gradually they were treated like burden. Their daughters and the other family members became bored of them with the changing pattern of family.

One daughter lives in the city and the old man was comfortable staying there doing some of his works. But they didn't want to be burden on their daughter's family for their whole life, so they were forced to go to village where another daughter lives.

The daughters felt ashamed to the other people that their parents had no shelter to go. For them it seems a status issue and burden in the changing value system. People give much importance to what others say or how they react.

The older couple could understand that they are nothing but burden. They felt they could have shelter of their own where they could live freely along with proper respect. It is a matter of great pain for them. However, they are bound to live within sufferings.

The main support for them is a monthly pension. If they didn't have this, they hardly could maintain their life. They had to get less food, less dresses, less treatment facilities etc which would hamper them discriminately.

He was an active person of society. So, he has many experiences of life including governance, transportation, communication systems and others at his early period of life and the way how everything is going on. As he always stayed updated through listening daily national and international news still by listening radios. Though he is still a human resource, he faces many problems, neglect etc.

Recently he also had a hernia operation without any fear with pension money. But if he had not that opportunity for getting pension, perhaps he had to stay with the problem till death, as Bangladesh is not a welfare state that will bear the health costs of elderly. Like the poor son, he had another daughter who is also very poor. So he is used to thinking of the son and the daughter. He still gave them financial support as much he can.

### **Mental health challenges**

Because of this, he passes time with additional depression. If they were well-off, he could stay relaxed mentally which is very important.

So, he faces many problems of depression beyond his blindness which hampers his quality of life where concentration is highly needed. The old people don't want lots of things, money and happiness; they only seek for proper care and proper treatment.

This is very important to ensure the senior citizen are supported. But nowadays people consider them as burden through the breakdown of the social norms, values. They even send the old people to care homes where they hardly can take breath. It's time to stand together beside not just our senior citizens, but old people all over the world!

### **Author experience**

From the life story, the most learning issue is the quality of managing the hard times through perseverance. Being active and energetic despite being physically less able is the lesson of his life. Physical inability can't always keep people going. It's all about mental strength.

After retirement, the old are also engaged to many activities, which is helpful for both economic and mental satisfaction. That person can be the example of second demographic dividend for the developing country like Bangladesh.

As it's very important to stay active with the increasing number of elderly; the elderly suffer from poor socio-economic status and neglect in their basic needs. However, he himself could manage their spousal basic needs. He was dependent on their shelter which hampered their life. They have to stay by the wish of others which lower their self respect. He passes his life through depression for it and also for thinking his two children who live in extreme poverty.

He is an updated person having the information all over the world by listening to radios and he can motivate people through his experience and perspective of life. So, there are a lot of things to learn from his life.

## 38 Ageing in Iran

Told by Melok Tabaghy and  
written by Sarah Zandi

*The final story from Asia is from Sanandaj City, Kurdistan, Iran where schoolgirl Sarah spoke to her great aunt, who talked about defying tradition to get an education, and the joys and sorrows of motherhood. Now alone, her aunt is enjoying living alone in an apartment and 'hobnobbing' with family and friends.*

I am Sarah Zandi and in 2002 I was born in the Sanandaj City, in the center of Kurdistan Province, Iran. I am an only child and I am in the 10th grade of an experimental major in one of the Sanandaj high schools.

My view of ageing is that older women and men in the community are a kind of blessing because if they live in a home, that home has a special status, and has a better blessing. I personally like old and elderly people.

When I see the elderly in the city's parks, I'm happy; I should say that, while at the time of my childhood, I have a paternal grandfather where we went to his home and he was always gentle and kind to me. He gave me chocolate or money or gift of the New Year.

I also remember the great maternal grandmother because we lived together they were upstairs and I always walked up at home. My grandmother was also kind to me and in fact, she brought me up as my mother went to work and often did not have a time. Unfortunately, my grandfather (father) died in 2005 and my grandmother died in 2013. Now I have no grandparents and no maternal grandmother. So I did not see any of them unfortunately.



**Sarah Zandi (16) and  
Melok Tabaghy (80)**

Iran is one of the developing countries in the Middle East, which is located in the southwest of Asia. From the north to the Caspian Sea, from the south to the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea, from the east to Afghanistan and Pakistan and from the west to Turkey and Iraq is limited. The province of Kurdistan with an area of 28300 square kilometres is located in west of Iran and is the 16th province of the country.

This position has affected on the climate, the type of vegetation, on the human activity and the commune of the province. Kurdistan is mountainous and hilly. There are three types of lifestyles in Kurdistan province: The nomadic life is part of a history of coincident with the devastating earthquakes of the clans and governments and the wars of Iran and Osman, Rural life and Urban life.

We speak Kurdish and we have special Kurdish dresses that we use at home and at different times. Kurdish dresses are in accordance with the requirements of the environment and life style of the people of the region, it is very diverse. Kurdish women and men clothing components includes; apparel, a kind of scarf and cape, Giveh and Klash (a kind of shoes for the Kurds).



Sanandaj is a traditional city without a lot of welfare. There is only one elderly nursing home. Altogether 150,000 Kurdish men and women are over the age of 60 and are among the elderly population of the province. Elderly people now have three day and night-care centres with a capacity of 200 people in Kurdistan province. At present, the two centres are in the form of a three-day nursing care plan in week.

Eight percent of the province's population is elderly and 80 elderly are held in Sanandaj's elderly homes. The implementation of the home visit plan by the three provincial centres for 150 elderly people who need medical and health care, helping the rural elderly, donating food baskets and distributing free milk along with providing health services are among other measures that are being taken by well-being is offered.

The elderly woman I've interviewed is my mother's aunt. Melok Tabaghy is 80, and I write to you about her life using her own words.

### **Family life**

"I was born in the city of Sanandaj in 1938 in the Qatarchian neighbourhood in Mardokh Street, which is part of the neighbourhoods, and now has kept its old context. I like this neighbourhood very much because I was born here, I was growing up there. Since the time I got married I'm still on this street. My father was married twice.

From his first wife, my mother, I was his only daughter, and I have a half-sister and a half-brother from his second wife. My half-sister and half-brother died a few years ago, but my sister's children still went away with me. One of my nephew's lives in Tehran and occasionally with his children he takes me to Tehran.

### **Defying tradition to get an education**

In the old days, they did not allow girls to go to school and study in school, and this would include me too, so my father would say that the girl should not go to school. But one of our neighbours spoke to my father and he was teacher. At the end he [her father] was satisfied so I went to school.

I studied about six years. I would be accepted every year with a good grade. I got a sixth certificate in 1944. Because we were neighbours with my husband and their family so they knew me and we married. We had a good life. It really was a happy life with my husband.

### **The joys and sorrows of motherhood**

During the 40 years that we lived together, God gave us three sons and three daughters. But I had a negative blood type [Rhesus negative], my two sons and one daughter died the same time when they were born. The result of my life was a boy and two daughters. My older daughter died because of heart disease at the age of 32, and now I have only a boy and one daughter. Thanks God now I am ageing, my daughter and my son care about me.

My daughter, her husband and her children live separately from me and my son and his bride are separate from me too. It's 21 years now that I live alone. I am not afraid of loneliness, and at night, after dinner, I will pray my prayers, and then I will sleep. I am accustomed to this way of life so that if I go somewhere and they have children, I will be very upset and I want to go back home.

I just do not like to be bored. Now I take my husband's pension payment and I spend my business with that. God keep my daughter and my son. Mohammad will be happy with them. But three years after my daughter died, my husband died too.

I remember a lot of memories of my husband because my husband was working in the army. We had to go to different cities and gain experience in other cities. The best memory of my life is that God gave me my son after the four boys who died in my belly; this is one of my best memories.

My second daughter married and has two sons, but unfortunately I lost her at the age of 32. Now only my third daughter is left for me. God is protecting my son. I am in touch with all my relatives and neighbours. When I bought the new apartment, all the previous neighbours come to see me. We had hobnobbed with your grandmother's [Sarah's] family, and your grandfather came and he said I had bought a new house. He said, "Look good? If you like it, I'll take it."

### **Good family and friends**

Your grandmother was a very good woman. She was wearing stylish and good clothes. When she came out, everyone thought she was very wealthy, but they did not know how she lived because they had so many children and her husband had little salary, but still had no complaints, she lived very well. We had a lot of fun with our family during our youth. We were together every day and night with the family of our sister's husbands and they all loved me and respected me.

Now I'm in touch with all my relatives and I like to have a guest. I am discomfited by the children's voice. In the past, family connections and neighbours were much better than nowadays, because people used to have a simple life.

My past life was very traditional and simple, and we had a lot of hobnob. Today, due to the fact of mechanical life we can see each other less than in the past, we can see possibilities of life, such as money and home instrument, which led to the disappearance or diminution of past intimacy. For the convenience and comfort of my son and daughter, I sold my husband's house and told them as long as I'm alive, I'll give them their share and they bought an apartment separately and they bought me a small apartment, and now I live in it and I am in calmness.

### **Words of wisdom**

But life in the apartment is easier for me, but there is no longer a yard and flowers. The feeling of happiness then was already much more, nowadays it is much less. However, during my lifetime, I felt happy and I also recommend to you who are young, know the value of your life and your contacts. You can travel and enjoy yourself because if you become old, you cannot enjoy life anymore, so be nice and respectful. For the pilgrimage, I went to Mashhad, I would go to my relatives home in Tehran.

### **Daily life**

I spend so many days doing this so that in the morning I wake up I will have a morning prayer, then I will have breakfast and prepare the lunch. I read a magazine and watch TV. Many years ago when it was cooler, I went to the Quran class. In the afternoons we walked with neighbours or we would go to the park near the house and we would play games like chess.

Every afternoon, if I have guests, I will be very happy. Every day my son and my grandson come to see me. At the young age, I made a handmade carpet and sold it and saved some of it, and with my husband's salary we could buy a house.

At that time, everything was cheap, so that we could have bought a house with 20 Tomans. I've always felt lucky, I already feel that way. Of course when I was young my husband did not let me become a teacher, saying you do not have to work out of the house, I've listened to him. The secret of our ability was at that time of our youth we used fresh meat and chicken, we used fruits and vegetables without fertilizer, and we had fun and we were thankful from God.

### **The challenges of age**

We took the life very easily. For amenities and facilities in Sanandaj, there are no special amenities for the elderly. My son buys things for me and goes shopping. If I'll have to go to a party or go to somewhere they will come and take me with their car. Because I cannot go out alone, and I'm having trouble in motion, so I'm at home most of the time, and I am for the same reason I have a little motion [mobility problems]. I feel I have become hearing loss, because of the heaviness of the hearing aid and what other people says, I do not like to use it, but for other illnesses, I have no problems with blood fat and blood sugar, but I have high blood pressure and heart failure.

I take different medications and I go to doctor for check up. I also try to eat more vegetables and broccoli and watery foods but don't eat rice and red meat. I use to eat lots of meat and fish. I avoid frying ingredients. I've had this lifestyle in the past, so I tried to use more nutritious foods and vitamins.

### **The next generation**

I'm talking about grandchildren. I have five grandchildren. I have two sons from my older daughter. He is married. One of them lives in Tehran. He is still not married, but I have two grandsons from my second daughter. Her first son lives in Tehran and is studying with a master's degree and his second child is a fourth grade elementary school, and another grandson from my son is at pre-university. My grandson says that I'm wealthy; he kisses me and says you have a lot of money. I'm giving him money and I love him so much.

I wish you will reach my age and live well and you can be kind to those who you love them, appreciate your father and mother too.

### **Author experience**

I think sometimes we should listen to the story of veterans and elder people in order to become experienced and also recognise the best way in our life.

So, after this conversation I feel that my sight to the world has changed and I know that I can last against difficulties and scrapes. I have learned how to be strong and insuperable if I want to be successful.

I'm happy and gladdened whenever I learn something useful. So I'm happy now because I had learned life skills and I believe the more you learn the best you will do in your life. Talking with a lovely 'grimalkin' was full of positive energies and great experiences.

You know if someone really wants to become educated, there is no limitation for her or him. I am hopeful that by learning these tiny but valuable things, I could help the society in order to become extended and wish to dream up.

## 39 Malta at war – first hand experience

**Told by Vincent Caruana and written by Sarah Agius**

*Having left Asia we now start island hopping in the Mediterranean Sea. During WWII the Mediterranean island of Malta played an important strategic role. Talking to aspiring primary school teacher Sarah Agius, Vincent Caruana shares vivid memories of life as a young soldier on the island.*

My name is Sarah Agius, an aspiring primary teacher from Malta. I am 23 years old and have a BSc in Earth

Systems. I am currently in my first year Masters Degree in Teaching and Learning.

Vincent Caruana, the interviewee, who is commonly known as Ċensinu, was a soldier stationed in Malta during WWII. Thus, the interview gives us a very personal and first-hand experience of one of the brave soldiers who defended the Maltese islands during this period.

Malta is situated in the centre of the Mediterranean Sea and is part of the European Union. Malta has an area of 316km<sup>2</sup> and has a population of around 430,000, making it one of the most densely populated countries. Malta is located at a strategic point in the Mediterranean Sea and has thus been under a series of different foreign rulers, including the Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Knights of St John, the French and the British.

Malta was under British rule during WWII. Even though Malta is a very small island, it was very important during WWII, as Ċensinu commented. For its bravery during WWII, the island of Malta was awarded the George Cross in 1942. Malta became independent on 21 September 1964 (Independence Day), and became a republic on 13 December 1974 (Republic Day). Another important public holiday in Malta is 15 August.



**Sarah Agius (23) and Vincent Caruana (94)**

This traditional celebration of the Assumption of our Lady known as Santa Marija also coincides with the day that the desperately needed convoy of 14 supply ships entered the Grand Harbour Malta in 1942.

Ċensinu was born 1922, making him 94 years old at the time of the interview. He had two sisters and three brothers, one of whom died at a very early age. Ċensinu never resided anywhere else except Malta. In his childhood, he used to live in Senglea but now lives in Hal Tarxien with his wife. They had two children, a son and a daughter who passed away. Ċensinu started work at 17 years of age at the power station with his father.

He lived through the terrible years of the WWII when Malta was hard hit by continuous air raids. He was paid six pence daily, amounting to three shillings a week. After a year Ċensinu started earning nine pence a day.

### **Italian air raids**

The day when Ċensinu heard the announcement of the declaration of war, he was 18 years old. Soon after France was taken over by Hitler, on Tuesday 10 June 1940, Ċensinu heard Mussolini declaring war on the radio. The next day, Malta was attacked by Italian aircrafts, Savoia Marchetti. The Maltese were terrified.

Earlier in the morning, the air-raid siren sounded but people ignored it, thinking that it was part of a military training exercise due to Mussolini's declaration of war. Ċensinu was sick in bed on that day while his sister was on the roof doing the laundry. His mother was at the church. During the air raid, his sister remained on the roof while the bomber flew over. Arriving home, his mother shouted for them to go to the basement until the air raid was over. Ċensinu admitted that at that time they thought they were safe.

However, had there been a direct hit, they would have been buried under the debris. When his father returned home, they decided to go by bus and stay with Emilio Camilleri at Rahal Ġdid. Two days later, Emilio took them to Hal Tarxien where they stayed the night.

Then, they moved to Siġġiewi where they were provided with mattresses and blankets to sleep on the floor at the M.U.S.E.U.M [a Maltese society for the teaching of Catholic doctrine] quarters. Ċensinu was scared when they had to leave their home. Initially they thought that this would be only for a short while as Italians bomber usually dropped few bombs during air raids.

When shelters were started to be dug out in Senglea for the nearby dockyard workers, Ċensinu's family returned there. Air raids used to occur both night and day and once the raid is over the 'Raiders passed' was sounded.

### **German strikes**

On the 16 January 1941, the German Stukas attacked for the first time causing much damage. During the air raid the whole street, Strada St Ursola in Senglea where Ċensinu's family resided, was destroyed. Ċensinu had been working at the power station with his father. On their return by boat, Ċensinu remembers he could not see their house's turret as usual. At the shore his siblings were waiting with the news that their house was destroyed. They had to sleep in the shelters that night.

