

## THE GRADE THREE QUESTION I AM YET TO ANSWER

It all started with the same common question “*Kibe (my childhood name), what do you want to be when you grow up?*” Mr. Patrick, my grade three teacher asked. It was not my first-time hearing this, for several times, I had heard Mr. Patrick cross-examine my fellow classmates on the same. Though I was somewhat afraid of his follow up questions about details of the profession I would mention, like most of my classmates, I knew I would easily get away by mentioning a doctor or an engineer. They were the common ones and Mr. Patrick loved hearing his students dream big. Without hesitation, I immediately crafted a response that revolved around engineering. I struggled and stammered as I explained how civil engineering was my future career. This seemed acceptable in Mr. Patrick’s eyes, who then continued with the lesson. For the rest of the class-time.

Clearly there was no strong reason as to why my instincts had rushed towards the construction industry, because I nearly had zero knowledge about the industry. Soon my thoughts started bounced back and forth in wonder about what I had pledged my life. Most people in my village were peasant farmers who seasonally prayed for the heavens to bless their crops with rains on the square plots of land that had been distributed by the United High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As such, being a doctor or an engineer seemed too big a dream for kids of my kind who were growing up in the neighborhoods of Kyangwali Refugee Camp, in western Uganda.

Farming never seemed fun to young people of my age. However, my siblings and I always enjoyed helping out my mother, who was in her early sixties and was still sacrificing so much to provide for the family. She had not never stepped in a classroom, but she daily emphasized the importance of education and why school needed to be taken seriously. She was

inspirational and a true example of what hard work looked like and had her own way of assuring us about a better future if we kept working hard in school. I remember, every time I seemed exhausted after a long day of working, my mom would look at me and say, *“My son, education has something better to offer. Make sure you work. I don’t want you to plow soils for a life-time.”* As such, the tilling of land in February or the planting of beans and maize in March had turned into an adventure within my family. Beyond just giving a helping hand, it was a great time to be inspired and learn from my mother what true discipline meant and what true hard work was capable of, contingent upon one’s willingness to put in the work.

Like my mother, dad had not acquired an education, but he knew so much about house construction. He had long-accumulated experience with traditional housing. Giving him a helping hand when building chicken houses and other home structures occasionally granted me a chance to ask several questions related to the industry. With my dad’s presence and Mr. Patrick’s question, I would be motivated to explore the construction industry.

By the age of 10, I had started putting up small structures resembling my family’s 48-square-meter-grass thatched building. I did everything out of exploration, but my curiosity and love for building was growing stronger, and this would take a different trajectory five years later in 2012, when I embarked on my first trip to Kampala - the capital city of Uganda. On this trip, together with my family, I would accompany my brother, Joe, who would be leaving for his first year of college in the US. I do not remember the specific day, but after seven to eight hours on that day, we had arrived. Everyone complained about how exhausting the long trip had been. My dad could not believe how packed and congested we had been on the first half of the journey: 22 humans in a 14-passenger taxi. I empathized most with my mother, with whom the long journey had not fared well given her old age. She grumbled most about the bumpy roads filled with

potholes - she would soon feel better, I hoped. I was bone-tired too, but I truly cared less. Traveling about 300 kilometers outside the confinement of Kyangwali refugee camp, felt relieving. I was already falling in love with the building style in the capital. Seeing housing blocks stacked on top of each other, forming high-risen structures, blew me away.

Joe had noticed the kind of scrutiny I had embraced throughout the trip. He decided that I would go with him as he left for shopping in the city center. By 11:00 am the following day, we had already checked out some shops. I hardly could believe what my eyes were seeing. Towers of many shapes and sizes! Roads too looked better compared to those in the camp, except they were populated by reckless taxi drivers who cared less about the road signs. Hardly did they obey traffic lights as they navigated the streets as though both red and green meant the same thing. Pedestrians in the roadway hustled to escape, and this seemed to bother no one! It appeared as if it was simply part of the culture as everybody intuitively looked confident and experienced at dodging the speeding taxis. I hated crossing the road, and I prayed for my safety every moment I had to.

At around 4:00 pm Joe was almost done with shopping, but still had a few things to check out. We exited one of the big shops around Luwum street and headed towards Kampala road. It was here that my eyes noticed a newly constructed and very tall building with alternating grey and blue stripes that made the structure look like a piano tilted vertically up into the air. It was the splendid Mapeera house. The building would serve as the headquarters for Centenary Bank: the fourth largest bank and the second-largest indigenous commercial bank in Uganda [2]. Throughout the day I had seen a number of impressive tall buildings, but Mapeera house immediately secured a special place in my heart. With 19 floors, Mapeera's elevation and towering height seemed to override that of other buildings adjacent to it. My attention was

captured, and my heart enraptured. The excitement within demanded that I ask Joe to enter the building, but my consciousness also understood that we had limited time and Joe needed to get back to pack up for his flight the following day.

With my mind taken up by the amazing architectural work, for the rest of the evening, Joe and I talked about house constructing. Joe pointed out how Mapeera wasn't even close to some of the world's tall buildings he had seen during his few trips to South Africa and other parts of the world. My brain hardly could conceive what the ears were hearing, while my heart ached for my family as I thought about the 48-square meter grass-thatched house we were living in. Whenever it rained, the gaps in the roof, created by the constant gnawing of bush rats, left me feeling like a garden vegetable receiving its daily watering. That evening, I wondered more if further exploration of the construction industry could enable me to build a better home for my family, either in Uganda or back in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, if we ever get a chance to return some day.

