

Gabriella Centre

A pioneer NGO for disabled children in Tanzania – a meeting with two young door openers

The mighty Kilimanjaro summit lights up the village of Umbwe Onana with its white snowcap. Not much else is white where the banana trees, lush and green, surround the little houses high up in the northern Tanzanian mountains. A photo of two young boys, both each other's exact copy, has awoken my interest. I am being told they have no language. They are aggressive, hyper active, and their parents are both dead after suffering from aids. I hear people saying they are a cause of great despair in the village. The message feels like a punch in the chest; my heart starts beating harder. At that moment I make up my mind. I will find the two boys. I am in Norway; they are in Tanzania. During the following weeks I sit down once a day to think about these twin boys, whom I know are somewhere in the village of Umbwe Onana. A place I have never been.

January 10th 2011. I discover the book "Rondane – Kilimanjaro. Mountains never meet but people do". I read a few pages and am hit by a sensation of home, of belonging. An email to the author, Ilona Drivdal, leads me a few days later to a meeting. We agree, I will travel to Tanzania three weeks later to visit a youth development center – they are in need of practical help and support. The inhabitants of this village are amongst the country's poorest. I will stay with a local farmer family. It's Sunday when I get a chance to go for a walk to take in the surroundings. No one knows that I have the twins in mind. As the evening approaches we pass some buildings that stand out from the wooden houses in the neighbourhood. I am asked if I want to come in and say hello.

There is a group of adults standing in the yard. We greet each other heartily. Only a short distance away a group of children are playing. Out of the crowd two small boys – the spitting image of each other – approach me, completely calm yet very determined. As they reach me, they determinedly grab on to me on opposite sides, they smile and place their heads against each of my thighs. Slowly, I become aware that these are the two boys. Completely overwhelmed, I squat down, and they climb up on each their respective side and lay their heads up against me, softening like two kittens. We stay like this for a while, rocking from side to side until I feel the quizzical looks from the adults. I get up slowly.

Then come the questions: "What did you do? What happened? Please tell us". And I tell them... It was

the boys who found me, not the other way around. There are words of praise and gratitude – it goes with the territory. I am in the yard of the village orphanage. Darkness falls quickly and we walk home under the starry sky lit by a full moon above the white summit of Kilimanjaro. Powerful and unreal, but all of it true nonetheless.



The twins - Dotto and Kurwa

I go back to visit the next day. The kids are in the kindergarten, a school building like any other school building with a blackboard and double seated school benches.

The boys are sitting in the back; they are nine years old and too old to be there, but where else could they possibly go? We sing to each other, the group of children and I. Soon there is a break. Everyone grabs their cups. Porridge is served. I sit down on the stairs of the little house that provides shade from the sun, hiding the white top of Kilimanjaro. I have not yet been in contact with the boys. As soon as they have porridge in their cups, they come over and reclaim their seats on my lap, as though it is the most natural thing in the world. Strangely enough the other kids gather around in a circle. No one questions the boys' rank.

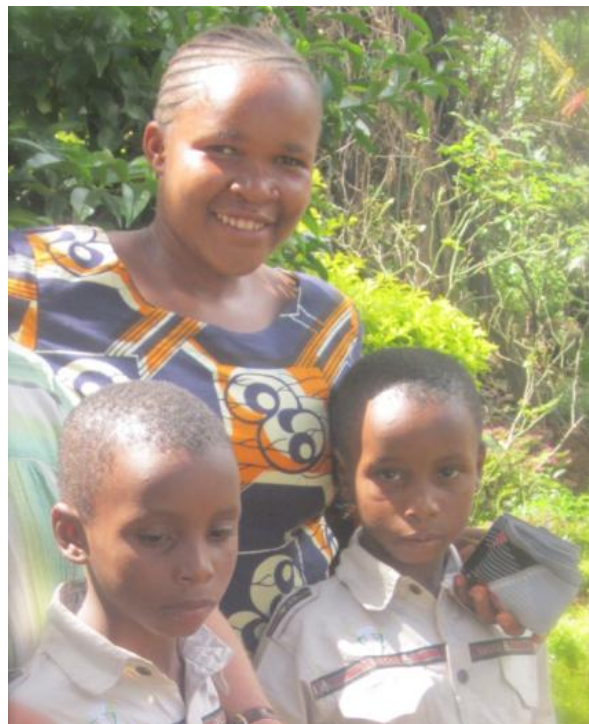
They are eating and resting softly against me. They want to rock and rest and cuddle. Clearly they are longing for the closeness they lost when mom and dad died, leaving them to be cared for by a grandmother who was already under great strain. Suddenly one of the twins leans back, looks at me and says, clear as day: "KILIMANJARO". We laugh in unison and he touches my white hair. He knows that the top of the mountain is white. So is the top of this new woman they have found. We laugh some more before he raises his little fist and says "One" for

thumb, “Two” for index finger, he struggles with “Three” for middle finger, but keeps going until all the fingers have been named. Again and again. This is something he’s seen the other children do, but has never done himself. For quite some time I have been thinking: “I wonder if their language disappeared with mom and dad.” A sense of joy grows inside of me – this boy is not as damaged as we thought. Maybe it is the same with his brother. The two of them have a secret language. Perhaps we can bring forth the real language too.