The next day they returned to Siġġiewi with whatever they could carry. Ċensinu remembers not being able to retrieve his new suit buried under the debris. Ċensinu did not go to work anymore as he was scared. At Siġġiewi, they were received with open arms. Although their new house was not satisfactory, at least for Ċensinu they had a roof over their heads.

Most Cottonera residents decided to move away from the harbour to Siġġiewi. Therefore, the village police sergeant, parish priest and Emilio went around houses to find rooms for these families. Ċensinu was very emotional remembering how the sergeant told everyone that they were all one family and should help each other.

The first time that Ċensinu saw enemy aircraft was at Siġġiewi. He remembers watching Italian aircrafts high up in the sky. He couldn't see German ones as they flew at very high speeds. Ċensinu described the Italians as those who knew nothing and did not want a war to break out. He described the Germans as 'harsh'.

### **Life in the shelter**

When the siren alert sounded, people would quickly go to the shelters where they ardently said the rosary as the planes passed overhead. Air raids didn't last long except when wave after wave of aircrafts arrived for extensive attacks.

The shelters were not used by everyone. There were those who risked staying at home. Ćensinu's family used a public shelter. He never spent consecutive days in the shelter. However, sometimes he did spend nights down there. In the shelter, there were no regulations to adhere by. When issues arose, the people tried to resolve them without resorting to conflict.

The shelters had no access to water or electricity, and they would usually bring some water along with them to share with everyone. Lamps were kept in the shelters to provide some light. There were no toilets; instead a corner was left with buckets for those who might need them. People did their best to keep the shelter clean, but it was a difficult when the shelter was tightly packed with people. There was always the fear that the shelter would cave in with the bombings. Once an air raid was over everyone would accomplish whatever they needed to do quickly as another air raid might occur at any time.

### **Orders to enlist**

On 8 August, Ćensinu received an enlistment notice to register as a soldier at Sliema. Joining the military was mandatory during WWII. Ćensinu was 19 years old and wished to join the RAF. Instead, he was assigned to a new Bofors Regiment [Artillery Regiment]. After going through a medical check-up, he was told to report to Tigne Barracks for recruitment training, where he stayed for one month. The recruited soldiers, who were all youngsters, felt like they were on holiday.

They were provided with good food that couldn't be found back at home, which Ćensinu felt gave them courage to go on. Every three days, the soldiers were given one day leave, when Ćensinu used to go back home. He remembers his mother giving him a hug and welcoming him back. Each soldier was given his own number. Ćensinu's was 41311. The soldier before him, who also had the surname Caruana and was also from the same village was 41310.

Ćensinu commented in a sorrowful voice that he has recently passed away. They used to call each other with their surname, Caruana.

Ćensinu was then assigned to the 22nd Battery 3rd Light AA Regiment. This regiment consisted of Bofors guns and searchlights. The regiment had one colonel, Salamone and an Officer Commanding (OC), Scicluna. His work in the Royal Malta Artillery (RMA) was either as a layer which involved the pointing or loading of the gun; or in charge of passing the cannonballs. All of this would take place at a very fast pace at the incoming aircrafts.

Ćensinu's unit was a mobile one. His unit would spend around two months in one location and would then move to another place. When they were stationed at Ta' Qali, Ćensinu was offered a position of translator at the Mtarfa hospital where English soldiers were stationed to give out instructions to other units. The soldier would give out instructions and Ćensinu would translate them over the phone.

The one thing that Ćensinu did not like was on his way back to his unit at night he went through a lonely road with no lamps in the street.

However, Ćensinu commented that was how life was back then.

When he was stationed at Fort Ricasoli and was going back to his unit after a day's leave he was passing by two tall posts near Rinella Fort. At that moment, the enemy attacked and one bomb landed on one of these two posts. Ćensinu dropped under a rubble wall for cover, and the post landed a few metres from him. Had the post landed on his side, Ćensinu was sure that he would have died on the spot and that's why it remains an unforgettable moment for him.

For Ćensinu his experience in the army was rather a positive one especially as he saw it as beneficial to his health since the soldiers would receive injections to avoid illnesses. Also on occasions a doctor would visit for a medical check-up. These included even dental checks. One civilian told Ćensinu to decline treatment for his teeth as it was painful and Ćensinu did so. He nowadays regrets this decision because his teeth would today be in a better state.

### **The importance of Operation Pedestal**

The Santa Marija Convoy, officially known as Operation Pedestal, in 1942 provided the necessary food and fuel for the survival of the Maltese islands during the war. Had Malta surrendered to the enemy as provisions were entirely lacking, England would have lost the war. The arrival of the convoy remains one of the best memories for Ćensinu.

Before its arrival, all guns and cannons were positioned on the piers and shores, surrounding the Grand Harbour. Each gun/cannon had only one direction to fire at forming a net of cannonballs which the enemy's aircraft would find difficult to avoid. Since there was very little ammunition left, an order was issued to fire only on those aircrafts coming in not going out.

When the convoy arrived, on the 15 August 1942, the soldiers were immediately given ammunition. The enemy didn't know about the arrival of the convoy and during their next attack they expected to just attack and leave. However, what occurred was a different story. There was a lot of firing and bombing with aircrafts of both sides being destroyed and pilots parachuting down into the sea. Boats were sent out to save these people.

### **The enemy did not return for another attack.**

On 8th September 1942, when the people of Senglea were celebrating the feast of our Lady of Victories, the Admiral arrived and announced that Italy had surrendered unconditionally to Malta. Everyone celebrated the end of the war. Everyone had been terrified that the enemy would eventually invade the islands. Ćensinu remains amazed to today that this event occurred on this feast day.

During WWII, there was a lot of hunger, which led to theft, with people stealing even from demolished buildings. There were many who used the black market. Anyone who had something to sell would do so in the black market at a very high price.

Ćensinu commented that he never slept feeling extremely hungry, since soldiers were always provided with something to eat. He remembers they were given black bread and the dried milk provided was like stone; they would break down this into powder and add to tea. According to what Ćensinu heard from others, the government-run Victory kitchens would normally serve soup. However, Ćensinu never had any food from these kitchens.

There were no medicines in Malta. When someone was ill, the doctor would give them 'qratas' (sachets). Before WWII, Ċensinu's youngest brother came home from school sick and the doctor gave him 'qratas' which poisoned him. He passed away the next day. Ċensinu was sorrowful when remembering his brother who was just 5 years and 5 months old.

Once the war was over Ċensinu's family rented a house in Siġġiewi. Ċensinu was asked whether he wished to remain in the army or be discharged. He chose the latter. The discharged soldiers were given civilian clothes, their uniform and 80 Maltese pounds. Ċensinu used this money to go abroad to Italy for the first time. Nowadays, Ċensinu still thinks that he could have lost his parents in the war. He was relieved when he saw that his family survived.

The most memorable event for Ċensinu is the arrival of the Santa Marija Convoy which he remembers as the largest attack he ever saw.

### **Author experience**

The interview gave me an insight of events that took place during the war that one cannot find written down in books.

Ċensinu was very happy to contribute to this project and to share his experience with others. In fact, he commented that he doesn't have anyone to talk to about his experiences. He couldn't stop talking about what he experienced throughout his life. Listening to the interview, I had the opportunity to listen first-hand about the suffering and dread they felt during the war as well as the uncertainty of their day to day living. I also appreciate the fact that I had the opportunity to go to school and further continue my studies at university, whilst Ċensinu's as well as other soldiers' and citizens' lives were disrupted because of the war.

Such an insight made me appreciate more the fact that today Malta is at peace as well as other things that are taken for granted such as having a roof over my head and having food to eat. I appreciate the time Ċensinu took in recounting his life story. If it hadn't been for the sacrifices of people like him, our history as well as our lives would have been very different.

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## 40 Caring for a veteran and supporting her family - an original feminist

**Told by Mrs Milia Andreou Aggelides and written by Alexandra van Zutphen and Andrea Argyrou**

*On the divided Mediterranean Island of Cyprus two schoolgirls, Alexandra Van Zutphen and Andrea Argyrou, heard about the challenges of caring for a war veteran and supporting a family from Mrs Milia Andreou Aggelides.*



Our names are Alexandra Van Zutphen and Andrea Argyrou. We both attend the Junior and Senior School and have just begun Year 11.

Born in Richmond, Virginia (USA), Alexandra's family relocated to Nicosia, Cyprus when she was only two months old. Now, 16-years-old, Alexandra has found a passion for music, and dedicates her time to playing multiple instruments, including the bass and drums. Academically, she would like to continue her studies in English Literature and History as A-level courses.

Andrea was born and raised in Greenwich, London (UK) for five years, and moved to Nicosia, Cyprus in 2007. Now at the age of 15, Andrea devotes her time to training for the high jump. Academically, she plans to continue her studies in mathematics and sciences as A-level courses.

Cyprus is the third largest island in the Mediterranean, and is situated in the eastern basin, South of Turkey and West of Greece.

Mrs Milia Andreou Aggelides, now in her nineties, was born and raised in Astromeritis, a relatively small village in the Nicosia district in Cyprus. Since the Turkish invasion of 1974, Mrs Milia has watched her village grow in population, due to the numerous refugees who desperately sought safety and protection from the war.

Her two children and grandchildren have moved to central Nicosia, leaving Mrs Milia quite isolated in terms of family. Thus, she relies on her neighbours and fellow villagers for company, and believes that as long as she feels a sense of amity and community in her village, she is completely content.

**Milia Andreou with a supportive neighbour**



**Alexandra van Zutphen and Andrea Argyrou (16 and 15) and Mrs Milia Andreou Aggelides (in her 90s)**



### **Caring for a veteran**

Her eyes flung open to the echoing screams bouncing across the room. Gasping for air, her husband jolted next to her. He spun around to look at her, his eyes haunted with distant memories.

She understood immediately what had to be done. She pulled herself up. Shivering, he shrieked her name, as she yanked away the duvet.

A thin strip of sweat lined his upper lip, which trembled with terror. She tugged at the hem of his night-shirt, raising it up above his head, and tossed it to the floor alongside the pile of sweat-stained clothes.

It was all a matter of routine now, comfort him and lull him back to sleep, hoping his cries hadn't woken the children...

This was Milia Andreou's daily routine for 38 years. Her husband, having experienced the horrors of war whilst fighting for his country's independence in 1960, was left to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

She attended to his incessant tormenting flashbacks for nearly four decades until his death. This unflinching commitment constitutes her character, as well as her compelling sense of selflessness.

### **The happiness of creating a family**

When asked what her fondest memory was, regardless of the suffering she carried her husband through, and the difficulty of raising two children simultaneously, she told us that it was creating her family.

This is a further testament to her appreciation of life, notwithstanding the hardship. Such a sense of gratitude is hard to come by.

### **Supporting her family**

Gazing out of the dust-covered window, taking a glimpse of the congested streets of central Nicosia, Mrs Milia sighed and returned her focus to the book, which lay on her lap. The hem of her dress, intricately decorated with convoluted patterns of lace, flowed to and fro with every rumble and shake of the bus. Her calloused, spider-veined hands delicately caressed the smooth, yellowed paper, her abraded, knobby knuckles protruding from under her skin. Wrinkles and creases webbed her furrowed face, as her vibrant, animated eyes scanned each page. Halt. The bus came to a standstill. She clapped her book shut and stood up, ready to enter the school gates.

As she fetched her mop and bucket from the storage room, she returned to the classroom to find a young girl leaning against the crumbling wall, her head drooped towards the ground. She turned to face Mrs Milia, her eyebrows raised in a sign of despair and relief. A smile flourished across Mrs Milia's face. She swirled towards the door and hopped off to the kitchen, briskly returning with a mug of soothing, warm chamomile tea. She gestured the girl to take a seat, in the same chair as usual, and began the discussion.

Since her husband was left mentally impotent and therefore unable to work and support his family, Mrs Milia obliged herself to take action. She became employed as a cleaner at a local 'all girls' school, however she also proved to be an astoundingly important contribution to the school's community.



Cyprus collapsed into a cloud of misery, precipitating sorrow and despair. To this day, the island is separated through its centre and Nicosia remains the only divided capital on earth, meanwhile the peaceful coexistence of the past still lingers in the country's memory.

### **Life as a young girl**

The sun was just beginning to crack through the distant mountains when she arrived. The herd stood grouped together, one large unit. They raised their heads slightly in recognition, and a few calls emerged from the crowd as she approached.

She placed her hand on one of the sheep, running her fingers along its tough hide. Her father's staff was propped onto the feeble wooden fence gate, and she took it, although the length of it towered over her. She pulled open the gate, and the sheep began to unanimously file out. It was a few kilometers to the grass fields, but the sheep were accustomed to her, and thus well-behaved.

This is when she had time to think, to reflect and meditate on life's intricate ways. The monotony of the task numbed her senses, and her body took over, marching automatically to the opening just over the hill. She had half a day before the curfew on the capital city.

The sun had crossed the sky, and hovered heavy above the West when she entered the market.

Two silver buckets brimful of fresh ivory milk swung at her sides. She walked through the narrow streets, congested with people. Rows of stalls, displaying meats, cheeses and plump fruits and vegetables lined up into the distance. Sounds of bartering and negotiations filled the air, and Milia searched past all the tall figures, to see her father and her brother, dressed in matching grey suits.

Across the market, she locked eyes with her older brother, who smiled warmly, bouncing across the stream of people to help her with the buckets. The day's work was over.

Mrs Milia came from a large family of eight children, and so everyone had to help contribute to the family's income, including Mrs Milia herself.

After finishing 5th grade (a typical time for girls to finish school at the time), she was taken to work in her father's fields, occasionally as a shepherd. Despite her strict upbringing, she repeatedly mentioned the importance of family, and the role of parents in a child's life.

She expressed that her discontent with modern society mainly centred around parents becoming increasingly absent in their children's lives, due to their financial duties and the children's numerous academic responsibilities. A young person's life in modern society, in her eyes, is tailored towards being financially successful in the future, and therefore loses its depth and importance, contrary to the simplicity of the life she lived as a child.

### **The challenges of age**

Brick by brick, the walls of the past tumbled down into reality, and we found ourselves back in the living room of Mrs Milia's home.

Tracing my fingertips along the emerald-coloured velvet of my seat, I became accustomed to my surroundings, after being engulfed by such riveting memories. We raised our heads to see the pearl-shaped drops of emotion trailing down her hollow cheeks; her dark lashes brimmed heavy with tears. Her luminous, tear-stained eyes depicted every recollection, every occurrence of suffering or joy that she had gathered throughout each era of her life.

Then, sheer delight etched itself into her crinkled face. She beamed, like a glowing candle, warming our souls. Slanting towards her, we braced ourselves for further words of wisdom and advisability, dreading the ending to this prodigious, flourishing experience.

In an aged body no longer capable of its former physical activity, Mrs Milia's vibrant, vivacious soul remains trapped. Fiery energy blazes behind the windows of her eyes, struggling to escape. Her mind, still tingling with vitality, thrives with scattered memories from each chapter of her life.

Accompanied by her knowledge, she usually finds herself immersed in a book, as time reluctantly drifts by. After all, according to Mrs Milia, 'Old age is a prison'.

### **Author experience**

Rarely do you get the opportunity to delve into the past, and have decades of venerable wisdom handed to you in a few hours' worth of words. Looking through Mrs Milia's perception of life was like a breath of fresh air. She distanced herself from unimportant details in a way only a highly intellectual and emotionally mature person could.

Much of the communication between elders and youth is lost in the 'generation gap,' in other words a lack of the ability to shift perspective, although this was no problem for her. She was understanding in every sense of the word, and could see any situation without the influences of her experiences.

We could all take a little time out of our hard-pressed lives to listen to someone else's story, spend a few moments looking through their eyes. Perhaps we'll find some advice worth treasuring.

