

A School for My Village: A Promise to the Orphans of Nyaka

By Twesigye Jackson Kaguri with Susan Urbanek Linville

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Reviewed by:

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A School for My Village details the story of Twesigye Jackson's vision to provide educational opportunities for the children in his home village in Uganda. The book begins with an introduction to the geography and political structure surrounding Uganda, specifically the area of Nyakagezyi. The author of the introduction, Susan Urbanek Linville, describes her travels with Jackson to learn about his journey of planning and implementing the construction of an AIDS orphans school in his home village. The 26 chapters of the book are autobiographical and highlight the adventures and struggles associated with undertaking a large project beginning with an internal sense to take action.

The author begins his story by providing background information about the cultural norms and expectations placed upon all children from the small village in Uganda and throughout much of the surrounding areas. Jackson was driven from an early age to receive an education, which countered the familial and cultural expectations placed upon him. Jackson outlines the sometime tumultuous relationship with his father, Taata, and the impact of that relationship on his development as a scholar and, later, philanthropist. The first interaction that was described was concerning Jackson's decision to attend an institution of higher education in the United States. Jackson received encouragement and mentoring from his older brother, Frank, which caused friction between Jackson and Taata. Jackson described that Taata responded with anger and saw Jackson's desire to receive a university education as an act of defiance.

Upon entering college, Jackson was quick to make friends and enjoyed all aspects of university life. One relationship that is introduced and explored throughout the autobiography is with Beronda, a woman who would later become his wife and partner in the development of the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School. Jackson outlines that the time spent at his university provided the opportunity for him to identify his goal of providing educational opportunities for the children of his village who face the tremendous burden of being orphaned due to the epidemic of the AIDS virus. Jackson refers to the illness as "slim" because he would notice the dramatic physical differences in those individuals who face the grim reality of the disease. His response became more poignant after watching his brother and then, later, other family members pass away due to the disease. Jackson struggled greatly following Frank's death but returned to the United States to continue his education with encouragement from Beronda. Jackson saw first-hand the tremendous negative impact of slim on his community, and the book chronicles his call to action.

After graduation and deciding to marry Beronda, Jackson identified his desire to build a school for orphaned children in Nyakagezyi and began to make concrete plans. The story told by Jackson following the inception of an idea appears to be quite flawless to the reader, not based on the ease of the project, but due to Jackson's notable ability to think strategically and act relationally. Jackson quickly enlisted the partnership and assistance of key players in his home village, which contributed to the success of the vision. The Nyaka AIDS Orphans School is an example of the lasting positive impact that initiative, buy-in from multiple levels of support, and commitment to a worthy cause can have on an entire community. One of the aspects of the book that leaves a lasting impression is Jackson's ability to connect with his community. His demeanor with community members struggling to survive with basic needs was genuine and heartwarming. Jackson treated all

individuals with whom he was working with dignity and respect, whether the individual was living in a mud hut or was a high-ranking government official.

The remaining chapters detail Jackson's struggles with beginning a new family in the United States while traveling frequently to Uganda to oversee the project of building the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School. The formation of the school required Jackson to utilize his celebrity status in his home village and surrounding area to meet with necessary officials to receive their approval, while also appealing to many non-profit organizations in the United States for funding. Jackson's narrative certainly assumes a religious approach, calling on his connections to church communities in the U.S. to receive monetary support for the construction and staffing of the school. Jackson and Beronda also provided much of the initial support for the school from their own savings. The success of the school was contingent upon Jackson's ability to pull his community together for a common goal, while also utilizing the resources—both human and fiscal—acquired during his time in the United States. Jackson's resilience and genuine care for others contributed to his success with the program.

The book concludes with Jackson describing the graduation of the first-year primary class. Many of the students would be attending boarding schools in neighboring villages and began to see the value of pursuing and continuing their education in tangible ways. Accounts of student success and the mentoring relationships developed were of the most importance for Jackson during this time of recognition. Jackson remembered his brother on that day, and found a peace knowing that he had done what he could to promote positive change. The story is inspirational and encourages readers to persist, to do more with gifts that have been given, and to pursue a purposeful cause with one's vocation.

Several themes surfaced throughout the book that would provide pertinent discussion points in a seminar classroom setting or an orientation group. One reservation with using this text is the consistent connection with Jackson's action to his Christian orientation. Although the tone is not abrasive in any manner, it could potentially be off-putting to students from certain institutional settings. This reservation should not discount the book, but it is a consideration to be mindful of upon evaluation. Three themes that are rich with discussion opportunities are gender roles, family relationship dynamics, and the role of religion connected to service.

The strict gender roles described throughout the book provide ample discussion opportunities for a small group setting. One example of the text that could be used as a talking point is from Jackson's grandmother, who stated, "We will find you a hardworking woman. You will get married and she will stay home, till the land, and bear children while you continue school. I will take care of the children (pg.10)." Jackson knew from an early age that he wanted to leave the village to obtain an education, and he had to navigate feedback and expectations placed upon him from family members. Jackson was able to achieve that goal, but it was made clear that the same opportunity would likely not have been available to a woman. The gender roles also transferred to the structure of the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School curriculum. Jackson noted that the school would offer tailoring classes for the young girls and brick making for the young boys. The fact that the gender roles may be interpreted as narrow and oppressive may serve as a talking point that could evoke strong reaction.

The book also highlighted a theme of struggle to connect and relate to the author's father, Taata. Jackson had a plan that differed from his father's plan for his life from a young age, and it was evident that Jackson struggled to reconcile that important relationship. Although Jackson described much tension within their relationship, Taata was ultimately supportive of the school and actually oversaw the construction while Jackson was back in the United States. One potential reservation with discussing this theme is having the appropriate support structure in place if a student chose to share similar details in the classroom setting. The author's tone surrounding this relationship was somewhat bitter and could become too intense for a seminar setting; however, providing students the

opportunity to think through how familial expectations can influence life and career decisions could prove to be useful in a seminar classroom setting. An example of a discussion point that could be used is, “In what ways do one’s personal experiences shape vocational passion?” Discussion centered on this topic could prove to be quite substantive and useful in a vocational seminar or leadership course.

Jackson notes throughout the book that his experiences and desire to fulfill a higher calling served as his motivation toward action. The author was oriented toward a Christian perspective and worldview, but a common ground of service could be discussed regardless of one’s faith background. The book would serve as a strong reader for a service-based class or organization. Jackson’s story demonstrates his commitment toward bettering humanity in concrete ways; his story inspires readers to take action within their own sphere of influence. The book would provide many salient discussion points surrounding service and commitment to religious beliefs that may be useful for an institution with a religious affiliation or particularly strong commitment to service.

A School for My Village leaves some reservations with the applicability of the text as a first-year or common reader, but it does offer many rich discussion opportunities surrounding service and connecting to the needs of one’s community. Many students would likely find the story to be an inspirational piece—reading about how one man identified his life’s passion, took action while enlisting the support of his network, and made a lasting, positive influence on his community.