



## Uganda Humanist Schools Trust

# Progress Report from Moses Kamyia, Director of Mustard Seed Secondary School, Busota, Kamuli February 2021



Greening of the Mustard Seed School campus

### Introduction

*I am very grateful to Moses Kamyia, the Director of Mustard Seed Secondary School for writing this update on his school's recent progress. The report sets out details of the phased school reopening after Covid. It includes the personal story of an outstanding young lady whose life was turned around by the help she received from the school and from UHST.*

*Steve Hurd, Chair of UHST*

### Director's Report

In order to combat the spread of Covid-19, educational institutions in Uganda were kept closed between April and October 2020. Schools reopened for examination classes in November and the 2020 school year has been extended to April 2021, to allow students to catch up with work they had missed during the lock down.

Mustard Seed School opened on 18th January 2021 to catch up on teaching lost

in term 3 of 2020. 96 Senior 4 students returned to complete their O-level studies, but only 15 of A-level students came back.

### ***The Covid Challenge***

The Covid lockdown devastated the cash economy of Uganda and saw a return to subsistence for many families. Farm output has never been higher as local people have been locked down at home, with nothing else to do but tend their crops. Markets were closed for much of the period, so farmers could not get surplus produce to market. When they did open, the glut of surplus food led to a price collapse. Rural cash incomes have not been so low for many years.

To prevent the spread of Covid from schools back to towns and villages, students were kept in school over Christmas. This reduced the spread of infection but placed a huge financial burden on schools.

Compared with Europe and North America, the health impact of Covid in Uganda has been low. Total confirmed cases have been 39,843, with 327 deaths nationwide. Our local MP, for Kamuli municipality constituency, died in December from Covid-19. We hear of other deaths locally, but there has been no confirmed Covid case among school staff or students.



Before the school was allowed to reopen, we were inspected and awarded a certificate confirming that we would be able to follow Standard Covid Operating Procedures, stipulated by the ministries of health and education. These are designed to keep children and staff safe and require the school to enforce regular handwashing with soap using foot-operated washing stations (previous picture), keeping social distance, regularly sanitising classrooms and dormitories, and wearing face masks indoors. Classrooms and dormitories are thoroughly disinfected twice a week. Our gatekeeper and the school nurse monitor children's temperatures on a 3-hourly basis using infra-red scanners.

All children on UHST scholarships are back in school and studying with renewed enthusiasm. They are all anxious to make up the studying they missed in 2020. Our examination students are happy to be in school, and we are looking forward to the phased return of other years. Government has just announced that pre-exam classes in Senior 3 and Senior 5 will resume their studies on 1st March. (A-level boys below)



It is crucial for the very survival of the school that we get all students back. It is only when students are in school that we receive local fee income from parents. School finances have been in a dire state through the Covid crisis, and we have only survived thanks to emergency funding from UHST.

Uganda is hoping to roll out its vaccine programme in March and teachers, health workers and students are high on the list of recipients. As teachers get the vaccine,

other classes will be allowed to return. If the vaccine does not arrive as the government hopes, it will have dire consequences for children's education and the survival of schools.

Last term, thanks to scholarships and additional funds from UHST, we managed to provide 50% of normal pay to teaching and non-teaching staff. This enable us to, at least, retain our staff team intact. At the start of this term, our staff were in serious financial need and some had incurred debts (e.g. rent arrears). In January, to relieve their stress, we managed to pay them their full month's salary. This would not have been possible if we had to rely upon the limited funds we were receiving from local fees. In our area, sugar cane prices, the main cash crop, had fallen dramatically, due to border closure cutting off the Kenyan market. Additionally, the glut of maize caused a price collapse. Fortunately for the school, emergency funds from UHST facilitated monthly salary payments to all our staff, making them happy to return to work.

We are hoping the situation will normalise when all classes return. Parents will then start to pay fees and the school will be back on a sound financial footing. However, if social distancing requirements stay in place, we may be forced to accept only boarding students and reduce enrolment to 400 (from the normal 600). If this happens our school may need to raise fees a little higher to bridge the financial deficit.

### ***Humanist Vision***

In spite of Covid-19, we remain a humanist school focused on supporting liberal, inclusive education. We encourage children and staff to understand the pandemic through scientific principles and reject the widespread belief in Uganda that Covid is a punishment from God or a product of witchcraft. We encourage our students, staff and parents to challenge the view that Covid can be overcome by prayer alone, and to instead apply scientific principles which advise regular handwashing, covering your face and

maintaining a good social distance to reduce transmission of the virus.

Our school debates, which examine topical issues in science, democracy, human rights and the environment continue in spite of the need for students to catch up on their academic work. We are looking forward to getting together with other humanist schools in Uganda for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Humanist Schools Conference, which will be sponsored by UHST, as soon as it is safe to do so. At the conference we will share our humanist values and consider various ways in which we can improve student welfare and education within our schools.

