

*(SOUNDS OF KIDS TALKING AND PLAYING)*

**Daniel Ameny:** Hello class!

**Kids:** Hello sir!

**Daniel Ameny:** How are you?

**Kids:** We are alright, thank you, sir.

**Meghan Mast:** *That was Daniel Ameny speaking with a class of children he works with from an MCC partner in Uganda.*

*Today on the show, Daniel's story. He hasn't always lived in Uganda.*

*He arrived as a refugee when he was only ten years old. Today he is 35 and is now helping other refugee children get an education.*

*I'm Meghan Mast and you're listening to "Relief, development and podcast," a production of Mennonite Central Committee.*

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*

**Meghan Mast:** *Daniel Ameny arrived in Uganda from the Democratic Republic of the Congo as a child with his siblings and nephew.*

**Daniel:** I left my mother behind and my father had been killed three months ago. The reason why we left our country was that we were being hunted by some unknown assailants. It was in 1997 when Laurent Kabila, the president of DRC, had just taken power from Mobutu. And there were Ugandan soldiers and Rwandese soldiers in Congo. The soldiers that had supported him, to capture power from Mobutu. My sister was married to one of the soldiers. And I was able to escape the place through the truck of soldiers that was moving from Congo back to Uganda.

When I first arrived, I remember we went to Northern Uganda, because the soldiers from Congo had taken to go and battle with another rebel group called Lord's Resistance Army. So from Northern Uganda, we were shifted from one barracks to another because of the conflict there. It was that time when the husband of my sister was killed in another war in Western Uganda, and my sister was helpless. She didn't know how she could take care of me, my brother and my sister.

**Meghan Mast:** During this time, Daniel met the woman he credits for helping him get an education. The woman he calls his Ugandan mother.

**Daniel:** In two months, we had moved to over eight barracks, until one old lady told my sister, that it is better for you to leave these children behind so that they can go to school. Because if you continue moving with them, they are going to lose their future. And that is how I got my Ugandan mother.

I started going to school when I was in primary three. I studied from 1997 up to 2000. And I sat my primary leaving examinations, I passed it with division two, that was a good grade—24 aggregates, but I was not able to join secondary school. So when I came to the camp, I had to repeat the primary seven class and redid the national examinations again. This time, I was able to score first grade with 12 aggregates. But it was still not possible for me to join the secondary school, there was only one,

secondary school up to now it is still one, where children, students were paying 10,000 shillings. That is like around \$3. But at that time, it was very difficult for someone to even earn that much.

Seeing my colleagues, the ones I finished primary school with, going to school and I was at home. I was selling samosa and chapati, walking in the entire town from morning to evening to sell at least 60 samosas so that I could get paid 1,000 shillings. That was like a quarter of \$1. This continued for a period of six months. One gentleman asked me whether I was now going back to school. And I said no. He asked whether there was a secondary school in my village. I said yes, and I said, it cost 10,000 shillings. He was shocked because that price was too cheap. But it was not possible to get it in the camp. So he offered to pay my school fees. He asked whether I had books and uniform. I said no. He advised me to continue working so that I could get money, buy my own books and uniform and he would pay my fees.

**Meghan Mast:** Daniel saved up and was able to buy his own book and uniform. The kind man paid for his tuition. But Daniel felt nervous about how far behind he would be. His classmates were a couple terms ahead of him, so when he started at third term, he wasn't sure he'd be able to keep up with the rest of them.

**Daniel:** So I had to read really hard. I copied notes the whole night, every day, make sure that I was not going to fail to pass to senior two. And indeed, I emerged number 19 out of 72. I can't forget that. Because I couldn't believe that I would still win [over] others who had studied for two terms.

#### *MUSIC BREAK*

Education to me is really one thing that I relied upon. Every time I saw my colleagues were having a better life than me, or having better clothing, better shoes. I just felt like the only way I could change my life was by excelling in my education. I used to read, not so hard, but I think I had the gift of understanding things faster.

This kept on giving me the courage that I can make it. All of my secondary school, lower secondary school, I was never number one. I was always number 4,5,7. And at one time number three. But in the national examination, I also don't know how it happened, but I was the best in the school. And I was the only one who scored a first grade. And that helped me to go to get a scholarship in high school.

**Meghan Mast:** Daniel remembers that not having much money in high school was difficult. It was a challenge to pay for food and lodging and school supplies.