As the future generation, hearing Mrs Milia's story altered our view on our society and its flaws. Our responsibility for the future requires that we reflect on the positive and negative aspects of the past, in order to make the most of upcoming situations.

The simplicity of the life Mrs Milia lived in her younger years allowed her to live a much less mentally straining life, as opposed to the complexity of modern society. Technology is the primary cause of this vast difference, as it is gradually consuming the lives of the majority of the population, especially of our generation, forming the main flaw of our society.

According to Mrs Milia, what has true importance in life is love and family. She deems herself blessed to have grown her own family, and to be loved by the people around her. Viewing life from her perspective and realising how fulfilled she was with the little that she had, allowed us to broaden our horizons, and reconsider our overly materialistic tendencies, truly appreciating every opportunity that we are provided with.

Having the chance to seep into the past and experience life from nearly a century ago, through the eyes of a person who has endured so much, has transformed our approach to life, for which we are eternally grateful.

# 41 Earthquakes, hurricanes, wars and discrimination – just living life

Told by Mr Harold St Clair Clark and written by Richilde Hunte

*We now cross the Atlantic Ocean and arrive in the Caribbean where in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, graduate student Richilde Hunte talked to a fellow member of her church community, 94 year old Harold Clarke who describes both the experience the earthquake in 1928 and hurricane Janet in 1955.*



My name is Richilde Hunte and I am a 24-year-old from Bridgetown, Barbados. My main goal in life is to become an art therapist. Reading and writing however are some of my passions. For the Life Story project, I have interviewed my fellow parishioner at St Barnabas Anglican Church, 94-year-old Harold St Clair Clarke.

Our country is popularly known as 'the Gem of the Caribbean'. Our beautiful island lies south east of the Caribbean Island chain. Both Caribbean and Atlantic waters wash against our shores. Barbados is 166 miles square and is divided into 11 parishes.

Barbados was once a British colony until we gained Independence on 30th November 1966. In 2016, Barbados celebrated its jubilee of 50 years of Independence. In addition, in the summer of 2017 Barbados hosted CARIFESTA 13, a celebration of Caribbean arts and culture. This was a pivotal moment for the country, which last hosted the festival in 1981.

The sugar industry was once our primary source of income. Today, tourism is now our main service industry. With blue seas, white sand, fields, and hills, our people stand as our most valued asset.

It was a Wednesday evening. The sun was setting in the evening sky. An olive green car arrived by the driveway. Behind the wheel was Harold Clarke. As he approached the steps to the house, Mr Clarke stopped to ask if there was an elevator. Laughing at his own joke, Mr Clarke climbed the stairs and made himself comfortable in the chair. Sipping a glass of water Harold Clarke began to relay his life story.

## Early years

The Wednesday evening was appropriate for it was on a Wednesday in December 1923 in Bridgetown Barbados, that Harold St Clair Clarke was born. Clearing his throat Mr Clarke began to reminisce. His thoughts took him back to his first memory.

**Richilde(24),  
Co-editor  
Ingrid Eyers,  
Harold St  
Clair Clark  
(94)**





In the year 1928, a then five-year-old Harold Clarke felt the earth shake beneath his bare feet, as the donkey cart in sight shifted with the earth's movements. It was the first time he had experienced an earthquake.

Harold Clarke first lived with his mother, a shopkeeper, in Bird Hill, Haggatt Hall, St Michael. His father had lived in another parish. One Christmas day, Mr Clarke recalls walking with his relatives from Bird Hill in St Michael to Gun Hill Signal Station in St George to see the statue of the white lion. From there they paid three cents for the bus fare, and boarded a bus travelling to the city. Back then, walking, riding a bicycle, the donkey cart and the horse cart were the main means of transportation.

In Bridgetown, 'Boogles' (his boyhood nickname), would marvel at the Nelson Statue. As a child, he was told that money was kept underneath the statue and then taken over to the Parliament building across the road. Mr Clarke chuckled to himself as he was reminded of his childlike curiosity.

### **Childhood games**

In the early years of his life, Harold Clarke had the pleasure of being an only child until the arrival of his brother and sister. During his boyhood, he enjoyed pitching marbles and spinning top. He also enjoyed kite flying. His father had given him a multi-coloured kite. Eager to fly the kite, a young Harold Clarke had accidentally let go of the kite and it was lost to the sea.

His favourite childhood activity however was 'bat and ball', now formally known as cricket. Mr Clarke enjoyed bowling, and prides himself on having been an excellent fast bowler. This skill he possessed caused him to be nicknamed 'Harold Larwood' after the British cricketer.

Mr Clarke was first educated at St Mary's Boy's Infants, where Low Primer and High Primer were the classes offered by the school. From there Mr Clarke attended Bay Street Boys School under the motto 'Head, Heart and Hand'. The school had classes from the First Standard to the Seventh Standard.

On reaching the third standard Mr Clarke left school to care for his mother who had taken ill with the influenza. For two years Mr Clarke was unable to attend school. On his return to the school he repeated the fourth standard and left school at the fifth standard. During that time in Barbados, on leaving school, students were given the opportunity to return and teach in the school. Another option was to search for a job. Harold Clarke chose the latter.

### **First job**

In 1935 Mr Clarke was hired by a Caucasian woman in Strathclyde St Michael - his job was to maintain the garden. From seven until ten he would water the garden and pick the slugs. Every Sunday morning Mr Clarke would receive one shilling in pay.

A bare foot Harold Clarke would then walk from Strathclyde to the Bridgetown market. There he would purchase a pound of pig liver for eight cents. With the remaining cents he would purchase cooking oil, butter, and hot sauce for one cent each. Returning home with the groceries, Mr Clarke and his mother would enjoy a meal of cou cou and pig liver. Mr Clarke found a better job in 1936 in Fontabelle St Michael as the 'run of the house'. His job was to clean and help maintain the property. His pay was eight shillings a month, which his mother collected on his behalf.

## **Remembering national and world events**

The following year, Harold Clarke was in Westbury Cemetery St Michael picking ferns and flowers for the lady who had hired him. Suddenly, Harold Clarke heard a commotion in the street. Rushing to the cemetery wall in his shoes made out of car tire, Mr Clarke saw people running with donkey and horse carts. Screaming, the people were shouting, "deh rioting, deh rioting in de town." His voice mimicked the panic of the voices in his memory.

It was the outbreak of the Labour Rebellion in Barbados. Mr Clarke recalled standing by the wall until everything had quietened down. A then frightened Harold Clarke travelled to Broad Street in Bridgetown and saw broken glass by the stores.

"It was like a ghost town, with policemen with guns," Mr Clarke exclaimed. He shook his head as he was reminded of the horror that unfolded in front of his eyes.

Three years later, in 1940, the events of WWII were impacting the island. Mr Clarke at this time was residing in the Bayland, St Michael. Mr Clarke and his younger brother had intended to join the army. Mr Clarke however was afforded a job as a delivery boy at the Ice Company. His pay was ten shillings a week; his mother had told him not to join the army because they were only paying seven shillings a week.

### **Unfair dismissal**

At the Ice Company Mr Clarke was dismissed six times for absurd reasons. A particular circumstance really stood out in his mind. One of the clerks, a Caucasian man, had asked him to make a delivery. Excited, he had put the ice in his delivery pan cart which had an iron wheel. He had then covered the ice in a cocus bag. From there he walked to deliver the ice.

On his return, Mr Clarke had put the 18 cents change on the clerks table. At the end of the week the same amount was deducted from his salary. Devastated he began to cry. The manager, a Caucasian man had seen him crying and proceeded to tell him to leave.

Shaking his head as he spoke, Mr Clarke mumbled, "We didn't have any rights, no rights at all," he reiterated.

### **Hurricane Janet**

The year 1955 came and with it came Hurricane Janet. Hurricane Janet, a category five weather system, caused widespread destruction on the island. This was a time in Barbados where there was no television. The means of communication was either by letter, word of mouth, or via the popular local radio station Redifusion. Mr Clarke was sombre as he reflected back on the catastrophe.

It was evening and Harold Clarke was tuned into Redifusion listening to the boxing match being played at Madison Square Garden. Mr Clarke was listening intently because his favourite boxer Sugar Ray Robinson was playing. At twelve o'clock the match ended.

Two hours later the radio presenter announced Barbados would experience bad weather. This was an unusual broadcast, since the term 'bad weather' had never been used to describe any system approaching the island. Later that day Mr Clarke went to work at the Ice Company. On one of his deliveries, he had realised that tree branches were falling. Uncertain about the weather conditions, a concerned Mr Clarke returned home. The weather system intensified and Mr Clarke and his family survived a narrow escape from the wrath of the storm.



The aftermath had placed the island in a state of emergency. Mr Clarke had lost his galvanised roof during the hurricane. This however was not a deterrent to Harold Clarke, who in the midst of despair saw the opportunity to build his own home.

### **Building his own home**

Mr Clarke first erected a single roof gable house in Brighton Avenue, St Michael. While living in Brighton, Mr Clarke raised a pig, which he sold to a butcher for 72 dollars. With 68 dollars, Mr Clarke paid for a utility pole from the Barbados Light and Power Company, and was given electricity eleven months later.

This was an achievement for Harold Clarke because most homes had used oil lamps as a means of light at night. Mr Clarke prides himself on being the first individual to install electricity in the community. Through his kind ways, everyone in the community was able to benefit from the electricity.

### **A varied career**

During the 1960's, Mr Clarke started to work at the Barbados Ice Company, BICO, delivering ice cream. By 1965 he had negotiated a job at the Seawell Airport. At the airport, he cleaned out the cargo and drove the workers between their shifts. The following year in 1966, Mr Clarke left the airport and became a taxi driver. This year was a pivotal year in Barbados because it was the year the island declared its Independence from Britain.

On 30 November 1966, the rains poured down on the Garrison Savannah. Now in his forties, Harold Clarke stood beaming with other proud Barbadians in the rain. He watched as the Union Jack was lowered and the Trident was raised. Mr Clarke was overjoyed.

Fifty years later Mr Clarke was still overjoyed when Barbados celebrated its 50th Anniversary of Independence in 2016. He smiled as the feeling of nostalgia and pride at being a witness to both events touched his heart.

Mr Clarke switched from taxi driving and worked as a deliveryman for businesses such as Martin Doorly, a rum company, and Hanschell and Inniss Ltd, a distribution company in Barbados. His last job was as a deliveryman for Collins Ltd where he worked until his retirement.

### **A simple and quiet life**

This father of eight, two of which are deceased, his wife also deceased, now enjoys a simple and quiet life. Mr Clarke currently resides in Christ Church where he developed his single roof gable house into a better home. As a retired senior citizen, Mr Clarke enjoys keeping birds, travelling, cooking, watching Netflix and devoting time to the church.

On reflection, he describes his saddest moment as having only one shirt as a young man. In addition, during his tenure at BICO, he recalls not being paid on Christmas day, a common circumstance for the underprivileged. He reiterates however, that he chooses to see the bright side of life. To him the cup is always half full.

In contrast, he considers the day of his Confirmation at the St Barnabas Anglican Church St Michael to be his happiest moment. As a young man Mr Clarke described himself as someone who just lived life, never really having aspirations. This feeling changed, and now Mr Clarke is a committed member of the Ushers' Guild at the St Barnabas Anglican Church. He is often seen at the Lectern table reading the prayers for Intersession for the Sunday worship service.

**Devoted to the church**

A devoted member to the church, Mr Clarke is loved by the entire church family. His optimistic and cheerful demeanour supports his character. In addition, Mr Clarke enjoys travelling with the church. The most significant journey was a trip to the Holy Land. This trip allowed him to experience the River Jordan, and the Sea of Galilee.

In closing, an active and ambitious Harold Clarke became excited as he spoke about the fish tank he is currently assembling. As Mr Clarke left the house, descending the steps, the peaceful feeling of the atmosphere appeared to welcome the life story of Harold Clarke.

**Author experience**

It was indeed a pleasure to sit and listen to Mr Harold Clarke tell his life story. Not often do we take the time to focus on our senior citizens. The excitement and honour of being able to document his life was an unforgettable experience. I have learned more about my country, this time not just from the history books, but from someone who has lived the experience.

Through his memories, I was able to envision my country and life of yesteryear. The absence of workers' rights as an underprivileged, and the impact of political events in the country were poignant features of the conversation. In addition, being optimistic about life despite the circumstance was emphasised.

Moreover, I was also able to give ear to someone whose story needed to be told. Listening to his life story made him feel elated. It also made me realise that his contribution to this life was significant in the development of what my country is today.

From this, I have learned that every life story is a part of our identity as a people. The value of the story however, lies in the hearts of those willing to listen.

## 42 The secrets to longevity

**Told by Aviscene Carrington and written by Thomas King**

*In another area of Bridgetown, Barbados Thomas King, who is in his final year at school, was intrigued and fascinated by the experiences he was told about by his former primary school headmistress, 99 year old Aviscene Carrington.*

My name is Thomas King, I am 17 years old and from Barbados. Barbados is the most Easterly of the Caribbean Islands and, while

an independent nation since 1966, it is currently still part of the Commonwealth. Barbados is a well-developed country, and it relies mostly on tourism as the major foreign exchange earner and form of income for most of its citizens. Most tourists come from the United Kingdom but in recent years there has been a bigger influx of American and Canadian visitors as well.

I am currently a student of the Christ Church Foundation School, where I attend upper 6th form. I have gone through all my education here in Barbados; 13 years ago, I attended Merrivale Preparatory School, which was run by the subject of the interview and this essay, Ms Carrington.

I had the pleasure of interviewing Aviscene 'Avis' Carrington, a 99-year-old Barbadian educator and former principal of her private run school Merrivale. She started teaching at a very young age and continued to do so for many years, only very recently retiring. While running her own school, she married and had children and she is still very much involved in her family's lives.

The 21st century is an age of technology, peace and freedom of choice. However, the world that we as today's generation know and love now was not always this way. This present world represents only a small piece of the long life of Avis Carrington.



**Aviscene Carrington (99)**  
**Keeping in touch with family**



**Thomas King (17) and Aviscene Carrington (99)**

On Friday, 20 October 2017 I had the privilege to interview Ms Carrington. I had prepared a series of questions, but I counted on her recalling many stories in between and I was not disappointed.

### **A renowned educator**

Aviscene 'Avis' Carrington, known by many as "Miss Carrington", is the founder of the primary learning institution known as Merrivale Preparatory School, and is 99 years of age (though she is continuously told by those who meet her, myself included, that she appears many years younger).

An educator for more than 70 years, Miss Carrington began her teaching career at the St Giles Primary School at the young age of 19, and once she had established her own primary school, she continued teaching until the age of 92 when she finally retired and closed her school.

### **Three sisters**

The story of Miss Carrington begins clearly with her childhood. She grew up with two other sisters, under the strict tutelage of her father. This meant her contact with boys her age was somewhat limited. However, as a female trio they got along with each other well enough. Avis was the youngest of the three, and shared a particular bond with the eldest. This was because they both enjoyed being active and outgoing, while the middle sister, was more inclined to quiet reading, or as Avis herself puts it "the older one and I bonded very well because we were both tomboys. But, the middle sister – she was a bookworm."

### **Making their own entertainment**

The modern technological devices we can't seem to live without today, were, of course, not present in those times. As such, children had to rely on more basic means of entertainment. As recalled by Miss Carrington, children at schools occupied themselves by playing games and activities like skipping and racing. Children would often be dispersed into groups or niches, essentially just doing whatever activity took their fancy. This is notably different from the structure and organisation of sports and extra-curricular activities in the present day.

At home, the children entertained themselves with activities like playing with dolls and climbing trees. A very popular activity at the time was going for long walks in the morning. Neighbours would group together and organise the event and decide the general direction of travel. The residents would then wake up at 5 o'clock and go walking together.

Other valued engagements included an agricultural exhibition, held at Queen's Park. This exhibition was held in high esteem because not all parents could afford to get their children to take part, and it was therefore considered a privilege to attend this event.

