



Diana Achayo

Like Father, Like Daughter, by Diana Achayo, 24

"My Mother was 13 when she gave birth to my older brother. I was the third born to her at 17 years of age. Two days after I was born, my mother went to sit her final primary school exams. My Father and she went on to have a total 6 children of which I was the only girl.

I was born in a refugee camp and studied in a refugee school. But that's not who I am. God knows the reason why there was a war going on in South Sudan and they were forced to leave. When I was 8 years old my Mum asked me to drop out of school so that she could finish her A levels (Secondary School). I stayed home to take care of my little brother who was 1 year old. I remember questioning why I had to leave school so my Mum could go. She told me that my Grandfather was not a good man, he had two wives and believed in corporal punishment of them. My mother remained at home with her Dad and from then on a lot of work was on her to take care of the family. School was not an option. She chose to get married at 13 to my Dad who was 29 at the time as that seemed like the best thing to do.

After my Uncle died, my Dad, in African tradition, took on the responsibility of a total of 15 children and 6 wives including our family. He worked as a teacher in an urban centre near the refugee camp. Mum also managed to get a job for the UN but instead of money she received food, oil and other benefits. We survived by cultivating our farm and selling extra produce we had.

Soon our family moved to a nearby town to rent a place and begin schooling in a public Ugandan high school. This school was where my foundations started. There, the education system was different to the camps. Instead of having 200 kids with one teacher in my class we had 60 kids and 2 teachers. In the camps school was more about getting your porridge for breakfast, it wasn't about learning. My Dad was a very good teacher and education was, and is, of great importance to him. In my new Ugandan public school the teacher would come and look at your homework, they would actually grade your work and tell you if it was wrong or right.

A big turning point in my life was when I was 14 and my Mum had to leave us so that she could work and supplement the efforts of my Father. I remember that we were left as children to feed ourselves and cater for ourselves. We were a child headed household but my parents would send money for school fees, for food, rarely leaving money for anything more. During this time I felt an emptiness because I needed my Mother's love. She would say the skills we were learning of taking care of ourselves was good for us even though we were alone. This meant waking up at 4am and no more playing after school but rather going home to bathe my siblings and cook their food.

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Even though my parents had left us and my life was consumed with caring for my siblings, I committed myself to school. By the time I was graduating, I did so well my Dad said, "My daughter, as long as you have that eagerness to study, I'm ready to pay for you to continue up to any level you want."

One-day people from a place called LASS came to recruit students. I did the interview and went back to wait in South Sudan. In February, they called my Father to say I had been accepted and, if I worked hard and graduated from LASS, I would have a scholarship up until I finished university. I remember feeling as if I had the bread of life when we got that phone call. My Dad sat me down and told me, "Wherever you go, favour will be upon you. You are going to join LASS and this is an opportunity like no other."

I have since graduated from LASS and I'm in my second year studying a Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration. I chose this line of study because I want to live a life that is fruitful serving others.

I know I am so fortunate for my time at LASS and for having a father who valued education. For many South Sudanese girls their Dads see finishing primary school as enough for a girl. After that, you are old enough to be married, many are barely teenagers. A girl is often viewed as property, so educating her is not a good investment because she is expected to just stay at home and take care of the family. LASS gave me a path to strive for more and showed me how valuable I am in God's eyes.

The Diana I see in the future is a very great Diana. And I've already started to be great. The community I came from often says I have been transformed. I've learnt a lot of things in life, LASS and now focus on the bigger picture. Even though I was born in a refugee camp and born African, my identity is not found in those things, rather, by God's grace my future won't be determined by my past. Where I have come from shows me where I want to go. I have to change that trend.

My dream is to start a school in South Sudan using the skills I got from LASS. Myself and other LASS alumni have created a small NGO that takes care of orphans in the refugee camps. I believe that what we've gained in life we should be shared so others gain from it. At LASS they want us to excel in all areas of life, not just in academics. They taught me that to be a highly effective person you have to think Win-Win. I want everyone to succeed. If I progress alone but leave my neighbour behind what good is that? I also want to see people's impressions of South Sudanese change from a negative one of us being aggressive, arrogant and always fighting to one that is positive. By God's grace it will happen.

Recently I've been asked to speak to groups of young girls. I tell them, "To whom much is given much is expected. From what you have been given - extend it. You have a life that has worth and has value. You can contribute something to this world. Be a woman who of virtue with a vision for changing the world." I know I am the future and now must be the one to share, to show, and to shape the future of South Sudan.