While reflecting on all this, a small, convincing voice whispered to me "*You could use your meagre skills and experience to build your own housing units resembling the Mapeera.*" I had just completed my first year of secondary school at the time and had three more years to finish. The good news was that this period would buy me enough time to thoroughly think through my new idea, and hopefully come up with something worth holding unto. Though I knew that my dad would be a great resource and somewhat convinced that he would appreciate my thinking, I doubted his approval of my idea. On the following day, we escorted my brother to Entebbe, where he flew to the US while the rest of us returned to the village.

I took a few more days to brainstorm, and with one week remaining before I left for school, I built up the courage to share my thoughts. I was very excited as I explained my plans to

my dad, yet my enthusiasm was short lived as a frown spread across his face. *“Kibe, I don’t think anyone can build a storey hut using our ordinary poles, nails and ropes; otherwise everyone around here would own one,”* my father said. I felt heartbroken and every joint in my body frozen in that moment. Later that week I left for school, and with time I begun building up courage once again. *“Give yourself time - you have three more years to think through the whole idea,”* I whispered to myself. While at school, I drew a few sketches of how my storey hut would look. These sketches changed year after year, but by grade ten, I had the final full sketch of the house I wanted to build: a two-storey hut, 9 square meters wide and about 5 meters high. The hut would have the up-trotting stairs on it’s right consisting of treads and handrail leading to the balcony, and into the upper section, and then down-sloping stairs leading into the lower section.

In November 2014, I finished my national exams, and thought it was time to embrace the challenge. At the beginning of 2015, I began gathering materials to start construction. The process was not easy as I made several trips back to the drawing board. It became hard dealing with curious neighbors most of whom kept asking if I was building a traditional latrine after seeing me dig out the basement. Others wondered whether I was building a traditional granary for my family’s maize when I started separating the two housing sections of the building. My dad still seemed concerned about my motivation. I had explained my idea many times, but he still wasn’t convinced. He even refused to give me some of the old nails, poles and ropes that were at home. *“I don’t want you to waste my building materials,”* he politely said whenever I requested supplies.

In the next few days, I focused on convincing four of my friends to help me gather more resources and keep the construction going. Like everyone else, they hardly understood what I was trying to accomplish, but fortunately they agreed to give me a helping hand in the best way

they could. Whenever they got stuck, they would reach out, but once in a while, I also had no idea of what to do next. We would then take a day or two off to figure out the puzzle, and then get back to work once we got an idea for the next step. The whole process had turned out more complicated than I had initially imagined, but I got to learn what commitment, persistence, and teamwork were capable of. I realized that at times having a good team is better than having everything completely figured out.

Three months down the road, with all the hard work, we had succeeded in building the first unit. With this in place, my dad's attitude took a completely different path. He now could see the light and believed in the construction of the multi-level huts using nothing special but ordinary nails, ropes and poles. Thereafter, he became supportive, and with him by our side, the second unit was done in less than a month.

Simultaneously, time was running out! I needed to give full attention to secure my travel documents to attend African leadership academy, a pre-university high school in South Africa I had gained admission to earlier that year in February. My hut wasn't fully furnished, but it was in a good shape, and overall, I was impressed of how far we had come! There was finally something to look at and be proud of. Impressed by his son, my dad offered to do the plastering all by himself as I travelled back and forth to Kampala for my school documents. From this moment, he would become the deliverer of the final product; the same project he had doubted earlier.

Although it looks older now, my hut still stands firm and remains one of the things I look forward to seeing every time I fly home for my summer breaks. Over the past four years, not only have I been able to visit Mapeera house for more inspiration, but also had a chance to fly to a few more places where I have been able to see taller and more complex buildings. For

example, I have been able to travel to Washington DC where I got to see the Washington Monument, one of the tallest structures in the region. New York, where I saw impressive buildings like the Empire State Building and the Bank of America Tower. And the gigantic Mercedes Benz Stadium in Atlanta Georgia able to accommodate 71,000 people, which is breathtaking.

Today, my love for home construction and passion for better housing for humanity have grown stronger and I have kept on finding better reasons to follow this path. Last summer, when I went home, I had a chance to visit Kinakyeitaka primary school, my former primary and the same place Mr. Patrick had asked me the rhetorical question. I was able to find Mr. Patrick and during our conversation, I confidently acknowledged how challenging college has been thus far. I told him of the several nights I have spent awake, contemplating whether I still want to follow this path. The daily struggles in my academics, constantly push me to question my choice as I have felt like giving up many times.

Nonetheless, I excitedly shared with Mr. Patrick how my future in the construction industry looks promising in my imaginations. I told him how the grade three me being asked what I wanted to do when I grew up, has kept me going and in search for answers. How the inspiration of Mapeera building on my first trip to the city, dad and mom's presence in my life and the need to have a better home for my family, remains my strongest motivations to press through doubts and find courage to give it my all. I am still learning and continuing to trust the process with the faith that the dots will connect one day and, hopefully, find the answers.

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