As different as many things seem to have been in those days, some traditions last many generations. Sunday morning church was highly attended. On celebratory occasions, such as the anniversary of the church, children would sometimes take part singing or presenting poems. Acting and drama, however, were looked down upon by society at the time.

### **A love of sport**

As a child, Avis followed cricket closely as her father was an avid cricket fan and insisted that they played but yet, she herself never become a fan of the game as she was intimidated by her father and afraid she would do it wrong and disappoint him.

At St Michael's school later, she took part in sports and she was particularly strong in races. She loved the cheering of the crowd while she was racing and often came second or third.

Though she had a clear passion for teaching later in life, Avis didn't always enjoy school as a student. As previously mentioned, the middle of the three sisters was an avid reader, and as such, she became regarded as a very bright student. However since Avis was more outgoing than studious, she did not share her sister's academic prowess.

"She [the middle sister] was regarded as being a very bright student. I was just the opposite of her academically," says Avis.

It was for this reason that Avis, unfortunately and somewhat ironically, did not very much enjoy her time at primary school. However, upon reaching secondary school, there was a change in this regard.

Avis attended the St Michael's Secondary School. When she arrived, she became quite engaged in the school's sporting activities where she was able to excel. It should be noted that school sporting activities were conducted in a rather different manner. School systems were a lot less sophisticated in those days. Though there were athletic teams and competitions, there were no sports coaches and there were no Interschool Sports. Each school would have its own individual 'sports day' which occurred within the school, but no competitions between the schools. In fact, there was hardly any interaction at all between students of different schools.

### **Changes in teaching techniques**

The changes in the system of education over the years can also be seen when looking at Avis's time as a teacher. This is because, as mentioned, Avis began work as a teacher the same year that she left school as a student. Teaching in those days was done in a very rigid way. Students were asked questions by teachers and once called by name they had to respond. They were not allowed to express themselves freely but had to respond in a specific way. Clearly very different from today's teaching style where students are actively encouraged to share their views in order to develop their thinking skills.

Ms Carrington is very aware of today's technological advances and understands that the world as we know it would not be the same without them and that we cannot exist without them. She has learned the basics and her daughter has taught her how to use the computer so that she can email and Skype with her family abroad. She loves the fact that it helps her stay connected.

The contrast to her upbringing is very stark as in her younger years the big advancements were the introduction of the telephone or even electricity. In the eyes of my own generation simple technology from these times is often taken for granted or is considered almost outdated.

### **Important life events**

A very important historical event during Avis' lifetime was the time that Barbados became an independent nation. She remembers it vividly and it represents a proud moment in her lifetime.

Travelling abroad also left a mark in her memory as this was not something that was easily done when she was a child. With the advancement of air travel she was able to take trips abroad and this was quite remarkable for her and it helped her broaden her horizons.

### **Medical advancements**

Progress in medical treatments and procedures also impressed Avis throughout the years, as there are now many new techniques such as surgeries and highly advanced medication to combat different diseases.

This was particularly of importance to her as her youngest son is a cancer survivor. Telling this story was very difficult for Avis and understandably, she became very emotional, even though this happened over 20 years ago. At still a young age her son came home and was not feeling well so he underwent some tests and was eventually diagnosed with cancer.

He had a tumour and he needed surgery urgently. When Avis was given the news, she felt terrible and could not eat or sleep. Her son was a fighter however who stuck to a strict diet and did everything the doctors told him to do and this is even so until today. He has also reached out to other cancer patients and has helped them go through treatment.

Avis is extremely proud of her son and of course thankful for his recovery, which she credits in a big way to the advancement of treatments in medicine.

### **A blessed life**

Overall Avis considers herself really blessed, so it is hard for her to pinpoint the happiest moment of her life. She recalls the happy moments with her husband and her children. In general, her happiest moments always involve having her family around her and having family gatherings. When everyone would be at the same place and at the same time be it as a young child with her parents and siblings or later on with her children and grandchildren.

Her parents were some of the greatest influences in her life. While being strict disciplinarians, they were still kind, and Avis knows they were passionate and caring. She has taken on these traits from them and has tried to be herself compassionate and caring all her life. Clearly important characteristics to have, in order to be a great educator and Avis is certainly known as such.

### **Secrets of longevity**

When asked what she thinks helped her live such a long life, she is adamant that it is in her genes. Her mother died at 94, and her cousin at 100, and she has a sister that is currently at the ripe age of 101 years.

She also attributes her well-being to her constant happiness and her eagerness not to fret over things. She thinks she has an even temper and loves people, so she enjoys interacting with everyone in society. She finds this is often not the norm anymore in today's times, but she truly loves talking and meeting people up to this day.

At 99, and being retired for seven years, she did not know what to do with her time at first, but now she finds herself wondering how she ever had time to teach as she stays quite occupied these days with a variety of things. She rises early and tends to her plants. She has travelled at least once every year to visit her family (missing only one year).

She was also asked to travel for the wedding of a former student, however she thought she would have to miss it because she did not want to travel alone, but her son then arranged for her grandson to meet up with her to ensure she was safe during her trip for this special wedding.

### **The importance of family, friends and faith**

Avis also fondly remembers Ms Applewaithe who was her housekeeper for many years, helping her keep her household in order while she was running the school. When she closed the school she unfortunately had to let go of all her staff including Ms Applewaithe. So from then on, she had to take care of her household herself. Buying groceries and cooking were two chores in particular, that she was not used to, and she still does not like to do them very much up to this day.

Avis recalls once more how much her family has always meant to her, first her life with her parents and siblings, with whom she spent many wonderful and memorable moments, and now with her own children and grandchildren whom she cherishes very much.

Last but not least, Avis emphasises that she has always been a Christian and she still worships actively and regularly. She wants to ensure that it is understood that her belief has always been an important part of her life.

### **Author experience**

Interviewing Avis was very enlightening for me, especially as I had actually spent my first year and a half of primary school at Merrivale Preparatory School. Avis did not remember me too well (neither do I have a great recollection of that time, as I was still so young) but she still remembers accommodating me and my older brother despite the relatively short time we spent at her school and the many students that would have crossed her path during her long teaching career.

Her stories were very intriguing and certainly interesting.

I especially enjoyed hearing about her upbringing and what her family used to do for entertainment when there was very little technology at that time. It was such a vastly different experience from what we are used to today.

It was especially fascinating to note that Avis mentioned on occasion that she could not remember more details about the early days, but what is astonishing is that she actually still remembers so much, has a sharp mind, and is very active.

I truly enjoyed learning about the old days and spending time with Avis.

## 43 From village boy to becoming a cricketing legend

Told by Sir Everton Weekes and written by Ocean Cumberbatch Campbell

*In the Parish of St Phillips on the island of Barbados, Ocean Cumberbatch Campbell, is taken by surprise at how much he enjoyed talking to 92 year old cricketing legend Sir Everton Weekes.*

I, a karate practicing, book loving, 17-year-old student of Queen's College, having no experience in either watching or playing cricket, was slightly intimidated when challenged with the task of interviewing Sir Everton Weekes, a

world-renowned Barbadian cricket legend.

Yet with much reluctance, I decided to forgo my usual evening routine of lazy procrastination and then frantic completion of homework assignments, to speak with this man, who I had known nothing about other than a title.

What was supposed to be a half an hour of rigid, uncomfortable conversation with an old man turned out to be an entire evening of wonder and reminiscing as Sir Everton shared aspects of his career, childhood, family life and coming of age. I was totally unprepared for the world that he laid out before me, the scenery of which was in high contrast to that which I am accustomed.

I live in a Barbados where, even if it takes an hour of waiting in the searing sun, buses are generally available to transport you from one side of the island to another.

I live in a Barbados where if I want to speak with a friend I can send them a quick text message.

I live in a Barbados where people of all ethnicities and economic backgrounds can eat, play, party and learn in the same place with no sense of prejudice, or racial stratification. The Barbados he described was the complete opposite.

### Growing up

Sir Everton Weekes grew up with one sibling; his older sister. He made a joke that his mother preferred him of the



Ocean Cumberbatch Campbell (17), Sir Everton Weekes (92) and Co-editor Ingrid Evers meets Ocean Cumberbatch Campbell





two, which I found quite amusing that even at the amazing age of 92 one could still have sibling rivalry on their mind.

This amusement soon turned to awe as I quickly realised that underneath his 92 years of maturity, there was still a childlike spirit of wonder, whimsy, and a little cheek hidden. He told me a story from his childhood, where he was a Boy Scout and was about to graduate into the upper ranks for the older boys.

The older boys had a tradition of throwing the younger boys into the deep water near the wharf; this caused them to get into a considerable amount of difficulty in the water plus soiling their uniforms. This also got him into a significant amount of trouble with his mother when she saw the state of his uniform. It was stories like these that allowed me to relate with Sir Everton, his adventurous and playful childhood.

### **The differences of then and now**

However, there were aspects of his childhood that I could not even comprehend. One of the first things he said to me in our conversation was 'children are well received now', informing me of how back then, the statement 'children are to be seen and not heard' rang true.

He also informed me that as a black person in that time, who was not wealthy, things were considerably harder as well. He had only been able to gain a primary level education, up to the age of 14, at the St. Leonard's Primary school, which I had never heard about.

This was due to the fact that secondary education was not affordable to the general populous, a foreign concept to me, as in present day Barbados, education is free through primary and secondary levels.

The thought of this disadvantage saddened me as Sir Everton is such a well read, educated man, that the secondary school education could have pushed his intellect even further than its current high level.

### **Racial prejudice**

In addition, he told me of the racial prejudice that existed in his time, where persons of colour could not even walk through certain neighbourhoods, play sports such as tennis or golf, or get the same level of education at the same schools as Caucasians.

I was appalled mainly because I would read about racism and had even experienced it in my life as a young black teenager. However to accept that I could meet someone living who had experienced that level of racism first hand made the entire thing seem more realistic; it made me realise that it wasn't as long ago as I would be led to believe.

Moreover, this granted me an appreciation of the society I live in, an inclusive one where everyone is more or less afforded the same opportunities and there is no significant or institutionalised racial divide.

### **Major life influences**

After he graduated from primary school he played in the Barbados Cricket League and then joined the army which he said played a large role in the discipline he has to date. He served in the army for four years before deciding to play cricket professionally.

He also said that one big challenge in his life was the trials to be chosen for the Barbados cricket team. Given his background and race I found it inspirational that

he was still able to rise to such a great height, not just becoming an international cricketer for the Barbados team, but being so great at what he did that he received one of the highest achievements possible in his field; a knighthood for achievement in sports. I hope one day I can be as successful as he is, regardless of the sacrifices necessary.

### **A love of literature**

We also spoke at length about reading, a shared hobby that we found. We both agreed that it was a great way to not only widen one's general knowledge and vocabulary, but also widen one's horizons and open your mind to new perspectives. I also quickly realised that most of his intelligence and his well-spoken nature could be attributed to his extensive reading. I also noted that he seemed fairly open minded and didn't dismiss any notions I raised, more than likely an attribute of his background in reading since he had exposed himself to so many topics and ideas.

### **Astutely noticing change**

Another thing that blew me away in our conversation was the way he described the way the world has advanced from the time he was a child to now, when I am a child.

He says that a lot less people walk now because public transportation has improved (debatable) and that our economy has strengthened since he was a child, which makes me wonder how bad it must have been before now...

Communications have also improved according to Sir Everton; at one point, there was only one phone per village, and now almost every person has their own personal cell phone.

He seemed reasonably happy to say these things, which attested to his patriotism, a man who served as a defender of his country and represented it on the world stage in cricket, now happy to see the lives of its people improved and made easier.

### **Life events –the highs and the lows**

Our conversation took a sombre turn as I asked him if there was any event in his life that he would consider the saddest. He said that the death of his mother would be his worst moment to date, as they were very close. He was overseas, playing cricket with the West Indies team, and his mother was ill at the time of his departure.

However, when he returned he went straight to the hospital to visit her and was met with the news that she had passed. One of the nurses said to him "it's almost like she was waiting for you" as she passed away around the same time as his arrival in the island.

He spoke so affectionately of his mother and I could tell that even after so many years, just speaking about it had reopened the wound in his mind.

On a lighter note, we quickly switched to a more positive topic, as I asked him about any highlights in his life, moments that made his life worth living. He spoke of his greatest achievements, his knighthood, his Pride of Barbados Lifetime Achievement Award and his honorary doctorate from the University of the West Indies. These made it clear that Sir Everton had lived a full and successful life, and had something to show for it.



### **Finding common ground**

Finally, we bonded over jokes about the parishes in our homeland, seeing as I live in St Philip and his family is originally from there. We joked about St Philip's movement for independence from the rest of the island (all about 10 miles of it) and about how people from St Philip seem to speak differently from others on the island.

What I found most interesting in that discussion was his mention of the fact that he was actually born about 200 yards away from Kensington Oval. This led me to wonder if we truly have the power of choice or if our fates are predestined.

### **Author experience**

After spending two hours that felt like a lifetime speaking to this legend, I felt as though I had been transported through a time machine.

Our worlds were so different and yet, we still related so well.

I gained a serious appreciation for the way persons in his age group had to work hard and fight to gain the success they did, and the way that they had also managed to make our lives easier in the process.

All of their efforts so many years ago allowed for my generation of Barbadians to have all that we do now and live these comfortable lives. I am honestly so grateful that I had the opportunity to converse with such a man, and to be able to take a look into his world and see how life was in his day.

Our conversation has changed my view of the elderly, and honestly my outlook on life in general. I feel invigorated to work hard for what I want to achieve, because if they could do it with next to nothing, why can't I?

## 44 A visionary nation builder

**Told by Mrs Ada Straughn and written by Kobie Broomes.**

*Still in Barbados, we meet the first of two lifelong friends who have influenced life on this proud Caribbean island.*

*Budding broadcaster Kobie Broomes speaks to retired teacher and former Senator Ada Straughn, and learns of her experiences as she brought education to the masses by helping transform the education system.*



My name is Kobie Broomes. I am 18 years old and I am from Barbados.

Just a little about myself. I am a student pursuing a Bachelors Degree in Media and Journalism having completed my course of study for an Associate Degree in Computer Studies from The Barbados Community College.

My goal is to become a television broadcaster. I have already started on that path as a junior reporter at Barbados Today a local media house. I am also a senior member of the Barbados National Youth Parliament. I represented Barbados at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference in 2016 in the Bahamas.

The older person I talked to is Mrs Ada Straughn a 91-year-old retired teacher.

### **A visionary “Nation Builder”**

As I pondered in deep thought looking for the right words to describe my interviewee in the introduction; the only ones that came to mind to truly encapsulate the woman Mrs Ada Judith Straughn, is ‘nation builder’.

I could only describe her as a true visionary. Mrs Straughn oversaw the transformation of the historically all-girls school to a co-educated school ensuring that the boys were well integrated.



**Kobi Broomes (18) and Mrs Ada Straughn (91)**



During her many years in the teaching service, she could be credited with ensuring thousands of Barbadians received a quality education.

Born in Barbados in July 1926, she received elementary education at Vauxhall Combined Schools and Secondary Education at the St Michael's Girl School where she later taught as English Teacher.

Like the popular saying in Barbados goes, teaching was in Mrs Straughn's blood; even up to the present she still finds every opportunity to reciprocate the knowledge that she obtained from her extensive small library at her home.

She received her professional training at Erdiston Teachers' Training College. She also was a graduate of the University of the West Indies where she obtained a bachelors degree with second-class honours in Political Science and Sociology and completed a Guidance Counselling and Careers Work course at Edge Hill College, Lancashire, England in 1972-73.

Mrs Straughn entered the school system at a very young age and made an outstanding contribution to the education system in Barbados. In 1959 she transferred to the Alexandra School in Queens Street; over time she became Principal and later retired in 1986.

### **Lifetime achievements**

However, her teaching didn't stop after retirement as this superwoman continued to teach at tertiary level institutions for some years after. She taught English Communication at the Barbados Community College and Guidance Counselling at the University of the West Indies.

