

A Simple Letter

The children in Unified for UNIFAT's Sponsorship Program come from a variety of families and backgrounds. Some children are total orphans (both parents have died) while others are partial orphans (only one of their parents are living). Other children in the program are inflicted with various diseases such as HIV or are dealing with conditions such as Polio and must maintain strict drug regimens to stay in school. The varied backgrounds and challenges these children bring with them make the job of mentoring particularly difficult. A mentor must become personally involved in each and every one of their lives to guide effectively.



Head Mentor Opiyo Denis tutoring Agenowrot Josephine, P3 during lunch time.

So goes the difficulty that each one of Unified for UNIFAT's four mentors faces everyday. However with every difficulty, comes great rewards. Rewards not measured by increased productivity, higher sales figures, or a raise in salary. No, these rewards come through the personal satisfaction of knowing that someone's life is for the better because of hard work and individualized attention to their needs. The mentors in Unified for UNIFAT's Mentor Program aim to embody this through tutoring, and one-on-one guiding sessions, and their day-to-day actions.

One mentor in particular, Unified for UNIFAT's head mentor Opiyo Denis, has come to know this particularly well. This is the story of how a simple hand-written letter confirmed for him the importance of his job and allowed him to see the real impact he is having on the students he mentors.

About four weeks ago, in late June early July, Opiyo Denis was sitting at his desk filling out forms about the children he mentors. Break came at 10:30 and he grabbed the frisbee to go play with Adoch Fortunate, a P5 student in Unified for UNIFAT's sponsorship program.



Head Mentor Opiyo Denis playing frisbee with Adoch Fortunate, P5 during break time.

Break time came and went. Denis retreated to the mentor room to continue his forms and plan for the tutoring sessions he had scheduled for lunch time. Lunch arrived and with it a flood of students to the mentor building, most from Unified for UNIFAT's Sponsorship Program. Ajok Juliet Mercy, P6, came straight to Opiyo's desk, as she does almost everyday, and handed him a letter. She asked him how he was doing, affectionately calling him "Uncle" as they chatted about the happenings of the day.

Mercy was happy; her grades were good, she had a close group of friends at school, and UNIFAT had just finished competing in the Primary School Music Competition where she had performed the lead role in several performances. Mercy's life was not always this way. In fact, for much of her life she faced struggles and challenges that threatened her education and her future. Not long ago she was struggling in class and could often be found in the Headmaster's office because of bad behavior. What turned Ajok Mercy's life around? The simple act of someone caring.

Ajok Mercy has been in Unified for UNIFAT's Sponsorship Program since its inception in 2008. She was in P4 at the time the program started (roughly equivalent of the 4th grade in the American school system) and was struggling. Her mother had died when she was young and the father had deserted the family. Mercy and her siblings were taken in by a teacher at UNIFAT School.

Ajok Mercy had no motivation. She was supposed to be in P5 but had failed P4 because of bad behavior and her low scores across all the subjects. For years she avoided the mentors and the guidance they offered. She ended up barely passing P4 in 2008 but failed P5 in 2009, repeating it for the second time in 2010. Mercy was lost and had no one to turn to.

Opiyo Denis knew that if something didn't happen soon, Mercy's chances of remaining in the sponsorship program were not good. Opiyo Denis started to investigate exactly why Mercy was doing poorly in class by going around to Mercy's teachers and asking questions. It quickly became apparent that she was a smart student but as Denis had suspected, had fallen into bad habits that were keeping her from revising her notes and studying for examinations. Denis found out that Mercy had also fallen into a group of friends who took a greater interest in boys rather than studies. This, coupled with her poor study habits, was a recipe for disaster and certain expulsion from the program.

Denis immediately started to counsel her towards the end of 2010, requiring her to show up for tutoring sessions and talking with her about her self-destructive habits. Denis however knew that simply talking to her was not going to be enough to dismantle years of bad behavior.



Ajok Juliet Mercy in 2008.



Ajok Mercy performing in the 2011 Primary School Music Competition in Gulu, Uganda.

Slowly Denis began to take a more vested interest in Mercy by encouraging her to take part in other school activities such as dancing and acting and showing his commitment by assisting the music teacher with the performances and practices. Denis also increased the frequency of visits he paid to her home, ensuring the study habits he taught her in school were being applied when she went home. He also took those opportunities to talk at length with her guardian about the role they could play in Mercy's success.

Denis encouraged her grandmother to not give Mercy so many chores and responsibilities so she would have more time to study. He also promised the guardian to keep her informed of Mercy's progress at school.

Slowly but steadily, Mercy's study habits became better and her teachers reported that her behavior in class was improving. She stopped hanging out with the friends who were a bad influence for her and dropped the bad habits that distracted her both inside and outside of class. As Mercy separated herself from her bad habits, she drew herself closer and closer to Denis.

Today Mercy treats Denis as she would a best friend. Even at her young age, she has realized how much of an impact he has had on her life. They have become closer as time has gone on and even Denis has come to feel the impact that Mercy has had on his life.



Ajok Mercy with Mentor Opiyo Denis.

The letter he was now holding confirmed for him the results of his hard work and the profound impact his job has had on both of their lives. He held it proudly and after reading it several times over, handed it to me and said, "Will, read this!"



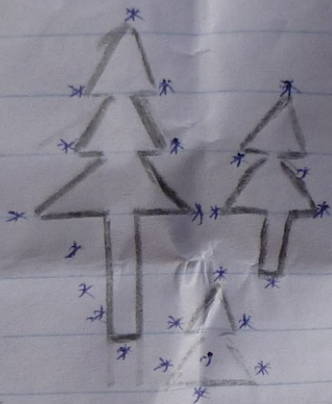
Ajok Mercy with her mentor, Opiyo Denis.

The simple hand written letter was proof of the power to change someone for the better. Proof that all children are meant to succeed but often lack the proper environment and influences to fulfill their potential. Opiyo Denis and Ajok Mercy to this day remain close and understand how deeply each has affected the other, knowing they are both better because of it.

Scroll to the next page to see the letter that Mercy wrote Denis.



Opiyo Denis proudly holding his letter from Ajok Mercy.



* * *
* THE LIGHTS OF *
* GOD SHINE ON YOU *
* WITH BLOOD OF LAMB *
* AND CHRIST: AMEN! *
* * * * *

Dear my best mentor Denis,

I am truly happy to write for you this letter for the first time. How was your day yesterday? How did you spend your time yesterday. To me, my day was so funny. I had funny things to do.

I am also happy for being so good to me this term. You removed my mind from doing bad things to good ones. My mind depend on what you use to tell me. The day when before I asked for help from you, I was only wasting my time. But since you gave me good advice, my mind changed completely. And that is why you are like my friend.

You are the only best mentor who gives me a lot of knowledge for my future. I request you to continue with that spirit. I have left bad thing that you told me to not to do. The way you talk to me, is like the same as my father.

I want also to ^{make} you happy for what you have done to me. By working very hard. And I will do it. I will write more letters to you. This is just a brief one.



Yours sincerely,
Mercy Juliet.