### ***Tree Planting Project***

Increasing awareness of habitat loss and climate change is important in Humanist schools. We have been happy to play our part in the Humanist Schools' Tree Planting Project.



For some years, we have been planting trees around school for fruit and shade. We now have a wide variety of trees growing up, including avocados, jackfruit, lemons, oranges, guavas, mangoes (whose fruits children enjoy twice a year) and umbrella trees, eucalyptus, mvule, acacia, gravaria and others. In the next rainy season, we intend to plant more trees at school, and also around the nearby village, in order to create awareness of keeping our environment fit for ourselves and for posterity. From the school's tree nursery, we will provide each children with a sapling they can take home to plant. We will carry out further work on hedges and plant flower borders to make our school a greener and

pleasanter place to live and work. We are hoping that UHST supporters will support this endeavour.

UHST scholarships continue to be very important to the school in bringing in bright but needy children. Our school has been going for 15 years. Educational standards and exam results have improved steadily over the period. At O-level we are in the top 150 of 4,500 schools in the country and 6<sup>th</sup> out of 35 schools in our district.

Our leavers are very successful in finding jobs, many move on to vocational training as mechanics, agri-specialists, office workers and nurses. More each year are being accepted on university courses and then training for high level jobs in teaching, accountancy and law. Our recent successes include Ahimbisibwe Martin (an engineer), Joanex Mukisa (a competitive entrant to Makerere University Law School – see separate details), Emmanuel Komakech (a medical doctor), Hellen Kisakye (final year student in a University School of Nursing), Ochan Mathias (final year diploma teacher now teaching at Mustard Seed School), Pirrez Okello (graduate teacher partly teaching at Mustard Seed School), Ivan Kayondo (undergraduate teacher for Maths and Economics). These and many others inspire their counterparts currently at school to read harder.

Mustard Seed School is heavily involved with the wider community. Our staff is recruited from the community, foodstuffs are bought locally, we have elected representatives on the PTA (Parent-Teachers' Association) where important school matters touching the community are discussed. Our children carry out charity work in the community and, in so doing, we extend the spirit of humanism to our neighbours. Our school is not merely accepted by the community. There is a real sense of community identity and ownership of Mustard Seed School.

## **A Mustard Seed School Role Model**

### ***Joan Mukisa***

*This is the inspiring story of a girl succeeding against the odds. From a difficult start in life, Joan has blossomed due to her innate talent, creativity and capacity for hard work coupled with a helping hand from sponsors and a supportive school that recognised and helped her to achieve her full potential. The account is written by Joan herself.*

*(Steve Hurd, Chair, UHST)*

My mother divorced Dad when I was 3-weeks old and she took me along with her to my grandma's place. When I was 5, mum remarried, and I returned to live with my dad. I stayed with him until the age of 8, when he died. My father had a steady livelihood, which enabled him to father and support 32 children, most of whom were educated. We did not have much money, but our older siblings would visit us at weekends and bring additional things to help us. These early years were really nice and I felt the world was great, but this all came to an end the day my dad died. My father's death brought a period of upheaval, during which I matured very fast in mind, even though my body was still small. From that point, the 8 youngest siblings, including me, lived a hand to mouth existence.

As is common in Uganda, on my father's death his family took possession of the house where we lived with our mother. The house had been bought for my mother but, that made no difference. The family demanded that we pay rent but, as we were penniless, we could not afford to pay and were forced to leave. Mum took us to stay with grandma, but she complained that mum sent too little money to enable her to look after us. At this point, Mum divorced her second husband so she could take us back to live with her, giving her 6 children to look after. The financial strain drove her into depression. Seeing mum depressed was a huge blow, since she was our beacon of hope. As our extended family

had deserted her, my mother had no option but to work hard to pull the situation together. She found a low paid job in a factory and the little money she could get was used to transport food from my grandma's place to feed us and to pay rent on the house. During my senior two year, my mother took out a small loan to start a market garden business.

It proved impossible for her to raise the fees needed to get us all in school. This gave her a sense of failure, because our mum always believed that education would be our salvation. I have always held onto this narrative and this explains my love of education. Luckily for me, my dad's first son showed up one day and took me with him to Jinja and enrolled me into a town school which I yearned for. I loved school, worked hard and performed well in my primary leaving exams.

A lot happened that I cannot write about, from the time my father died to the time I sat for my primary leaving examinations. I am grateful to have survived this period and for all those little acts of kindness that helped me get through this difficult period. After my primary leaving exams, there seemed to be little hope of progressing further. My older brother's wife prevented him from sponsoring me any further.