Mrs Straughn was recognised regionally and nationally on a number of occasions her latest achievement was being a part of the island's 50th-anniversary honour list. She has also been awarded:

- Gold Crown of Merit for Meritorious Service to Education in Barbados in 1986
- Outstanding Service to Education and Community Service in 1990
- Citizen of the Year Award in 1991
- Certificate of Appreciation for Outstanding Contribution in the Field of Education from Rotary Club of Barbados West 1994
- National Volunteer Award for a Lifetime of Voluntary Contribution to the Upliftment of the People of Barbados on 'International Day of the Volunteer 2004'
- The St Michael School Alumni and Clement Payne National Hero Award in 2008 for Outstanding Service to the People of Barbados

She also served as an Independent Senator in the House of Assembly from 1990 - 1994 and Chairman of the Film Censorship Board in 1990.

Mrs Straughn is still an avid churchgoer even at her age. She is still extremely active in the Mothers Union, an organisation of which she has been a part for over 50 years.

### **Teaching is in the blood**

This 91-year-old educator is very witty and independent and still always finds a teachable moment.

"I supposed I may be one till I die," she said jokingly. "I was teaching for a long time, it was like a family history; I was told that my grandmother before me was a teacher, my mother was a teacher. The teaching runs in the family."

Mrs Straughn remembered her experience as the first coloured teacher at the Alexandra School: "I was appointed straight away. I don't remember writing an application; I was interviewed and then I was recommended. It was a kind of negotiation between Alexandra and St Michael's Girls' School," she says.

At the young age of just 19 years old, Mrs Straughn began her long career in the field.

"At the time I went into teaching I was still sitting my exams, GCE (General Certificate of Education), some of the senior girls and I sat exams together. I think the only thing I didn't teach on the timetable was French; at that time it was generalised," she says.

### **Growing up in Barbados**

"I am the tenth child of eleven children and there was no piped or running water," she said. Her family members call her the matriarch because she is now the eldest of the living siblings.

She gave vivid accounts of what it was like to live in Barbados in the years before running water and during the WWII times.

Mrs Straughn grew up in her childhood home in Christ Church and rural part of the country. "St David's was like a little egg in a nest of plantations or estates; it wasn't difficult to live. The running water in homes came a little later and when it was installed it was 84 cents a quarter; the boys used to go further up the road and bring back water for us girls to bathe, in that was their job before going to the school", she said.

She reminisced about how much different life was. "It was a shared life," she says, and gave the example that if there was only one orange in the home then it would be cut so that each child could get a piece of it.

In was in St David's that she found her religion at the Anglican Church, which she described as the pivotal place in which the community met every Sunday.

"You went to church that was a must. What else was there to be active in?" she said. But it was no shock that Mrs Straughn's interest was in the Sunday school section where she taught the children.

### **Living through war and gaining independence**

Another notable event in her life was living through the war. She said it wasn't easy but it was very disciplined. "The unavailability of certain commodities, the boats that would bring the imported goods could not travel because of the submarines in the water," she recounted.

She narrated the events of 1942 when a ship in the Bridgetown harbour was struck by a submarine. Mrs Straughn's said some people were able to get some overseas products for very cheap prices because the boat had to unload, which was relief at the time.

Upon reflection, she joked as she explained some of the strange practices that took place during that time, "When you think back we had some strange practices but what would we do? As a colony whatever direction was given you had to obey."

She said people were very serious about war times, "You could not turn on your lights at night as soon as it began to get dark and you had to put your lamp chimneys at half-mast."



After the war, the other notable event that Mrs Straughn witnessed was the country's independence from Britain in 1966.

"I was there on the night. Every Independence the rain pours, and that night the rain poured. But you felt the celebrations vibrated, you had real celebrations for independence, you had to learn about it first because there was the idea of the Caribbean coming together as a federation and that broke up because countries fell out."

As a proud Barbadian what strikes her the most is the second verse in the national anthem: "It absolutely beautiful, the Lord has been the people's guide, it gives history, it gives praise and thanksgiving," she says.

Mrs Straughn is a widow, a proud mother of three sons, grandmother of seven and great-grandmother of two and a national gem. I thoroughly enjoyed taking part in this activity. I grew up around older people and spent my time engaging them so this was not a new experience for me.

### **Author experience**

What was particularly interesting is that Mrs Ada Straughn was the former principal of the school, which I attended. Though I was not there during her tenure she made such an impact that I felt as though I knew her personally from the stories told at orientation.

With that newfound connection we were able to interact on a more personal level because of our shared experience at the best school in Barbados. I was very impressed by the level of independence and sharpness that Mrs Straughn exhibited and it was an honour to be in the company of a woman of her class.

## 45 A trailblazer for women's rights

**Told by Dame Maizie Barker-Welch and written by Krystal Hoyte**

*The final conversation in Barbados is between storyteller Ada's best friend Dame Maizie Barker-Welch and young journalist and photographer Krystal Hoyte.*

*Dame Maizie revealed her strategies to help rural women become independent and Krystal learns that the core values of service above self and community are ageless.*

As a journalist and photographer at one of Barbados' leading media houses for the last year, everyday is a new adventure. My work allows me to give voice to the voiceless but also to meet men and women from all walks of life. Hearing their stories and sharing them with the world is a job that brings me immense joy.

When I made the decision to take a gap year from school, I vowed to make that year my 'yes' year, where I would say yes to new opportunities regardless of how daunting. Any experience that would advance my career or teach me something new, I took. I have learnt more this year outside of the classroom than ever before.

I am honoured to have this opportunity to interview Dame Maizie Barker-Welch, a woman whose story has always inspired me. Dame Maizie paved the way for women in my country and rallied for the rights of women, not just in Barbados but across the region.



**Krystal Hoyte, (18) and Dame Maizie Barker-Welch (90)**

Her life in politics is one that continues to influence me whilst I serve as the Vice President of Barbados Youth Development Council and the Leader of Opposition Business in the Barbados National Youth Parliament.

In 1927 when Dame Maizie Barker-Welch was born it was a very different Barbados, a pre-independent Barbados with no electricity, no television and no free education. Today, at 90 years old, Dame Maizie, a daughter of the soil has witnessed many historical events and has left her name on history's page.

### **A caring community**

Dame Maizie was born in Green Hill, St Michael but grew up in St Thomas. "Coming from St Michael and moving to Clifton Hill, was almost like moving to another country, St Thomas was so different, I didn't know that people went to school without shoes until we moved to Clifton Hill," Dame Maizie said humorously. The eldest of 12 children, Dame Maizie lived with her father and mother and many other siblings. "My father was a country schoolmaster and I saw a great deal of community work; it was at home where I first experienced care for the community. Daddy always taught us that we should give back to the community; he believed in the betterment of the village," Dame Maizie said.

### **Her father's influence**

She spoke fondly of her daddy who was a father to many. "I have to speak about my father because he was like the father of the village; my father had the only car in the village and any time of the night you would hear a knock on the door and small voice saying 'Mr Barker, somebody's ill and has to go to hospital'. Daddy would get up and take that person to hospital. Many a baby was almost born in his car - that was the car of the village, the village car," she said.

Adding that back then transportation was very different, "We didn't have a bus every hour sometimes half an hour like you have now, we had one bus in the morning and one bus at night, so there was a lot of walking being done," Dame Maizie said.

Reminiscing on her life in Clifton Hill she smiled broadly as she talked about the mobile cinema, "When the people in the village heard that the mobile cinema was coming out they would all flock to the pasture. The films were always useful and educational films, talking about health or diseases, it was a very different time," Dame Maizie said.

### **Winning a bursary**

She shared on her schooling and the very first bursaries in Barbados, of which she was one of the recipients. "In those days there was no free education, you had to pay to get into secondary school and at that time St Michael's Girls School fees were \$9.20 a term. I know that today that may seem like a small amount but back then that was a lot, especially to persons who were making 25c a day or so; many could not afford it," she said.

"In 1939, notice was sent in the newspaper that they were going to give out scholarships, it was the first bursary in the island and it meant that if you won it, your school fees would be paid," Maizie said. She revealed over 500 students applied. "To think that you could go to school and not have to pay anything, it was such a big thing and they were so many students that two exams had to be held." Dame Maizie was placed first in both exams and would start school at St Michael's Girls School shortly after.

"I mean we would have had secondary education at any rate but having 12 children to send to school is tough. This was an opportunity for me to receive secondary education for free, so I went down to this examination and did my best," she said.

The young woman would complete her schooling and go on to spend her early years teaching at various schools across the island for over 20 years, before leaving the classroom to become an entrepreneur. "I had a little shop in my home where I made clothes. Everything I wore, I made myself," Dame Maizie said.

### **A career in politics**

But it was her career in politics which started in 1985 that would be amongst her greatest accomplishments, the trailblazer; in her own right was the only female in parliament between 1986 and 1991.

She served under the party leader, and her close friend, the Rt Hon Errol Walton Barrow, Barbados' first Prime Minister, after securing the St Joseph seat for the Democratic Labour Party, a seat which had been a Barbados Labour Party stronghold for over 15 years. Dame Maizie travelled through every crack and crevice of St Joseph canvassing.

"One day I was out canvassing in St Joseph and I came across a woman. I introduced myself and said 'I am here to ask for your vote'. She put down the tray on her head and said 'No person has ever come to this village'. This is because St Joseph was like the backwoods, it was far and like a forest but I grew up in Clifton Hill, St Thomas which was a half mile away from the border of St Joseph."

### **A change of name**

The people of St Joseph related more so to the Barkers of St Joseph than the Welch's of Christ Church and so a mid life decision to hyphenate her name to Barker-Welch came in 1986.

"I made the decision to change my name from Maizie Welch to Maizie Barker-Welch when I was out canvassing and a lady said 'We don't want no town woman representing we' - I said 'I am not a town woman, I grew up right down the road in Clifton Hill, I am Mr Barker's daughter,' and she said 'Mr Barker? Maizie, so why you didn't say so'," Dame Maizie said.

This was a move fully supported by her husband, of whom she spoke lovingly. With a mentality much like the Chinese Proverb 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime', Dame Maizie set out to liberate the women of St Joseph.

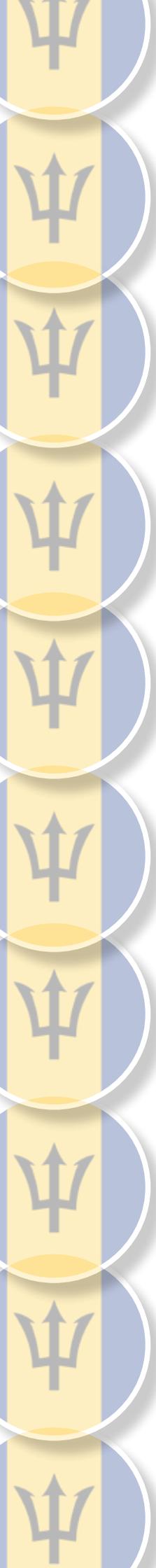
"I wanted to help the women of St Joseph become independent women and so when I was campaigning, I went to the villages down in Branchbury, Suriname, Joe's River and a few others and I gathered the girls and taught them to do crochet, knitting, dressmaking. I got a friend of mine to teach them baking and arranged a floral arranging class for them. I thought rather than just coming and asking people for a vote, I wanted to show them I can do something to help improve their lives," Dame Maizie said.

Many believe it was that unique way of campaigning that encouraged the people of St Joseph to choose Dame Maizie as their representative.

"I wanted to help the people of St Joseph, many of whom had felt very forgotten. I trekked steep pathways like Horse Hill to reach the constituents there, and then got the road done. That hill was once a very dangerous hill," Dame Maizie said.

### **An advocate for women's rights**

She became much more than a representative for the people of St Joseph, Dame Maizie Barker-Welch rallied for women's rights in a post independence Barbados. Along with her career in politics, Dame Maizie delved into a life of advocacy and in 1992 she became President of National Organisation of Women, the umbrella body for women's organisations across Barbados.



“Women are valuable assets in nation-building; they are the caregivers and so much more.” She zeroed in on domestic violence when she was the President of the Business and Professional Women’s Club.

“It was at a time where there was a surge of domestic violence but they were no laws in place to protect women. So we started a shelter for women who were involved in domestic violence and we were able to get a building but we never disclosed the location just to ensure the safety of the women that passed through our shelter.”

Led to empower women in difficult situations the club under the leadership of Dame Maizie started a weekly seminar for unemployed mothers.

“The Personal Development Programme for Unemployed Young Mothers was an initiative we did to teach women life skills, we wanted to prepare them for the world of work but also life in itself,” Dame Maizie said.

She admits that the most rewarding days of her life were spent helping to improve the livelihood of women in Barbados. Dame Maizie now spends her time at home gardening or travelling to Europe visiting her children and many grandchildren in Switzerland, Belgium, Croatia and England.

### **Author experience**

Listening to Dame Maizie’s story was a timely reminder and important example that women can indeed have it all, a husband and children (even four) and multiple careers. Her work to elevate the status of women in Barbados is one that I am grateful for and inspired by.

My life experiences will undoubtedly be different from that of Dame Maizie’s particularly with the advancement of technology but her core values of service above self and community empowerment are values that are just as important today in 2018 as they were in 1937.

Sigmund Freud once said ‘If Youth Knew, If Age Could’, the sharing of information between the young and old is critical, the amount of life nuggets Dame Maizie shared with me about hard work and being a woman in Barbados are invaluable. The experience in itself was a history lesson and I am thankful to have had this opportunity.

## 46 Surviving hurricanes and life in two countries

Told by Ermin Veronica Frederick and written by Sean and Marli Fredrick

*Our island hopping ends in Grenada where Sean and Marli Fredrick discover about life in Grenada, hurricanes and living in England in the 1950s.*



Ermin Frederick met her great-grandchildren Sean and Marli for the first time in 2017 when they visited Grenada with their grandfather. Keen to know more about their great-grandmother, they asked questions about herself and her life.

### What was it like when you were young?

"My name is Ermin Veronica Frederick. I was born in 1931, which makes me 86! I was born in Gouyave, in Grenada. I grew up in an area called Florida as the youngest of four children in a small, 3-roomed house with my two brothers, my sister and our grandmother.

Growing up, life was hard. We had no money. We had to walk three miles to school every day, then three miles home. We had to do our chores before and after school every day. We went to church every Sunday.

I left school at 16. We didn't have qualifications in those days. When I left school there was no work. We just had to make the best of things. I learnt to sew, became a seamstress and made dresses and clothes.

After a few years, I moved back to Gouyave where I met Cecil. We got married in 1954 and in March 1955 we had a daughter.

Later that year (September 1955), Grenada was hit by Hurricane Janet."

### Was it scary Nana?

It was terrible and very frightening. The hurricane caused tremendous damage right across the island and we found out later that nearly 150 people on the island had died but it killed over 1000 people in total across the whole area.

After the hurricane, England opened its doors to us and arranged for those who wanted to, to leave Grenada and come to England. We decided to go. We didn't know England at all, but we felt we didn't have a choice.



Sean (10) and Marli Fredrick (8) and Ermin Frederick (86)



Many people went to England. I think they charged us £15 each for the fare.

My husband went first to find us somewhere to live and I followed. We went by boat via Jamaica, and I think Madeira and it took over 20 days. I was sick every day for the first seven days, but in the end, I got there. Soon after arriving, we had a son. Then a few years later, our daughter who we left in Grenada joined us. We then had another son, so we brought up our three children in London.

At first we lived in one room in Catford in south London. It was true, the signs in many windows of houses did say 'No Blacks, No Irish, No Dogs'. We were not welcomed. We were very frightened for a long time, but it got better. I knew I had to work but I couldn't find any work.

In the end, I found a job as an auxiliary nurse at a big residential home in Lewisham called Ladywell Lodge. There were so many people in the home. Hundreds! (Ladywell Lodge housed 700 residents).