**Daniel:** Where could I live? The scholarship wasn't for boarding school. And then what could I eat? And then things around scholastic materials was difficult for me. But because I had some friends from the camp that were also studying in town, and they knew that I could help them with physics and mathematics homework. They offered to give me a place to live and food to eat.

**Meghan Mast:** He remembers a time when he was chastised for not wearing the right shoes. The school policy required everyone to wear black leather shoes, but Daniel only had one pair that were canvas and torn a bit on the bottoms.

**Daniel:** On this day, particular day I went to class. And one teacher came and took one side of everyone's shoe, everyone who did not wear black leather shoe. Their one side of the shoe was confiscated. Mine was among them. Others came back to school the next day with black leather shoes. I came back to school the next day, with a pair of sandals that I had gotten from my friends, the ones I

was living with. I remember going to the office and explaining to the administrator, that wearing canvas wasn't by choice. I couldn't help but shed some tears. And he felt my pain and gave me the shoes that I continued using. I think that was the only challenge. But otherwise, I really had a wonderful high school, the two years of high school was great. And I scored very highly then. And I remember when the national examinations came, my name was in the newspaper. They just called me, my friend started calling like, have you heard the result, they have read your name on the radio, and I just had to buy the newspaper to see my result.

#### *MUSIC BREAK*

**Meghan Mast:** Daniel went on to co-found an organization called Planning for Tomorrow, with other young people who were refugees. Today it's an MCC partner. Together Daniel and the other young people started a nursery and primary school.

**Daniel:** We did this because we had gone through the same education system. And we narrowly passed. So many failed, so many dropped out, the condition was not good. And we felt like we could do better. We could help our fellow refugee children get a better education. So through the school, we tried to tackle some of the issues that we knew affected children in the schools. The quality of education was so poor, this could be served. And so a team of humanitarian volunteers came out and said we are going to volunteer and teach our own children.

Our focus is mostly on quality education and then providing them with food. Because we know most families only have one meal in a day. And when a child is at school without a meal, they're unable to concentrate. So from day one, even though we did not have resources we made sure every child was with food.

**Meghan Mast:** When the school first opened, there were 26 students. Today there are nearly 600.

**Daniel:** We are very interested in supporting children, the most vulnerable children. So there are children who study our school without making any contribution. Like the children affected or infected with HIV. We have some small kids we started with, the kid got HIV from the mother. And others, we have some orphans that are studying in our school. And because we use a lot of community volunteers to make sure the school is running, we also sponsor their children. We allow their children to study there without making any contribution. But the school has always been depending on the community, the community has to contribute towards payment of staff salaries, running the operational cost of the school. Unfortunately, it is never enough. In the early days, we would collect up to about 60%, of whatever parents are supposed to contribute. But after COVID-19 and with the Russian war, the economy is so bad, that we struggle to even get 30% of the collection. And these are our children, we cannot just deny them an education.

**Meghan Mast:** Looking at the students in the school, Daniel sees variations of himself as a child, little people going through experiences that are familiar to him. He tries to give them opportunities and care that he would have wanted to receive when he was in their situation.

**Daniel:** I want to empower many children [to] come out of their difficult situations and be able to help other members of the community. I could count over 1,200 children who have been through our school. We really connect with them and talk to them and guide them and make sure that we are changing their mindset and building people who are going to come back and help their community. Some of them are

serving in the students' associations. Some of them are in the leadership of the school, the prefectural bodies and others are leading projects in their school because the new secondary school curriculum involves a lot of projects. Every time we see them posted even by the secondary schools, we really feel proud, this one particular school that was the three excellent learners, they were all girls from our school. When I look at all that, and you know, whatever we are doing is not in vain. And if we keep building people like that, we are going to have a better community and a better future for the entire refugee camp.

Education is my only hope, was my only hope to change my life.

**Meghan:** Those are the voices of children from Planning For Tomorrow, an MCC partner in Uganda.

*Thank you to Daniel Ameny for sharing his story.*

*MCC works with remarkable people all around the world. Daniel is just one example.*

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*This episode of Relief, Development and Podcast was recorded and produced on Treaty 1 territory, the original land of the Anishinaabeg, Cree and Dakota peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.*

*This episode was produced and hosted by me, Meghan Mast. The head producer is Emily Loewen.*

*We're taking a break next month and will be back in November.*

*A lot is happening in the world right now. This is a difficult time for many. May you experience God's provision and protection as we work together to share God's love and compassion for all in the name of Christ.*

*Thanks and take good care.*

*(MUSIC FADES UP AND THEN DOWN)*