Having tasted education, I was not willing to give up easily. I started the process of searching for a school that would offer me at least a half bursary. Some schools advertised these on the radio, so I stayed for days with my ear glued to the radio. Then came salvation. Mr Kanya, the Director of Mustard Seed Humanist School, appeared on radio saying that his school was offering full scholarships to children from poor families who had done well in their primary leaving examinations. This was the only school offering to pay full school fees, so it stood out from the rest and I rushed to the phone to request an interview.

I went with my mother and we convinced the school to let me in. Being accepted marked the beginning for me of a new life in a new world.

Going to Mustard Seed was the best thing that ever happened to me. At first, I didn't like the school environment. I had been brought up in the urban setting of Jinja town and I found the school setting very quiet. But it was my decision to go there and I was determined not to regret it. I realised that this was my new world and I would fight tooth and nail to play my part to make it a better place.

The school gave me the opportunity to participate in different clubs and to start new ones. I became active in the debating club, the humanist group and encouraged the start of an agricultural club, all of which made learning at school fun. Most importantly, I became leader of the scouts, which greatly widened my horizons. Mustard Seed Scout Group participated in competitions both nationally and internationally and our school became well known in the district and across Uganda for its success. I treasure the moments when I dressed in my scout's uniform and visited various villages and primary schools, talked to pupils, their parents and teachers about our school and asked them to join us. This is the most memorable achievement in my life because many parents were inspired by the articulate speeches I made, and I believe it attracted many good students to our school.



I really believe in making things happen and this explains why I took part in almost every activity at school. I was elected to a number of leadership posts, including academic prefect, head girl, and head prefect. Working together with other students and teachers, our school really

improved in both spirit and academic success.

Mustard Seed School gave me opportunities for personal growth. I grew in mind, in leadership skills, and did my best to inspire others to aim higher. I enjoyed every single bit of my time there. I owe much to a special group of classmates (we used to call ourselves the "taxi bunch" just because we were brought in the same taxi from our homes in Jinja). These guys were an asset in making my world. Although they looked down on my short height they were still prepared to listen to my ideas and work with me to achieve them.

I will never forget the school director, Mr Moses Kanya, and the teachers who believed in me till now. They encouraged me to push to the great heights.

Getting to university is everyone's dream in their academic journey. I am in not just any university but East Africa's greatest, "Makerere University". It's really great to be here, and I thank Derek and Glenda Miller, my sponsors from the UK, for making it possible. Only 300 students out of a thousand applicants get through the rigorous entrance requirements. Given my difficult home circumstances I really do appreciate the help I have received from so many people along the way.



"From the village to the big city...", my mother always jokes. Life was hard at the beginning and it required a lot of effort and help to reach where I am. University life is kind of tricky, I must say, because everything changes, from the mode of teaching, the resources used, the people around you, to the decision making. It's been a wonderful moment save for the coronavirus pandemic which cut our physical interaction with the lecturers. Be that as it may, the University has embraced online classes and we have been able to complete our first year of study and second year starts this Friday.

It's really nice to meet new people and have new experiences. I hope that in future we will be able to encourage even more students from our Humanist School to go on to university.

Much appreciation goes to the supporters of Uganda Humanist Schools Trust who paid for my entire education and transformed Mustard Seed School into one of the best schools in Kamuli District.

Moses Kanya, the Mustard Seed School Director says of Joan:

*"Joan's single mother contacted the school in 2012. She heard about us from a local radio station in Jinja where I had advertised our new UHST scholarships. She came to school, explained her financial difficulties and asked if we would help her daughter, Joan, had passed her Primary Leaving examination with the highest division one grade and she looked sharp.*

*We were happy to award her a UHST scholarship which paid for her schooling from Senior 1 to Senior 6, when she left with the best A-level results in her year. While with us she served as class captain, academic prefect, head girl, head prefect and scout leader. Largely as a result of Joan's leadership, our scouts won national level competitions several times and they went on to represent Uganda in the East and Central Africa scout jamboree in Kigali, Rwanda in 2014.*

*Joan came to Mustard Seed School from a devout Christian background, and she readily embraced the school's humanist philosophy, becoming a reasoned, liberal voice in school debates. Her debating style always drew on the scientific approach to life.*

*Joan has been an outstanding student. She works hard, is open to new ideas, has good organisation skills and loves to help those in need. All of her teachers loved Joan for her discipline and good nature. We are all delighted that Joan gained a well-deserved place at our country's top law school and wish her well in her studies. She is an excellent role model for those who follow her."*

Moses Kamya,  
Director, Mustard Seed Secondary School

If you feel you or your group would like to help us to educate more young girls and boys like Joan then please support the Humanist Schools in Uganda by making a regular donation or providing a scholarship to give a bright young person the life changing opportunity of a good education.

For further details, please contact [stevehurd@uhst.org](mailto:stevehurd@uhst.org) (01782 750338).

Donation forms can be found at:

<https://ugandahumanistschoolstrust.org/donate/>