At first it was run by the London County Council (LCC), then Lewisham Council took over the running of the home. After a few years there, I became an 'Officer in Charge', responsible for a floor of the home.

In the end, it closed and smaller residential homes were built across Lewisham. I then managed two homes; Marden Court, then Barry Lodge. In total, I worked for over 30 years for the LCC and Lewisham Council. I loved working with older people and I made so many good friends.

#### **Did you like England Nana?**

England was very good to us. It became our home. We worked hard and no one gave us anything. Everything we had we worked for. We bought a small house in Catford, then after a few years, we bought a bigger house and that's where we stayed until we left.

It was always our plan to return to Grenada. My husband used to say 'I'm not growing old in this country'.

We bought some land in Grenada and built a house in 1992, or was it 1993? After 10 years of planning, we sold our house in England, put everything in a container, including my husband's car, and left England for good. There was no looking back! The children had grown up. We'd done our job and it was time for us to return.

#### **Were you happy to come back to Grenada?**

It was strange. Because we had been away for so long, many people in Grenada made things difficult for us. We were not welcomed. It wasn't just us. Many people who returned from England had the same thing.

Why? Because people were jealous. They thought we had money and had nice things from England! Because my husband brought his car down from England, local garages wouldn't service it. In the end we found a man who would. It was crazy. We'd gone away and found we were not welcomed, then come back to find we were not welcomed. It's OK now, but it took some time. My husband died about 10 years ago.

In 2004, Grenada was hit by Hurricane Ivan. Until the last minute, we thought it was going to miss us, but then it changed direction and we caught it full force.

We were not ready for it. It was terrible. It ripped the roof off our house and so many of the things we brought back from England were destroyed. We were lucky that the house we built was strong and survived.

Others were not so lucky and lost everything. I've survived two hurricanes in my life. I don't think I'll survive the next one, if I'm alive when it hits.

**What's it like now Nana? What's it like being old in Grenada?**

I'm very lucky. I'm comfortable, but it's really hard for many older people. The Government hasn't done enough for older people. You feel there's no respect for older people.

Everything is about young people.

Older people rely on neighbours and families for help. It's not like England. You can't go to the Council for help like you can in England.

There are a few private care homes in Grenada, but I don't know how many.

I'm lucky that I have my health and I have people who look after me and help me out.

**Author experience**

After hearing about Ermin's life Sean and Marli said, they enjoyed meeting Nana for the first time and talking to her.

She's done a lot of things and they have learnt lots about her.

## 47 Life on the road Down Under

**Told by June Glanville and written by Madison Butler**

*The journey collecting experiences now takes us on a long distance flight to Australia where on the Sunshine Coast June Glanville told Madison Butler about her experiences working around Australia on a trip she and her husband made at the end of the 1970s.*



My name is Madison Butler. I am currently living with my parents and three siblings on the Sunshine Coast in Queensland, Australia. I am 18 years old (soon to be 19) and I am currently studying a Bachelor of Nursing Science at the University of the Sunshine Coast.

I work as an agency nursing assistant, travelling to different facilities on the Coast. This suits me well as I love to travel, whether it is inside or outside of Australia. In my spare time, I enjoy playing the piano, reading and writing.

This story describes the travels of 92-year-old, June Glanville. I first met June through my tutor's colleague, who is a nurse at Sundale, June's home. Something that both June and I have in common is that we were both born in Queensland, Australia.

There are many words to describe this beautiful country however the word 'paradise' sums it up finely. There is so much beauty and so much history within. Such beauty being the Great Barrier Reef or the stunning Uluru; or my personal favourite: the magnificent Glasshouse Mountains.

### **Family life**

I haven't had any exciting adventures in my life nor have I travelled overseas. I have, however, had a good and very satisfying life. I have been blessed with four wonderful children, 12 terrific grandchildren, and now, nine (soon to be 11) lovely greats.



**June Glanville (92) and Madison Butler (18)**

In July 1979, my husband Bob and I, at the ages of 55 and 52 respectively, set out to travel and work around Australia. I was reluctant at first, but I didn't want to be left behind.

We bought a 16ft caravan for \$4000 that was pulled by a Toyota Landcruiser, which we had done up for our trip. Interesting to note, petrol was 21 cents a litre when we had first started our journey, and an overnight stay in a park cost \$3.00.

### **Adventures in the 'tip of Australia'**

We travelled up the old telegraph line to Cape York along with another couple. At that time, it was an exciting experience, as the track was fairly rugged. There were plenty of rivers for us to cross, including the wonderful Jardine, which at that time had to be forded by car.

Needless to say, many cars had to be towed out as they did not make it across. We all worked on a cattle station while we were in that area. The men were to be paid, and the 'women' had to cook, but would not be paid. We were always the 'women'. The homestead was a huge tin shed with a dirt floor, and the cupboards were old refrigerators that were scrounged from the dump at Weipa.

The station owner was quite a character; he was completely uneducated, but so knowledgeable in the affairs of the world. He completely relied on the news, however, the newspapers were delivered every three months. He told us when we left that everything was 'now better'.

When we reached the tip of Cape York, of course, we dipped our toes in the waters of Torres Strait. It was quite awe inspiring to think we were on the very tip of the top end of Australia. I had the same feeling at the very bottom of Western Australia. Whilst there, we saw a sign that said: there is nothing between here and the Antarctic.

### **Northern Territory experiences**

We travelled with six other caravans at one time during our stay in the Top End. We had camped by the Mary River, which is not that far out of Darwin. We had stopped for morning tea, and stayed there for a week. As we left, we had 56 bits of Barramundi fillets to share between us. Fishing there was great. On another occasion, we caught our first Barra at 5pm. It was in the pan by 6pm, and was being eaten by 7pm. Fresh Barra is to die for!

We had decided to stop at the butchers for a leg of lamb as we were passing through Camooweal. The butcher, however, nearly had a fit. "This is not sheep country, you gotta have beef." I have left out the expletives. "This is what you can have", and he slapped a chunk of beef on the counter.

By this time, I was so intimidated, I would have taken anything to get out of the shop. I forgot to mention that before going to the shop, we had to get the butcher out of the pub. Apparently, we were lucky (or not) that he condescended to serve us. It was the toughest meat I have ever had to cook. Thankfully, there is always that wonderful invention, the tin opener!

We had no crocodile adventures, as at that time they had just become unprotected. There were plenty there, but stupidly we were very blasé about it all, so we were very lucky. As one Aborigine told us, "I wouldn't put my big toe in that water."

### **Different work experiences**

As we continued to travel, we picked grapes and oranges in Victoria. I sorted potatoes on the Atherton Tablelands which Bob worked for the National Parks and we picked apples in Western Australia. Also, while we were in WA we worked on Alan Bond's sheep farm.

I worked in a supermarket in Tenant Creek, while waiting for the wet season to end. Bob, at this time, worked for the mines. Bob had to learn their ways. A job he took a day to complete, should have taken four days. "Don't hurry yourself, mate." Tenant Creek was an experience and a half, but nonetheless very enjoyable.

Reluctantly, we wended our way home in 1982, and by the end of our trip petrol had risen to 42 cents a litre. Daylight robbery! Although we went through, and stayed at, some very beautiful places, as Australia really is a wonderful country; we realised that here in the Sunshine Coast, we really do live in a little paradise. By this time, we were now fully retired, although Bob was fond of saying, "he didn't know how he ever found time to go to work."

We made many friends on our way, and took hundreds of photographs. Sadly, most of our friends have passed on, as has Bob, the photos have deteriorated somewhat; but the memories remain of a wonderful part of my life.

After having a stroke at the age of 82, I found it necessary to enter a nursing home. Now, ten years on, at the age of 92, with the help of my wonderful family, and the great staff, I have adjusted to life at Sundale, and am content.

### **THE END – WELL NOT QUITE!**

#### **Author experience**

After writing June's story, I feel as though I have learned so much. I have gained more knowledge regarding my country, including the names of the many places that June had visited.

Throughout writing this story, June and I spoke about each of our lives. It was intriguing to learn about June's generation and how different it was to mine. During this conversation, I realised that there is so much more for me to learn and discover.

As I wrote June's story, it made me feel entranced. The way June described to me each place and every experience, I felt as though I was there, living it all myself! Writing this story has been a life experience, and I am glad to have been able to indulge in it. After all this, I am quite excited to begin my own journey, travelling this land Down Under.

## 48 Being a wife, mother, teacher and friend

**Told by Peggy Eckenrode and written by Claire Grant**

*In Adelaide, Australia, USA born Peggy Eckenrode tells Claire Grant about the experience of growing up without a mother and explains how she came to live in South Australia.*

My name is Claire, and I work at the residential aged care home where Peggy lives. I visit Peggy twice a week and during those sessions, I came to realise that Peggy is a remarkable woman.

Every now and then, she drops amazing facts about her life into our conversation, as casually as if she was commenting on the weather. She was born in Virginia, USA and has lived in many different countries.

Her husband was in the Air Force and she and her family moved often. She is always busy. Many of the residents spend all day watching TV, but not Peggy. She keeps up her correspondence, spends many minutes on the phone to her family and friends, goes out for lunch and attends Church services and the social activities in her home regularly.

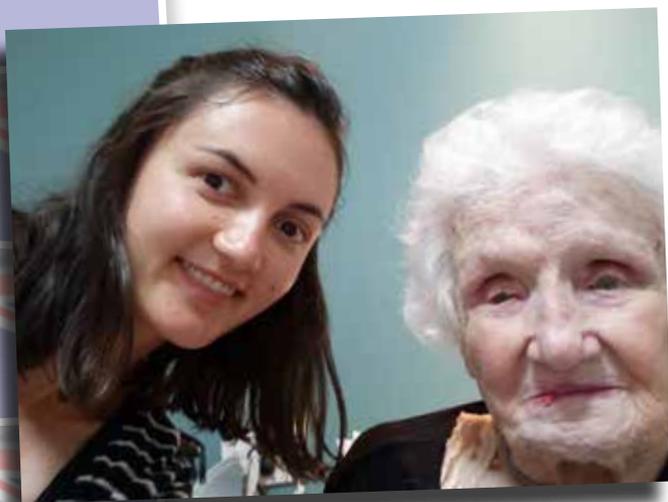
We are lucky to live in Australia. Peggy and I have both had the opportunity to study and have careers. Peggy was a primary school teacher and worked at three different primary schools in Adelaide, South Australia, where we now both live.

She speaks with a lovely southern twang even though she's been in Australia for decades. She is 95 years old, as she tells me often, and hopes to make it to her hundredth birthday.

### **Brought up by her grandmother**

Peggy's mother knew she was going to die. She made arrangements with Peggy's grandmother, her mother-in-law, to take care of her only child once she had passed away. When Peggy was only a month old, she went to live with her grandmother in Boykin, Virginia.

**Claire Grant (25) and Peggy Eckenrode (95)**



"I never felt the lack of having a mother. My grandmother was wonderful," Peggy tells me.

I wondered whether she might have resented her father for, in my eyes, giving her up. "Oh no," says Peggy, "I wanted to live with my grandmother. But I looked forward to the month in the summer when I'd visit my father, my step-mother and my half-sister. My sister still lives in the United States. We're close. Even now we sign off our letters 'Big Sis' and 'Little Sis'.

Peggy's stories from her childhood centre on her grandmother. She tells me that they had a strawberry patch and strawberry short cake with whipped cream every day. One of her friends from school used to marvel at the strawberry short cake every time he visited. Peggy tells me with a chuckle that she was equally as astounded that his family ate ham every day. For Peggy, ham was a special food, not an everyday food.

Peggy's grandmother supported the two of them by renting out rooms in her house. During Peggy's early childhood workers came to put electricity lines in so that the small country towns could have power. The workers stayed with Peggy and her grandmother. She tells me that her grandmother supplemented her income by making dresses for the young girls in the town. "If they had a ball or a party, they'd always come to her," she says proudly.

### **A childhood accident**

When Peggy was five she stood to warm herself next to a wood burning stove. She touched the stove and "it just went up in flames" she says. She ran screaming through the hallways out onto the porch, where her Auntie fetched her grandmother.

Her grandmother wrapped her in an old coat she wore when she went to feed the chickens and put the fire out. Peggy was in bed for the whole of the winter and she remembers how much she hated it when the doctor came to change her dressings. Her school mates all brought in a doll for her to look at and her grandmother lined them up on top of the sewing machine.

Peggy hitches up her dress and rolls down her stockings to show me the scars on her legs. They are faded but still clearly visible.

### **Family fun**

Peggy always had a lot of friends but two of the closest were her cousins Jane and Evelyn who were born within a few months of her. Their favourite thing to do together was make sweets.

Peggy liked chocolate fudge the best. Back then she ate as much as she wanted but now she rations herself. One year, she and Evelyn did a clay modelling class. "I can't say we did any great things, but we had fun." She remembers Jane as a great seamstress.

Later, when Peggy lived in Guatemala with her husband, the General invited them to a series of balls. "When the General invited you, you went." Her cousin Jane made her a new dress for every ball. "The first night was on the roof of a well-known building, I can't remember what it was called, but the full moon was out and it was like magic."

Peggy's first teaching job was at a school in Arlington, Virginia. It was a mile away from the site of the Pentagon. She saw it being built bit by bit.

### **A chance encounter**

After the war, she was returning to Arlington from visiting a friend in Williamsburg. The bus was full and the driver said she'd have to put her bag up in the overhead rack if she wanted to get on.

The young man in the seat behind her offered to help her with her bag. They sat next to each other and chatted for the two hour bus trip. The young man, Bernard, asked permission to write to her.

They wrote to each other for two years before 'things got serious'. Bernard was in the Air Force. Once they were married, she and Bernard moved around frequently. They lived in Guatemala, Panama, Puerto Rico, England and the United States. It wasn't until Bernard retired from the Air Force in 1969 that they moved to Australia. There, he worked for Chrysler in Adelaide, South Australia. Peggy had been unable to work while she and her husband, and now three children, constantly moved.

### **The joys of teaching**

In Adelaide, she started teaching again and it was there, at work, she found her fulfilment. "I love teaching," she says and she sounds sincere in the way you say you love your children.

Peggy studied teaching at Mary Washington College. It was all girls up until the last year when there were boys in the classes. "We all got a bit excited," Peggy says slyly.

She remembers in particular her friend, Dorothy Brown, later Dorothy Peterson, who she met in the second year of college. They kept in close contact until Dorothy died last year. "When my children visited the United States, they always made sure to visit Dorothy." The last time she visited herself, was ten years ago.

During that trip she also saw her sister, 'Little Sis' and her cousins, aunts, and uncles. Peggy is bound to a wheelchair now and gets tired easily. It seems unlikely to me that she'll ever go to the United States again and I ask her how she feels about it. She ponders as though she hasn't really thought about it.

"Yes, I do feel a little sad. But, I've learned to live where I'm living. Otherwise life would have been very dull," she says.

Life was certainly not dull as a teacher. Peggy recalls a time when a little boy, Jimmy, in the third grade suddenly went red as a tomato. The boy behind him cried "He swallowed an open safety pin!" Peggy turned Jimmy upside down and shook him until he spat the pin out. She thinks she got a bigger fright than Jimmy, but he learned his lesson and vowed, quite rightly, to never put another safety pin in his mouth.

Peggy taught all of her three children at one time or another. They called her Mrs Eckenrode right until they got home and started calling her mum again. "My first cousin married a fella I taught in Grade six and he kept calling me Mrs Eckenrode," Peggy laughs. "I told him, You're family now; you can stop calling me Mrs Eckenrode."

### **Proudest achievement**

I asked Peggy what achievement had made her the proudest in life. She said, "I hope that by teaching I've given the children something to make life worth living. I always felt happy when I heard a parent say something about how much I helped their child." A mother herself, Peggy understood the gratitude felt by the parent.



"It is one of the most wonderful things in the world", Peggy says of motherhood. I asked her if it was hard. "Sometimes you don't know what the best thing to do is," she says. But, she wouldn't take it back; "I sometimes wish I'd had more."

