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IMAGINEUGANDA

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**I refused to pay
money to buy
freedom**

Geoffrey Otto



CARITAS

Schweiz
Suisse
Svizzera
Svizra

**Advance
AFRIKA**

Note from the Country Director



A lot of young people are behind bars for crimes they may not have committed, but have been wrongfully accused, convicted and sentenced for them.

Dear Reader

Forgiveness is hard to ask for, especially when you make a mistake you could have avoided and yet it is important that we seek forgiveness and forgive those who have wronged us. A lot of young people are behind bars for crimes they may not have committed, but have been wrongfully accused, convicted and sentenced for them.

In this issue of *Imagine Uganda Magazine*, we feature the story of Otto Geoffrey whom we met at Erute Prison Farm in Lira district while serving the last months of his eight years sentence for aggravated defilement, having been transferred back from Luzira Prison where he served most of his sentence. Geoffrey did not only seek an audience with his accuser, but also forgave her and her family members who worked tooth and nail to ensure that he was incarcerated. Geoffrey is now a farmer and volunteer business mentor for ex-prison inmates in his community.

In the course of our work, we have faced challenges within the community to which ex-prison inmates return and have to live with the same people they committed crimes against or their victim's family members. In some cases, they are the first to be picked on when a crime is committed in an area and this has led to mob justice in some cases. This has challenged us to think beyond the entrepreneurship, life skills and start-up kits support, but also to introduce a component of restorative justice in our work. This largely looks at the community, the victims of crime, their family members and what roles they play in ensuring successful reintegration into their community and an improved relationship between victim and offender.

Our special appreciation goes to the European Union, Caritas Switzerland, AGEH, FK Norway, and Foundation for Open Society Initiative for believing in and supporting our rehabilitation, reformation and reintegration programmes in prison.

Advance Afrika, where dignity matters!

Sharon Atukunda – Ag. Country Director

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UPCOMING ACTIVITIES/EVENTS

- Launching performing arts center in Gulu
- Launching Day care center at Gulu Women Prison
- Graduation of prison inmates in West Nile
- Pre and post release visits in northern Uganda

This issue is for July 2017.

We love to hear from you, send us your favorite story/comment or opinion about life after prison to info@advanceafrika.org and we will feature them. Help us become better with each issue.



Cover Photo: Geoffrey Otto

Disclaimer:

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A photograph of a man standing in a lush, green forest. The man is wearing a light-colored t-shirt with a red vertical stripe and dark trousers. He is looking directly at the camera. The background is filled with dense foliage and trees.

I refused to pay money to buy freedom

Geoffrey Otto

My name is Otto Geoffrey. I'm 35 years old and live at Adek Okwok sub-county in Lira district. I was convicted on 9 July 2009 for aggravated defilement and sentenced to eight years in prison.

Before my arrest, I was proving successful in my business but this didn't go down well with some people in the community where I lived and worked. They got so jealous that some wrong characters even attempted to rob me on more than three occasions, but that didn't stop me from working hard. Since then, I have come to understand that there are people in society who never want to see others succeed.



How my imprisonment was stage-managed

I had also invested in a photography business and one of my employees would shoot and develop photos for me as I did photo distribution to clients. One day, a girl came to pick up her photos from my home. On her way back home, she met someone who also lives in the same community where I operate my studio. The person she met asked her where she was coming from and she told her that she was returning from picking up her photos from my place. The unknown person went and reported this to my customer's (the girl's) mother and she was led to lie that I had defiled her.

I was arrested and the girl falsely claimed that I had slept

Before court, I was accused of aggravated defilement since I was also HIV-positive. To seek justice, I spent 6 million shillings on applying twice for bail, paying a lawyer and the court security officer to be arraigned in court and warrant production.

with her; and all this was under the influence of her parents. She was taken for a medical test and was found to be normal and this proved that I hadn't slept with her. The police doctor and the CID officer asked for 500,000 shillings but I refused to give in to their demands. I knew I was innocent. They emphasised that I would regret not giving them the money. Thereafter, I was tested for HIV and I was found to be positive. The medical report that was given to the police had false results that showed that I had indeed slept with the girl.

