

# DAILY NATION



Teachers and pupils of Valley View in Mathare during the shooting of the documentary. Janet Bauer is behind the self-esteem project. Photo/Phoebe Okall

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Posted Tuesday, September 1 2009 at 22:30 KENYA

## IN SUMMARY

One woman draws from her own difficult childhood experience to help raise the level of self-esteem among Kenyan children.

“For the first time in my life, I spoke without being interrupted. Everyone in class was listening to me! The experience took away my shyness and made me confident about talking before other children in future,” says Branice Akinyi, a 12-year-old Standard Six pupil at Valley View Academy in the Mathare slums.

Branice was among 70 children who were part of a documentary on self-esteem among children in Kenya. The filming took place in June and involved primary school children in Nairobi’s informal settlements, including Mukuru Kwa Reuben, Dandora and Kibera.

The film crew also visited schools in rural settlements, including Kajiado Primary School in Kajiado district and Kambui School for the Deaf in Kiambu.

The project was facilitated by Janet Bauer, the programme manager for “I’m A Great Child Worldwide”, an initiative of Hope Worldwide that seeks to enhance self-esteem among children. Janet has been training Kenyan children on self-esteem since 2007.

Although she has also trained children in various other countries, including America, South Africa and Botswana for the last eight years, she chose to film the documentary in Kenya for reasons close to her heart.

“Children in Kenya are always in high spirits and they are also kind and loving, and like to learn,” she says. “They are smart and also good at taking the initiative, even those that live in slums and villages where there is neither electricity nor running water.”

It is Janet’s desire to inform the world that children from remote villages and dingy slums in Kenya have big dreams. “After working with these children for close to two years, I have come to realise that they are driven by the desire to triumph over the harsh

realities of life they face,” she says.

“This is what gives them the impetus to wake up every morning and go to school as usual, even when all they have had is a cup of porridge for supper. That is the reason why the world needs to celebrate them and that is what I want to do through the documentary.”

If supported psycho-socially, Janet believes these children could blossom into great leaders.

Some of the primary school teachers who were involved in the film said the project was good news for Kenya, especially at a time when children are facing so many challenges at home.

At Valley View Academy, teacher Leonard Wawire, who also participated in the film, says it gave his pupils some welcome exposure.

“It was worthwhile recognition for children in Kenya. At the end of the session, I felt a sense of encouragement among the children as they got to work on their self-esteem first in order to participate. In addition, they got to see it happen live – the cameras, the lighting... Given that most of them have never seen filming equipment in their lives, it was a big experience for them,” he says.

About 36 pupils were involved in the filming and since then, they have opened up, even those who were previously shy and withdrawn, says Leonard. He adds that children are supposed to be happy but it is the hurdles they encounter growing up that affect their personality.

### **Shaping personalities**

Meshack Odhiambo, a teacher at St Elizabeth Orphans Support Centre in Dandora, says the filming helped shape the personalities of the pupils due to the rigorous training they went through first.

Janet engaged the children for an hour in the absence of the teachers.

“And for about 15 minutes, the children were allowed to mingle, after which they were supposed to talk about the subjects they like most, what they like about themselves and their dreams for the future. Their friends were supposed to listen, cheer and clap, which

made the speakers feel very positive about themselves,” Meshack says.

Then for about a half an hour, each pupil received feedback from friends and classmates about his or her positive attributes. This served to boost their self-esteem as heard how highly their friends regarded.

The pupils spent another 15 minutes writing down on two cards what they had heard said about them. One card was for Janet and the other was to be “a constant reminder of how great they are and how far they can go,” Janet says.

She would then spend 15 minutes with the teachers talking about the importance of affirming and encouraging the students, irrespective of their academic abilities. Then she brought teachers and students together.

“Most of the teachers marvelled at how confident some of the children had become after such a short time,” she says.

Meshack agrees: “Most of the children, especially those in pre-unit and nursery school, used to sit around their teachers during break-time. Now they are happy, they are shouting and running around.”

He adds that the teachers who participated in the filming are implementing the skills that would see a healthier teacher-pupil relationship and result in high self-esteem among the children.

### **Strong conviction**

Although Janet believes children are the same everywhere, she harbours a strong conviction that children in Kenyan slums and villages have stronger resilience.