She was an older mother for her era. "I didn't marry until I was 26, and I was 30 when I had my first." Still, she got on well with the younger mothers and fostered a community of friends for her children. Her middle child, a girl, followed her older sister and her friends everywhere and was horrified at playing with her younger brother, the 'baby'.

### **Many great friends**

Working and raising a family can sometimes take time away from friendships, but not so for Peggy. She tells me that in her 40s she regularly went walking to the river with a group of her friends. At this time she lived in Oklahoma. They would walk four miles to the river, have a picnic and then start walking back. Sometimes another friend would drive by and pick them up in her car.

Peggy seems to have had a multitude of friends. She also kept up her close relationship with her cousins Evelyn and Jane. She tells me that they used to watch the Oklahoma City Band at their free concerts in the evening. She liked to sit and enjoy the music.

Peggy retired from teaching in 1988. She says, "In those days, you had to retire at 65, but I would have kept going if I could. I loved to teach." It was the year before teachers had to attend mandatory computer training. I asked her what she thought of computers now.

"I'm not of the computer age. I get my kids to help. But I think it's a good thing. You can get so much more done in a given time."

After her retirement, Peggy spent time working in the Church and tending to her garden and finally ended up in the aged care home when living at home by herself became too much.

"I could have had a bad life, but I had a really good life." Peggy said.

"What do you mean?" I ask. "My grandmother took me in as a baby. I could have ended up anywhere when my mother died. But instead I had a good life. I'm lucky."

Peggy doesn't see her life the way I think I might if I were in her shoes. I feel mad at her father for giving her up. Maybe that was just the way it was in those days. Peggy feels that luck placed her with her grandmother. She is grateful for the start to life that seems so tough and yet that made her the wife, the mother, the teacher, and the friend.

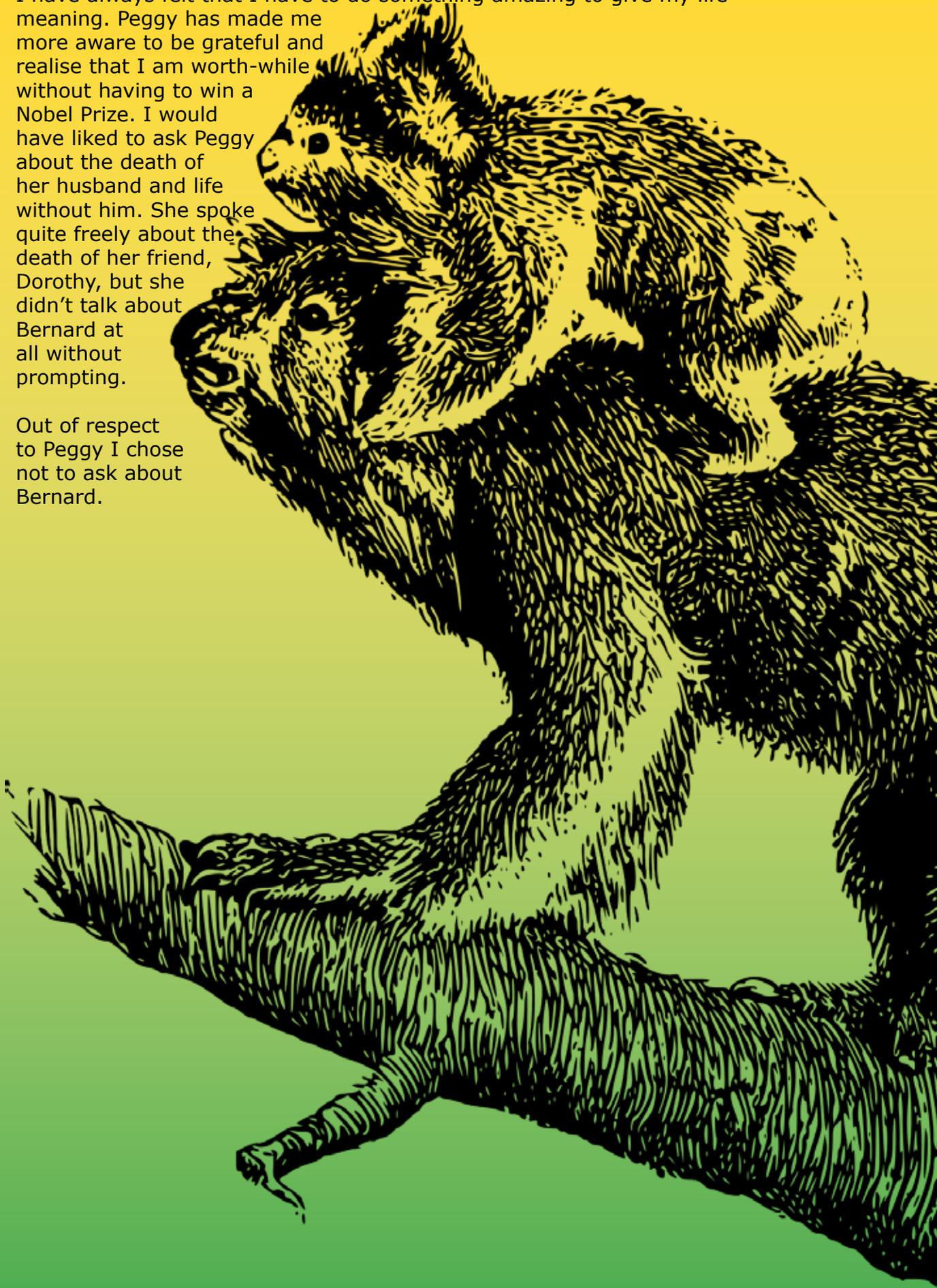
### **Author experience**

Peggy is an incredibly content person. She gets fulfilment from what some might consider small things in her life. She is also a very grateful person. While she was talking to me she often worried that her life wasn't interesting enough to write about. "But, I enjoyed my life. I had a good life," she repeated.

Peggy might have had a very sad story. She might have dwelled on the death of her mother or her grandmother or her husband. But she feels happy and lucky and blessed to have lead the life she had and have the friends she's made.

I have always felt that I have to do something amazing to give my life meaning. Peggy has made me more aware to be grateful and realise that I am worth-while without having to win a Nobel Prize. I would have liked to ask Peggy about the death of her husband and life without him. She spoke quite freely about the death of her friend, Dorothy, but she didn't talk about Bernard at all without prompting.

Out of respect to Peggy I chose not to ask about Bernard.



## 49 Swimming in and skating on the river and other joys of life

Told by Mary Lunney and written by Alexandra Muia

*Returning to the northern hemisphere nursing student Alexandra Muia from Ontario, Canada hears about life on the farm milking cows, growing corn and knitting socks by candlelight.*

*However, Mary's joy was to be found in swimming in the river during the summer months and figure skating on the same river in the winter.*

My name is Alexandra Muia. I am 24 years old, and am a fourth-year nursing student in Ontario, Canada.

Between attending classes and studying for exams, I am employed part time as a student intern for the Regional Municipality of York. I currently work out of the Newmarket Health Centre, a quaint long-term care home in Newmarket, Ontario.

The town of Newmarket has a small-town picturesque charm without lacking in innovation and diversity. It is a wonderful place that truly encompasses what it is like to live in Canada. Having been born and raised in Canada, I have always taken pride in the unique qualities of our nation; the raw natural landscapes, the multiculturalism, the chilly winter days, and the equality for all.



**Alexandra Muia (24) and Mary Lunney (94)**

I have always had an interest in working with the senior population, as I am constantly inspired by the wisdom and life experiences that these individuals have to offer. For this Life Story Project, I had the exciting opportunity to meet Mary Lunney, a 94-year-old resident at the Newmarket Health Centre. I am humbled to be able to share Mary's life journey, as it is one filled with happiness, inspiration, and joy.

As I first entered into Mary Lunney's room on the third floor of the Newmarket Health Centre, I immediately felt the sense of comfort that you would feel at home. Pictures of family members and pets were hung up on every wall in the room. There was a rocking chair sitting in the corner of the room with a basket of yarn just below it, and an antique furniture piece called 'the secretary', which had been passed down from generations.

Upon introducing myself to Mary, she immediately gave me a warm and welcoming smile, and was quick to open her home to me. Mary's son Richard, had accompanied us throughout the interview, and it was easy to feel the loving relationship between mother and son.

### **Growing up in a small town**

Mary has always had a large family, she grew up with six siblings in a small town in named Baldwin, Ontario. Mary's grandad had a mill in Baldwin, Ontario, where she ended up working from a young age. There she found herself learning to grind up grain and making flour for the local farmers.

When she was a young girl going to school, the only way to get there was to walk. She would have to walk two miles there and back to the public school she was enrolled in, which had all of the small town's children from grades one to eight in one large classroom.

Mary had mentioned that although she had always wanted to be a nurse, she had only gone to school up until grade eight so that she could work at her grandad's mill while most of her siblings went to high school. As a teenager, Mary also worked at a shoe store in Sutton, Ontario, where she would make \$10.00 for one month's work.

Mary recalled this memory with such excitement, as she had mentioned that working this job allowed her for the first time, to buy her mother a Christmas present with her own hard-earned money.

### **Life on the farm**

Mary met her husband, Stan, in 1943, and married him in 1944 when she was 21 years old. Although Stan had passed away in 2004, you could still sense the love and joy that he brought her throughout their life together. Mary and Stan had moved into a farm in Zephyr, Ontario, after getting married.

When recalling what the town was like, Mary and Richard mentioned it was a small and friendly town, where everyone knew one another, and living there felt safe and secure.

Mary and Stan had five children together, their sons Richard, Michael, Bill, and Bob, and their only daughter Carol, whom they raised on the farm. Mary recalled that doing the work on the farm was difficult, but it was work that she was happy to do. There she would pick potatoes, milk cows, grow corn and wheat, and transport hay by horseback. Mary even recalled one time where she helped with the delivery of baby pigs, a memory that brought her so much laughter and joy to share.

In their first year on the farm, there was no electricity to rely on. Mary had to knit socks by candlelight, and recalled that the winter time was so cold that often times the family had to sleep in the kitchen as this was the warmest place in the house.

Mary not only worked in the farm fields, she also made sure to make delicious meals for her family and the farm workers. She recalled all the large lunch and dinner meals she had to make for twenty or so corn-cutters, and would make ten pies at a time to make sure everyone was happy and fed. She would always make special and delicious meals for her family, with some of her specialties including bread pudding and fresh vegetables from the garden.





Her son, Richard, had mentioned that despite all the hard work Mary put in to keeping up with all the farm work and the house work, she never complained no matter the circumstances. Mary replied to this statement with a big smile, saying "If it has to be done, it has to be done."

Mary had also mentioned that in 1955, her and her brother had bought a 200-acre farm in Zephyr, Ontario, in which both families lived in a large house divided in the middle.

From hearing the way Mary talks about her family, it is undeniable that she has always provided such a warm and loving home.

### **A love of sport**

Mary and her family have always been sports fans; it was always something that brought their family together. She recalled that as a young girl growing up in Baldwin, Ontario, she would always find joy in swimming in the river during the summer months and figure skating on the same river in the winter.

She would watch every baseball game her husband played in the summer months, and followed this tradition as her children and grandchildren grew up playing the sport. She would go to every game, cheering and supporting the team, even if this meant shouting at the umpire from time to time.

The only day Mary would not go to her family's baseball games were on Sunday, as Mary was actively involved with the United Church.

Richard recalls this one time when he was a kid, telling me that his team had lost a few games and wanted his mom to be there for his Sunday games. It took all four brothers to convince Mary to come to the baseball games that Sunday, which she agreed to only this one time. Their team ended up winning both of their games that day, proving that Mary was the team's good luck charm.

Even though Mary is not currently able to attend any baseball games that her family members might play, she writes down all of their game days in her little red book that sits on her nightstand, as a reminder to ask her family about how the games went.

Mary is also an avid bowler, a tradition that started in the 1940's. While living on their farm in Zephyr, Ontario, Mary recalled her family's routine Saturday night. They would go bowling in Sutton, Ontario, but made sure that they were back home for 9:00 pm so that they could watch the second half of the Toronto Maple Leaf's hockey game. To this day, Mary still enjoys bowling at the Newmarket Health Centre, and she has proved to be an experienced competitor.

### **Notable events**

During the WWII, Mary's husband was recruited into the Canadian army. Stan trained in Newmarket, Ontario, and was sent to Western Canada for a couple of months. After those couple of months had passed, he was able to return home and help Mary with work on the farm.

Mary was also affected by Hurricane Hazel in the 1950s. Her home town in Baldwin, Ontario, was almost flooded with water from the river.

Mary has experienced loss in her life, her husband, parents, and siblings have all passed away.

After her husband's passing, Mary had to move into a retirement residence for four years where she was recovering from a broken pelvis. Here she experienced a couple more falls, and had to be hospitalised for a couple of months before moving into the Newmarket Health Centre.

### **Saddest moment**

Mary recalls her saddest experience as being when her mother passed away. Mary's mother had experienced health issues that started when Mary's mother had broken her ankle.

As a result of this trauma, her mother's leg had to be amputated. Shortly after this occurred, the Doctor's had told Mary and her family that Mary's mother had brain cancer. Mary's mother had sadly passed away at the young age of 66.

Although Mary recalled these emotional memories and was open to sharing them with me, she always says that she tries to put those sad thoughts behind her so she can focus on the good things in life.

It was evident that her optimism for life really allowed her to get through these more difficult times, which is something I find so inspiring.

### **A strong faith**

She credits her greatest influence in life to be the Good Lord, and is a dedicated member of the United Church.

Mary recalls that she used to teach Sunday School at the Church, and always spent much of her time volunteering, providing lunches for funerals, and preparing traditional turkey dinners to members of the Church amongst other things.

Mary said her strong faith was taught to her from her parents, to which she passed this strong faith down to her children. She mentions that she has based her life on the Golden Rule, and always makes sure she treats others with the same kindness and respect in which she would want to be treated.

### **Happiest moments**

When I had asked Mary about what her most joyous experiences are, she smiled as she tried to come up with one particular answer. Mary had found joy in so many moments in her life that it was difficult to come up with just one response. She said when all of her children were born, she was so happy and thankful for how beautiful they all were.

She mentioned all the activities she finds joy in, in which these include bowling, playing bingo, and watching the church service on Sundays. The thing that she finds most joy in though is when people come to visit her, with her eyes lighting up like a Christmas tree for every visitor that comes to see her.

Mary speaks so fondly of her family, and shares with me the members of her large family. She has 11 grandchildren; their names are Andrea, Jenny, Doug, Kate, Meg, Scott, Erin, Mary-Anne, Jill, Stephanie, and Mikayla. Mary also has 11 great grandchildren; their names are Julie-Anna, Belle, Reed, Abby, Leah, Bryden, Bre, Tyson, Levi, Emilena, and Alice.