When false accusations set in

Before court, I was accused of aggravated defilement since I was also HIV-positive. To seek justice, I spent 6 million shillings on applying




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I also made bricks that I sold for approximately 800,000 shillings and used the proceeds to buy a cow and goats

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twice for bail, paying a lawyer and the court security officer to be arraigned in court and warrant production. The first time I applied for bail after spending four months at the district court, I had three sureties but bail was denied on the grounds that they were not respectable, before I was committed to the High Court. It was a long, tedious court process but I ended up spending 18 months on remand before conviction even after spending a lot of time and money to secure court bail.

After conviction, I was sent to Luzira Prison then later transferred to Bulubula in Kayunga, Mbale, Soroti, Lira and I completed my sentence at Erute Farm Prison. Every prison transfer that happened drew me closer to home.

At Erute Prison, through someone, I asked the girl to visit me and when she came, I told her that though I was bitter, I had forgiven her. I asked her to ask God to forgive her because she had only invited problems to herself through wrongfully accusing me of a crime I had not committed. I forgave her family, too, because the Bible tells us to forgive. Much later, I learnt that the girl's mother had told her son that if I had not been convicted, she would have committed suicide. The brother did everything in his powers to see to it that I was convicted. When the girl's mother heard that I had been transferred to Lira, she left the village.

In prison, I did several Bible courses with different organisations. I read and preached the word of God to my fellow inmates and the church also stood with me. When I was freed on 19 November 2015, the church supported me because I had participated in charity work before my imprisonment. My shop and stock were nowhere to be seen and my wife with whom I had two children had re-married and my children were living with their maternal grandmother.

Building life afresh

In prison, I was trained to do business by Advance Afrika. When I was released, the organisation visited me several times before supporting me with 80 kilograms of rice seedlings, a spray tank and a watering can. When I planted the seedlings, I harvested over 80 sacks of rice and used part of the proceeds to buy a bicycle to ease my movements. I also bought two big storage containers to harvest and store water. I also made bricks that I sold for approximately 800,000 shillings and used the proceeds to buy a cow and goats. Currently, I'm concentrating on rearing animals and making bricks and I intend to open up a salon and phone charging centre as soon as I get all the required equipment.

Future plans

I would wish to expand my business but because Advance Afrika has limited capacity to support me, I would be grateful if the organisation works in partnership with other organisations to link me and other people that it supports to other entities to secure business improvement loans that we can work hard and pay back.

I am also part of a group of volunteering business mentors and we support ex-prison inmates in their communities to grow their businesses. This group was brought together by Advance Afrika after I and my colleagues were trained in how to go about our work. In the field, I encourage other ex-prison inmates to raise their own capital by using the available resources like land.

I also bought a plot of land in a nearby village and my plan is to build a house and move into it before 2017 ends. At the moment, I live at my maternal home. My motivation is to leave something behind for my children to inherit.



I am also part of a group of volunteering business mentors and we support ex-prison inmates in their communities to grow their businesses.



Advance Afrika helped me pick myself up

My name is Ogeny Shaban. I was in prison for two years on charges of motorcycle theft. Before I went to prison, I used to repair motorcycles in Lira town. One day, a customer brought his bike for repair but he did not pay. After weeks of waiting for him to pick it up, I asked my staff to deliver it to him. Unfortunately, it appeared that they did not. The police got it and later traced the owner, who then said it had been stolen. That is how I ended up in jail.

I served a two-year sentence at Alebtong, Lira Main and Maruzi Prisons where I was trained about business by Advance Afrika. From the training, I learnt how to treat my clients and colleagues. These new insights into business improved my work tremendously.

I have a wife and we have lived together for four years and nine months now. Unlike some women, she showed me support while I was in prison. She did not run away like some women do when their husbands are incarcerated. She visited me on almost all visitation days even when I was transferred to Maruzi Prison in Apac district.

When I was released, I came back to my work station. It was difficult to cope with the situation because I had lost a lot.

