

Gabriella Centre

A pioneer NGO for disabled children and youth in Tanzania

- a meeting with two small 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 houses high up in the northern Tanzanian mountain. 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, hyperactive, and their parents are both dead after suffering from aids. I hear people saying they are a cause of great despair in their village. The message feels like a punch in the chest, my heart starts beating harder. This very 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 sown 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 need practical help and support. The inhabitants of this village are amongst the country's poorest. I will stay with a local farmer's family. The first Sunday of my visit I got 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 would like 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 smile and place their heads against each of my thighs. Slowly I become aware of that these are the two boys. Completely overwhelmed, I squat down, and they climb up on 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 quizzel looks from the adults. I rise slowly.

Then come the questions: «What did you do? What

happened? Please tell us. We never saw the boys like that". And I tell them... It was the boys who found me, not the other way around. Words of praise and gratitude take place. 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 ureal, but all of it true, nonetheless.

I go back to visit the next day. The kids are in 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 small schoolhouse 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.

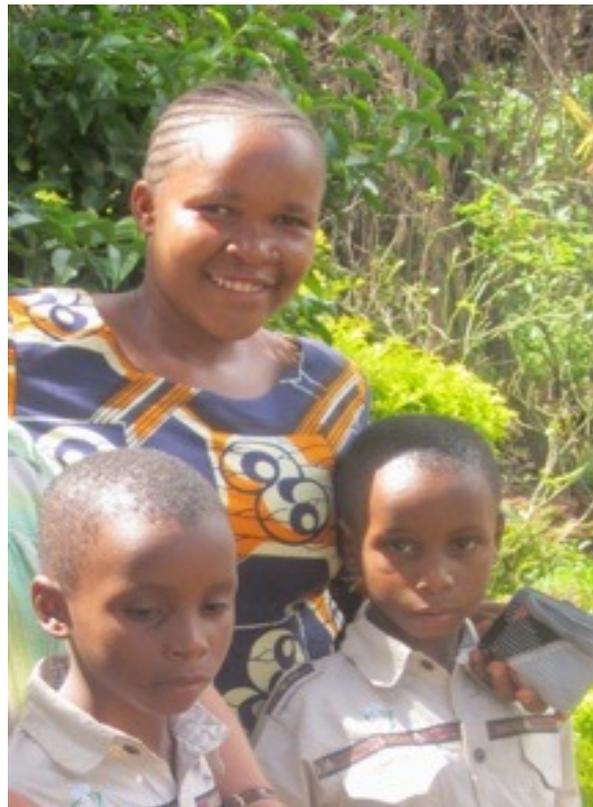
They are eating and resting softly against me. They want to rock and rest and cuddle. Clearly, they are longing for the closeness they lost when mom and dad died, leaving them to be cared for by a grandmother who was already under great strain. Suddenly one of the boys leans back, looks at me and says, clear as a 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 the 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 the middle finger but keeps going until all the fingers have been named. Again, and again. This is something he has 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 organized 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.

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 emails with the orphanage manager. I promised support from friends and myself. She on her hand promised to look for a girl who could care especially for the two boys. In the end our exchange resulted in the discovery of the young caretaker Ester and a new center for diagnoses and rehabilitation, a truly great effort by the manager of the orphanage to actually find such a place. She is very attached to the twins We are several people from Norway who combined have been able to pay Ester and support a diagnostic stay for the boys at Gabriella Children’s Rehabilitation Centre at the outskirts of Moshi Town in Tanzania. The diagnosis program was completed in 2012. The twins are in great progress and continue with professional help to further their development at 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 boys may get assistance. For them, this kind of help is certainly not a given – neither is the fact that there are people up



Ester and the twins. Dotto & Kurwa

north willing to get involved in helping their two disabled children. Their aunt came with me to Gabriella to sign the contract on behalf of the family. It was a touching moment. They have no financial means themselves. YES Kilimanjaro has promised full support for the boys. We are now looking for more people who would like to contribute so that the pioneers at Gabriella Centre can make their dreams of expanding to a large center and reach more children come true.

It is massive that the two boys should find me. It’s even greater that these boys have turned out to be the 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.



2012 – Let me tell you about Gabriella Centre:

Brenda Shuma, «Mama Gabriella» is born in 1980. She is 'humble, yet very determined – she is a true driving force for this center. 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 leave the place. YES Kilimanjaro has supported buying a land of 5 acres with the vision of seeing Gabriella Centre shifting over to self-owned buildings. Gabriella Centre has developed a model for teaching and hope one day to see more centers like their own coming up all over Tanzania.

Families can bring their children and youth to Gabriella Centre. 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 benefit from it, they may continue to go to boarding school at Gabriella, but this time without the children from the neighborhood who will be admitted in public schools. In the public schools there are no rights and no hope of receiving help for the disabled children.

In 2009 the greatest challenge was to convince parents with disabled children to bring their children to the center. Most families struggle financially to afford education for their other children. Few families prioritise this group of children, in a society where money for education generally is a challenge. A lot of shame and lack of recognition represent significant obstacles as well.

The great change is that families with disabled children now have a newfound courage to bring their children to 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 huge and the queue of families in need is becoming long.

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

Gabriella Centre makes remarkable pioneering efforts and changes

They need different kinds of support:

Financial support

To offer more children a place at Gabriella Centre

To build new buildings and equip them properly on their new land

Interest through volunteering

Professionals are wanted for the exchange of experience

Professionals are wanted to attend the centre as auditors

Power of thought

Last but not least, they need people who care to send thoughts of hope for 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 Gabriella Centre.

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

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