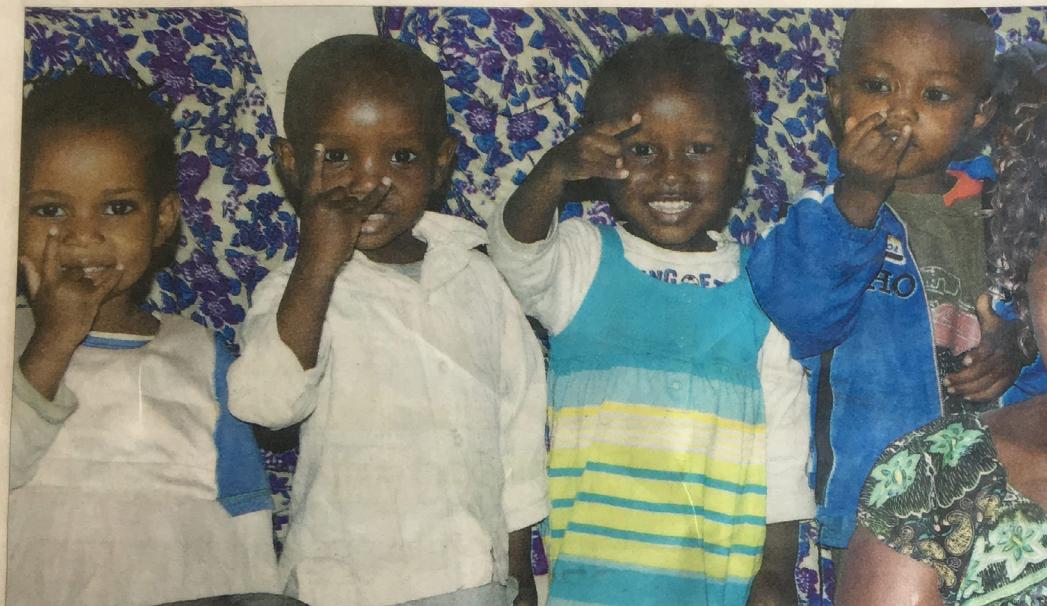


Golden heart: With no source of income, she depends on well wishers to give the best to the 32 children she hosts at her home

Transform
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Awards
HONORING THOSE WHO
MAKE A DIFFERENCE
Hearts of Gold



Some of children Martha (right) is living with at her home in Kabiria, Satellite Estate, Nairobi. (PHOTOS: WILLIS AWANDU/STANDARD)

In Martha's house, dejected children find a home

By SOPHIAH MUTHONI

Her three-bedroom house located at Nairobi's Kawangware estate, is home to 36 people. When you walk into her house you cannot fail to notice the pile of teddy bears and other toys on some drawer. Children of ages ranging between a few months to about 10 years are all over the living room that has also given way to a makeshift bedroom. They call her *cucu* (grandmother) and are delighted when she is around.

Thirty-two of the occupants are children the 53-year-old Martha Macharia has offered to raise as her own.

Martha's love for these children is evident in how she gives each child attention. Her affection is undeniable. Though at the time of our visit most of the children were in school, those we found painted a clear picture of the warmth and love in that big family. Unfortunately, it has not been a smooth ride for Martha in her quest to spread the love she has for needy children.

"I grew up in abject poverty. As a child I never slept on a bed or had a blanket. I never ate and felt satisfied. My father was a drunkard and my mother was struggling to raise 13 children on her own. Everything I lacked back then is what I try to give these children every day," she narrates. The mother of five grown-up children, despite being uneducated and finan-

cially unstable, started helping children in the early 90s. She would find children who were neglected by their parents, mostly of who were drunkards and clean them up and feed them. If the parent of a particular child agreed to let the child live with Martha, then she makes sure the child goes to school. Of all the stories of how she rescues different children from different situations; one stood out.

SOCIAL WORKERS

"I was walking home one day and found a group of men jeering at a woman. She had just given birth on the street and was trying to kill the baby. I helped her get to hospital and after talks with social workers at the hospital, I established that the mother wanted nothing to do with the child; I then took him in at four-days old. The baby lives with me to this day," she recounts. Ironically, it has not been all praises as some people have accused her of taking advantage of the plight of needy children for personal gain. "I was accused of using the children to earn money especially when a number of good Samaritans came to my home and brought gifts for the children," she explains.

"However, over time, the public appreciated our work and would direct me to children they thought needed my help. I have picked chil-

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— Martha Macharia

ren from the streets, others chained up like animals just because they were handicapped. A good example is of two boys I travelled all the way to Kajado to pick. They were living like animals and it tore my heart apart." At some point she breaks down during the interview, looking like a woman with the weight of the world on her shoulders. She says despite massive challenges she has managed to achieve her main objective of reaching out to children in distress. "I used to live in a house that leaked every time it rained. I had to beg and borrow to feed the children but I have never given up," she adds. What is amazing about Martha's story is the

fact that she does not work and yet with the help of well-wishers she manages to educate, feed and clothe the children.

She explains that a lady she met by chance and who she shared her story with sends her Sh20,000 every month for rent and another couple Sh10,000 a month for upkeep of the home. "My fulltime job now is to take care of these children. I have to be here to make sure they are eating right and that they are clean. I get help from my daughter, a house help and a young woman I took in and whose son is with us," she explains. Despite the struggles she has gone through and continues to face, it seems her efforts have been recognised. She is one of the Transform Kenya Awards nominees under the Resource Mobilisation category.

"I had never heard of the awards,

but I have a sketchy idea of who nominated me. I once went to Mbagathi Hospital; two of the children were sick and I had carried one on my back and the other on the front and this lady stopped me to find out why I was carrying two children. I told her what I do and three years after we met she visited me at home. She recently called to ask for my personal details. I think she is the one who nominated me," she says. She affirms that nothing will stop her from responding to the needs of children in distress. She does not choose what child to care of and this is evident in the children we had the pleasure to meet.

"I have always loved children and every day I trust God to provide for us. I will continue to take in more children. Parents whose children are here and willing to have them back are free to come pick them," she concludes.