“If they were supported from a young age, they would blossom amidst challenges that would otherwise hold them back. And due to this, they will appreciate and value themselves; not to engage in criminal activities including abuse of drugs and alcohol,” she says.

At St Elizabeth Orphans Support Centre, Janet took the upper primary pupils and their teachers through a self-esteem enhancement programme. Each of the children aged between 10 and 17 years got a chance to speak positively about their role model

and share their dreams for the future. Students also got the chance to say what they like about their friends and classmates as well as talk about their favourite animals.

“By the end of the class, the pupils were very positive about themselves. This radiation of positive energy was evidence that they had been transformed,” says Meshack.

In Mukuru Kwa Reuben, about 15 children from the Jovial Community Centre participated in the filming. Their teacher, Nathan Onyango, says the pupil-centred approach that was used during training helped the children connect with themselves very easily.

“It was like pressing a button – they suddenly burst out in high spirits. Their new-found high regard for themselves has given them a new determination to succeed in the face of the many challenges they face everyday,” he explains.

At the end of the training session, the children got to write down what they felt about themselves. The results were very positive after the good things they had heard about themselves from their colleagues.

“Hearing about their wonderful and unique attributes made them feel good and they began to look within themselves in a new and special way and makes them feel highly appreciated. This has in turn heightened their sense of self,” explains Janet.

The end result was a piece of work that Janet says will be viewed in many countries. “It will be distributed to various learning institutions, including universities,” Janet says.

She hopes the documentary will go a long way in creating awareness on the need for psycho-social support for disadvantaged children. And, she adds, the advantage of working with children is that, unlike adults, they do not have limitations.

“When children get down to do something, they only need to be shown that they can do it through positive criticism,” Janet says.

The documentary also demonstrates why parents should listen to their children. Janet says it is healthy for parents to give their children undivided attention.

“Listen to your children rather than just issuing instructions all the time. Let them know what it is you like about them,” she

says.

In 2001, Janet worked with street children in America. “The results were wonderful – for the first time, the children, got to talk about what it’s like growing up on the streets. Some even described how they were exposed to danger and crime, and how many of their friends had been murdered on the streets,” she says.

### **Heart-felt desire**

Her passion for working with children is “a deep heart-felt desire” she has following her own experience of pain and loneliness. Janet grew up in New Jersey, US, as an only child in a not-so-loving environment.

“I was an only child. My father was an alcoholic and my mother was a verbal abuser,” she says. “We did not have enough money and we lived in a small house that had no water. I walked myself to and from school regardless of the weather, in a neighbourhood where children were dropped and picked from school every day.”

Janet says her father came home drunk every evening and had no time for her. “I did not receive any love growing up.”

But regardless of what she was going through, she studied hard in school, got good grades and a good job. “I did not know the language of love until I was about 18 years old. Then I got married and had a baby who, unfortunately, died at a very tender age.”

A few years later, her husband also died of cancer. “I was alone and lonely all over again.”

Given her own experience, Janet knows and understands what it means for a child to feel lonely. And she says that when teachers use a positive approach in class, it impacts pupils positively.

“Whenever children hear good things being said about them, they feel encouraged,” she says, adding that this is the approach all children, and especially disadvantaged ones, need so they can triumph over the poverty that so often threatens to overwhelm them at home.

“It also helps them overcome the sense of loss they experience when parents die. They get a chance to value themselves and rise above the influence to get involved in crime or be exposed to criminal activities,” Janet says.

According to the State of the World Children's 2006 Report by the United Nation's Children's Fund (Unicef), an estimated 143 million children in the world have suffered the loss of at least one parent to disease, war and poverty. This has hindered their access to many services and denied them the basic rights of citizenship.

Janet says such children are in need of psycho-social support, and "there is no better place for this to happen than at home with parents and in school with teachers."

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*Story corrections provided by I'm A Great Child Worldwide:*

*Photo taken at the Kambui School for the Deaf*

*No classes at Kibera or Kajiado*

*"I'm A Great Child Worldwide" partners with HOPEworldwide and is not an initiative*

*Bauer engaged the children always in the presence of the teachers*

*The documentary is not a project of "I'm A Great Child Worldwide"*

*Bauer did grow up with water as a child*

*Bauer's father was often drunk but not every evening*