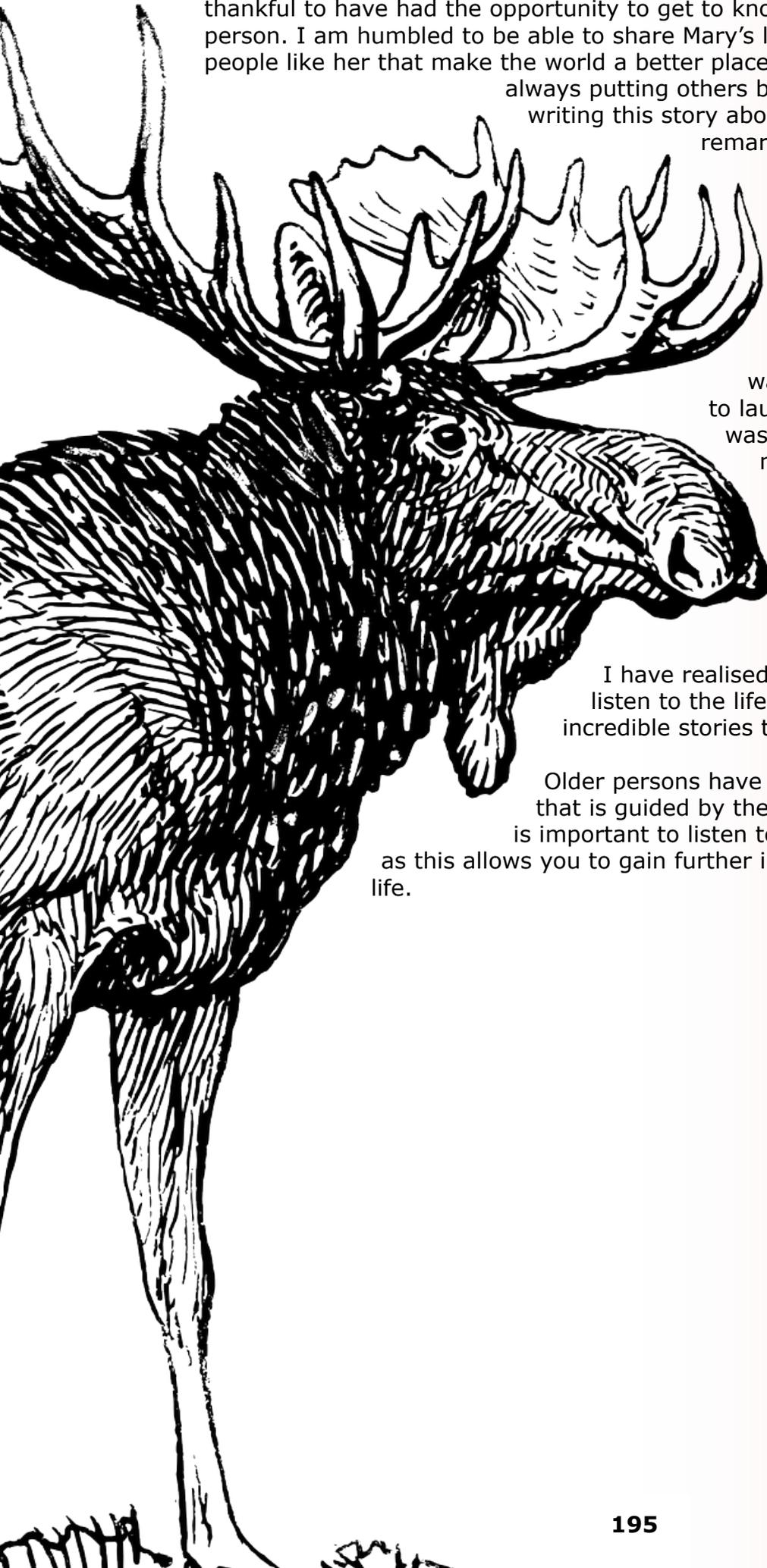
### Author experience

Listening to Mary Lunney's life story has been truly inspirational. I am extremely thankful to have had the opportunity to get to know such a beautiful and happy person. I am humbled to be able to share Mary's life story, as I believe it is people like her that make the world a better place. Mary has lived her whole life always putting others before herself, and so I hope that writing this story about her will allow her to see how remarkable and appreciated she truly is.

Listening to Mary's life story has been an incredible experience. Mary's positive outlook on life is extremely contagious, her happiness and love for life completely fills the room. When I was interviewing Mary, it was easy to laugh and smile with her as she was recollecting all of the important moments in her life.

Mary sharing her life experiences with me has taught me how important it is to let good memories and happiness guide you through life. Throughout this experience, I have realised how important it is to actively listen to the life experiences of those who have incredible stories to share.

Older persons have such a refreshing outlook on life that is guided by their wisdom and life experiences. It is important to listen to and understand these stories, as this allows you to gain further insight into their perspectives on life.



## 50 Love, travel and a positive attitude

**Told by Margaret Phillips and written by Hollie Lockhart**

*The final destination on the journey around the world takes us to England. Here Hollie Lockhart hears about experiences growing up in WWII and travelling around the world in the post-war years. She reflects on the similarities and differences of the generations and how she is changing her own attitude as a result of speaking to Margaret Phillips.*

I am a young woman, 24 years old from Englefield Green, Surrey in 'sunny' England just six miles from Windsor, famously known for the royal residence of Windsor Castle. I currently work in Basingstoke, England (the birthplace of Jane Austen).

England is part of the United Kingdom, sharing borders with Scotland and Wales. England is separated from Europe by the North Sea to the east and the English Channel to the south. Our country has a long chain of well-known and widely broadcasted historical events, some of which have had huge effects on the culture, lives and wellbeing of many older people who live throughout the country.

I have always had an interest in writing however; following my A Level in English, I haven't had the chance to practice the skill much, especially since I started my career in new homes marketing. This is after finishing my degree in Business Management and Marketing (BSc) at Cardiff University in the capital of Wales.



**Hollie Lockhart (24) and Margaret Phillips (94)**

When I learned about the opportunity to be involved in this project I was immediately enthused by the prospect of interviewing an older person for several reasons. Firstly, I was delighted that CommonAge had come up with this worthwhile project and its aim to share older people's journeys, experiences, warnings and advice through the medium of storytelling.

I have been involved with various charities and care homes over the years, working and engaging with older people. During these experiences I have always been touched when hearing about each individual's life experience and understanding how these events have shaped their personalities and outlooks on life. I was also interested to see how I would cope, interviewing someone I hadn't met before, on some quite personal levels – a personal challenge as well as an intellectual one.



I was lucky enough to seek out Margaret Phillips, a willing participant. Margaret is currently a resident at Merlewood Care Home, an Elizabeth Finn care home. A beautiful establishment in the much sought after area of Virginia Water, in the leafy county of Surrey approximately 24 miles from the centre of London.

### **Growing up**

Margaret was born in Manchester in 1924, just six years after the end of WWI. She then moved down south with her parents when she was four (1928), something that was very similar to my own life experience – with Northern parents and a southern upbringing.

She lovingly recalls her fond memories of being sat in a tin bath in front of the open fire, drinking warm Horlicks (a malted drink – intended to help one sleep) to keep warm when she was young, something that seems as if it is out of a storybook to me with our running hot water and modern day stylish ceramic bath.

Margaret started her schooling at St Jude's Church of England Junior School and then moved to Windsor Girls School in Berkshire, England where she was until she turned 16 (1936). She studied maths, English, science and gained the skills to become a good housewife, such as cookery, sewing and other household skills. Surprisingly, or maybe not to some, this was very similar to my experience at an independent primary school in Surrey.

Although these skills weren't dressed up as such, it didn't dawn on me until then that the girls were pulled into cookery and sewing lessons whilst the boys did design technology and IT. It wasn't until year 6 (10 – 11 years old) where I managed to get my hands on a soldering iron but I knew how to make a cushion and sew on buttons by year 4 (8 – 9 years old). Not so dissimilar after all.

### **Love and men**

The conversation turned to love and men, as it usually does when two women are chatting! I was intrigued as to how Margaret had met her late husband and what it was like courting in the 1900's.

Margaret explained she met her late husband when they were 16 at a dance in the local hall in Englefield Green, where I live. She tells me about the woe of not seeing him often after she started work in the city and how all their meetings thereafter were chaperoned.

I was interested in what Margaret did after she left school and before she met the love of her life and got married. From 1936 onwards, at the age of 16 Margaret joined the Civil Service and travelled into London from Egham train station to London Waterloo each day on the 5am train, travelling amongst workmen.

Margaret told me some interesting stories from her journeys to work talking with various people on the train each day, people who became good companions and they made sure they caught the same carriage every day on their way into London. Something that is unheard of here in England now, people talking on the train (most playing with mobile phones or listening to music) - let alone making friends!

We laughed about how ridiculous this is and how Margaret felt sad that the sense of friendliness and the neighbourly attitude that she felt so proud that Britain had throughout the war – had somewhat disappeared. This made me feel a little ashamed, as I admit to being one of those people with my head down, getting on with my life almost a little fearful someone might talk to me on the tube.

This made me reflect on how I conduct myself; I now make an effort to smile and make eye contact and some interesting conversations have come from this. Albeit that some of the younger generations think I'm a little odd for actually making eye contact. I have found that people 40+ are more open to my new tactic, which is a little upsetting and not a good reflection on my own generation.

### **Living through WWII**

The Second World War hit in 1939 and her husband-to-be was drafted into the army via conscription where all able-bodied males between certain ages were expected, by law, to serve their country by fighting in the war.

They kept in touch whilst he was serving, by writing letters to one another. Margaret recalls the way that the government censored the letters her husband-to-be sent to her, with large paragraphs at a time blocked out in black marker pen. It must have been somewhat frustrating but Margaret understood why this had to be done, in order to win the war and get her beloved home, safely!

Once he arrived home safe and sound they married immediately and lived happily together thereafter. Shortly after their marriage they moved into a 'pre-fab' home, an absolute luxury for the time with coal fires and central heating. Pre-fabs were a major part of the housing plans introduced by Sir Winston Churchill (Prime Minister from 1940–1945 and again from 1951-1955.)

Whilst Margaret's husband-to-be was away fighting for his country, Margaret was still working in London. She describes the daily train journeys and her mother's silent fear of her going into work each day.

I asked the question, "why didn't your mother stop you from going into town?", as I knew there wouldn't be a chance my own would let me do such a thing amidst a war. To which Margaret replied, "Well I was earning money, who can stop a person earning money."

I thought this was a very fair, honest and reflective answer. A testament of the time I came to learn.

### **Keep calm and carry on**

One of the overarching themes was the positivity and 'keep calm and carry on' and 'we're in this together' attitude that Margaret describes about the time at home during war.

She describes terrifying 'black outs' where no lights were permitted after dark, so that planes dropping bombs with the aim of killing as many civilians as possible couldn't tell where to aim. She also shares stories of hiding in bomb shelters in the middle of the night, for nights and nights on end in just her nightie. She recalls her mother deciding that 'enough was enough' and they would ignore the air raid sirens willing them to go down to the bottom of the garden to be safe.

Instead, she decided they would get under their beds – in order to get a little bit of sleep as the sirens were so regular. Margaret tells me of the most horrific bomb wreckage she encountered whilst running an errand for work in Kensington seeing the aftermath of a bomb that killed many people and was one of the most haunting experiences of her life and has stuck with her for years to come.



### **Getting married**

Margaret recalls her marriage in 1945, how her wedding dress was carefully chosen from a bridal shop in Petticoat Lane in London and how her mother had laboured for hours over hand sewing each bridesmaid dress from scratch.

I was impressed by this and it reminded me of stories that my own mother would tell me about making her own dresses for dances in the late 60's – something that is very unusual these days in the height of quick fashion and low priced shops.

### **Post-war travelling**

Conversation turned to the rest of their lives post war. Margaret's husband was in the Royal Air Force and worked in the radar technical unit, which meant that she was able to travel the world.

She had two life changing experiences in places that her husband's work took her. The first being in Germany for a year with him as he was station commander. Margaret recalls entertaining British and Germans alike with afternoon tea parties, a very British tradition that the Germans loved. She tells me of how difficult the language barrier was between her and the German speaking locals and how at times the atmosphere was terrible due to the bad feelings about the recent war.

After her stint in Germany, Margaret's husband was called to move as station commander to America; she tells me excitedly about her time in America and how she travelled by ship for five days.

She recalls how the Americans wanted to listen to her talking for hours just to hear her accent, how they enjoyed hearing about British culture and willed her to invite them to one of her famous afternoon teas.

Whilst being in the highly regarded position of a station commander's wife, Margaret tells me of her time spent with the other wives of the service men and how she was counsellor, activities coordinator and everything in between.

On top of all these responsibilities, she also pioneered keep fit classes, which she held daily for the wives, coffee mornings and personal one to one sessions for anyone who needed help. I can really imagine her being fantastic at this job, as she has a natural way with people bringing positivity, light and energy to the room. I can see how these women sought comfort in her, some might have been homesick or having marital issues miles away from home in a foreign country.

### **Hard decisions**

Margaret had two sons Graham and Malcolm both of whom became teachers. She tells me of the difficult decision she had to make when her husband got the position of station commander abroad, where she had to decide whether to ferry them around the world with her – potentially putting a high quality education at risk - or to leave them in England and send them to a good boarding school.

She tells me it was the hardest decision she has ever made, keeping them in England whilst she supported her husband across the seas. Margaret's face lights up as she remembers the sheer joy when she was reunited with them when she came back home to visit.

### **Author experience**

It was a fascinating two hours, finding out about how life and British culture was so different 'back in the day'. I was hooked from the start with her gracious and overwhelmingly positive outlook on life and captivating stories.

I couldn't give a better description about what I have gained from this experience than what happened after I stepped foot out of the beautiful place that is Merelwood Care Home. I sat in my car, stared into the distance for a short while recollecting all the details, hoping I could do Margaret's story the justice it deserves.

I found my phone and excitedly called my mum. It sounds silly, but I spoke with my mum for over an hour about how I had found my kindred spirit in Margaret, as we both enjoyed walking around Windsor Great Park, playing sports, chatting, meeting people and our joint love of gin and tonics! I felt I had found a friend in Margaret and she gave me such a 'straight talking' description of the world, as well as making me even more proud to be British.

There are some stark differences between mine and Margaret's ideas in life, one of which is the stances on marriage... not being married after four years of being together must mean there is something wrong with me... right? Unheard of in Margaret's time.

Although some of our views differed, there was no judgement between us – we laughed and joked around about the differences in our outlook and how things have changed... some for the better some for the worse. I could see her point of view and I think therein lies the most important thing I have learnt from this.

You might be similar yet different, different yet similar in life experience, values and what you feel is expected of you. But if you understand why people think the way they do, it gives you a whole new perspective of why people place value on certain things and why they make the decisions they do.

At the end of my phone call with my own mother and after I left the Merlewood car park I felt a bit sad about leaving Margaret, although I knew she has a loving son and a beautiful grandson who visits all the time and she lives in a care home, that is better than most hotels I have stayed in... I couldn't help but feel I wanted to take her home with me and put her in my pocket as my constant life advisor.

So, when I get caught up in my Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn feeds – I now try and remember how much joy that Margaret got out of the simple non-materialistic things in life and her drive and passion that got her through some of the most adverse times in the world as well as her life. Positivity and being nice was the overarching principle and I liked it!

I have always been fascinated about what can be learned from older people, their experiences, wisdom and different point of view on the world in its current state and I was overwhelmed with what a positive and glowing feeling those two hours spent with Margaret gave me.

## About the editors

The book was edited by gerontologist Dr Ingrid Evers and journalist Annie Waddington-Feather. They met in the development of the Life Stories Project supported by CommonAge ([www.commage.org](http://www.commage.org)) that has led to the compilation of the stories published in this book.



Dr Ingrid Evers was born in Yorkshire, England however; she spent part of her childhood in Durban, South Africa and youth in Germany. Ingrid divides her life between England and Germany, latterly interspersed with visits to many countries of the world. Having trained as a nurse Ingrid later studied gerontology at the University of Surrey, UK where she became a researcher and lecturer with a focus policy and practice relating to ageing. As an internationally known gerontologist Ingrid is widely published, she is now a semi-retired Independent Expert.

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Annie Waddington-Feather also was born in Yorkshire, England but grew up in Shropshire and has lived in Australia. She studied biology at university, undertook a post-grad qualification in newspaper journalism, and has qualifications in business and marketing.

Annie spent several years travelling the world, first as a backpacker and later as a tour leader for a leading adventure travel company. She eventually exchanged her life on the road for freelance journalism and marketing/communications consultancy.

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Adding to the youth aspect of this book, we are delighted 20-year-old Hannah Realey at Hayling Printers worked on the design and layout. Her creativity has greatly complemented these stories from 22 countries.

We are eternally grateful to the CommonAge Board for embracing the project concept; without its support, these stories may never have been told, let alone written down.



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