Back in Norway these two boys could not be forgotten. In a country where there are no obvious rights for children with disabilities, they do not have a place in the public school system, nor is there any organised care for this group of children. For many families, having a disabled child will lead to isolation and stigma from the local community in which they belong. For this reason, the children are often hidden away.

The twins can stay in the orphanage a while longer, but soon they will be too old. No schooling, no adequate training or treatment. What was I to do? I exchanged several conversations and emails with the orphanage manager. I promised support from friends and myself. She on her hand promised to look for a lady who could care especially for the two boys. In the end our exchange resulted in the discovery of the young caretaker Ester and the marvellous establishment of a new center for diagnosis and rehabilitation: a truly great effort by the manager of the orphanage to actually find this place. She is very attached to the twins. We are several people from Norway who combined have been able to pay Ester for her work and support a diagnostic stay for the boys at the Gabriella Children Rehabilitation Centre at the outskirts of Moshi Town in Tanzania. The diagnosis program was completed in 2012. The twins are still receiving professional help to further their development at the Gabriella Centre. Ester is still their nurturing caretaker.

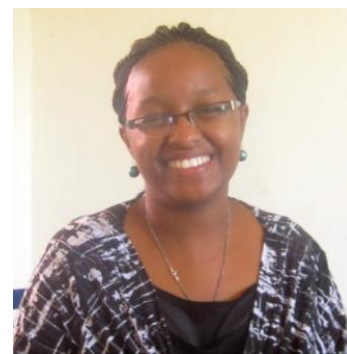
In the Tanzanian village there is now a whole family in wonder that such a center could exist where their



Ester with the twins – Dotto and Kurwa

boys may get help. For them, this help is certainly not a given – neither is the fact that there are people up north who want to get involved in helping their two disabled children. A very moved aunt of the boys came with me to the Gabriella Centre to sign the contract on behalf of the family. They have no financial means of footing this bill themselves. YES Kilimanjaro has promised full support for the boys. We are now looking for more people who want to contribute so that the pioneers at the Gabriella Centre can make their dreams of expanding to a larger center come true.

It is massive that the two boys should find me. It’s even greater that these boys have turned out to be door openers for support from Norway through YES Kilimanjaro. The true pioneer effort for disabled children is desperately needed. All possibilities are present for a professional and solid NGO started by Tanzanians with their hard earned means. Please help us to help them.



Brenda Shuma hard at work at the Gabriella Centre

Let me tell you about the Gabriella Centre:

Brenda Shuma, "Mama Gabriella", is born in 1980. She is very humble, yet determined – she is a true driving force for this project. Brenda Shuma has completed an education as an occupational therapist with teaching expertise at university level. She has chosen a life together with disabled people and is fighting for awareness concerning each individual. She WILL demand rights; she WILL give the disabled opportunities based on their own premises. Together with her husband, Brenda Shuma established the Gabriella Centre in 2009 in rented housing. Soon they must vacate these premises. They have bought a land lot and are working to raise funding to build new houses.

Families can bring their children and youth to the center. They may stay to be diagnosed and then return home. Or they may join a kindergarten inspired by Montessori where they meet children from the neighborhood. If they will benefit from it, they may continue to go to boarding school at the center, but this time without the children from the neighborhood who attend their regular schools. In public schools there are no rights and no hope of receiving help for the disabled young.

In 2009 the greatest challenge was to get the disabled to the center. Most families struggle financially to afford schooling for their other children. Few families prioritise this group of children in a community where money for education generally is a challenge. A lot of shame and lack of recognition represent significant obstacles as well. In 2015, the financial challenge is the same.

The great change is that families with disabled children now have a newfound courage to bring their children to the Gabriella Centre. They have seen children and youth in tremendous development. What they have seen has given them new hope that also their child might progress. The need is great and the queue of families wanting help has become long.

At the Gabriella Centre they are working in an entrepreneurial model, which develops each child to become a valuable co-creator in their local communities. They have developed an inclusive model – a change-making model where the disabled become resources for both their family and the local community after receiving training at the Gabriella Centre.

The Gabriella Centre makes remarkable pioneering effort and changes They need different kinds of support

Financial support:

To offer more children a place at the Gabriella Centre
To build new buildings and equip them properly

Interest through volunteering:

Professionals are wanted for the exchange of experiences
Professionals are wanted to attend the centre as auditors
Youth are welcome to work at the centre as interns

Power of thought:

Last but not least, they need people who care to send thoughts of hope for the Gabriella Centre to succeed with their visions and demanding work in an area where awareness concerning formal respect for the disabled slowly is about to become part of reality – thanks to the efforts made by the Gabriella Centre.

Financial support may be given to the Gabriella Centre via YES Kilimanjaro, account no. 1503 34 57054

You may earmark your contribution. Please state your name and email address so that we may offer you reports on the progress. All contributions that go through YES Kilimanjaro are subject to public audit. The entire amount goes directly to the Gabriella Centre. Apart from bank fees we have no administration expenses.

A heartfelt thank you for your interest.
Please get in touch if you want to know more.

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