When I was released, I came back to my work station. It was difficult to cope with the situation because I had lost a lot. I had no tools to work with, my regular customers had shifted and there was no money to buy other tools. It did not take long for Advance Afrika to support me with a new toolbox.

At my current work station, I work with other youth. We support each other in times of difficulty and we live as one family. Business is, however, slow. I only repair three to four motorcycles a day and this can get me only enough money to take care of myself and my wife. I plan to relocate to Kotido where I have discovered there are more customers and few people who repair motorcycles.



Prison Inmates Empowered with Business and Life Skills in the Lango and Acholi Sub-Region.

Over 590 prison inmates from 28 prison units in the Lango and Acholi sub-regions have successfully completed one month's training in entrepreneurship and life skills from June to July 2017. The training which took place under the Economic Empowerment and Social Reintegration of Ex-Prison Inmates in Northern Uganda Project also aims at establishing learning and mentorship mechanisms to accompany ex-prison inmates

in the development and implementation of small businesses, providing business start-up kits, improving reintegration into communities and strengthening the capacities of key stakeholders. It is implemented by Advance Afrika in partnership with the Uganda Prisons Service, with support from the European Union and Caritas Switzerland.







Advance Afrika spreads to West Nile

In another development, Advance Afrika has partnered with the Uganda Prisons Service to empower female prison inmates in West Nile in the districts of Arua and Koboko. Under the Socio-economic Empowerment of Female Inmates (SEFI) programme in the two districts, the one-year pilot project funded by Caritas Switzerland and TechnoServe focuses on contributing to economic development and the prevention of recommitting crimes through creating economic opportunities for sustainable livelihoods for vulnerable female prison inmates. A total of 150 prison inmates from Arua Women' Prison, Arua Main Prison and Koboko Prison are currently undergoing training to enable them to gain entrepreneurship and life skills.

It is believed that female inmates face a lot of discrimination both inside and outside prison. It is on the basis of this that they are not only rejected in their communities when they are set free but they also hardly receive visitors while in prison. It is important to note that many of the female inmates are not even allowed to return to their communities after they have served their jail sentences. They are considered outcasts. In order to create awareness about the plight of female inmates, Advance Afrika will also partner with Radio Pacis to carry out a radio campaign to engage the community on the importance of rehabilitating, supporting and empowering prison inmates.

In the course of the project, the trainees will start in-prison projects to give them hands-on experience and help them gain technical skills that they can put to good use once they are released from prison. They will also write business plans and successful participants will receive funding for their business plans from the organisation to help them start businesses upon return to their communities so that they are active.

Daniel J. Ntende
Prisons Liaison Officer



Organisation transparency yields results

– Margaret Orik

The work Advance Afrika is doing with prison inmates and ex-inmates is very crucial as part of our mandate. Owing to limited resources and manpower, we have not been able to do that kind of work. We wholeheartedly appreciate this effort and support towards rehabilitating inmates.

I have had the pleasure of seeing this programme grow from the time it started in 2014 to-date. I was a bit sceptical at first owing to the nature of the organisations that used to work in prisons but Advance Afrika has dispelled all my doubts. Their open-minded approach, transparency and constant engagement with us in the region and the leadership of the Uganda Prisons Service at the headquarters in Kampala have set a very good example for other organisations to emulate. For that, I appreciate the Commissioner General of Prisons for welcoming and embracing the efforts of Advance Afrika in rehabilitating and reintegrating prison inmates and ex-inmates.

From the time I was the Officer-in-Charge (OC) of Gulu Main Prison when this programme started, Advance Afrika has expanded its activities from just one prison unit to all the prison units (28) in the entire Lango and Acholi sub-regions in northern Uganda. It has also spread to the West Nile region.

They have also been able to introduce day care services for the children of prison inmates by constructing a day care centre in Gulu and they are supporting the arts in prison. This clean track record gives us the assurance that the future is bright because there are people who care to do the right thing.

Most prison inmates are here owing to petty offences while others are innocent. Even those who committed grave offences deserve a second chance because when they are shown care, supported and pointed in the right direction, they can change and we have seen this happen.

We appreciate Advance Afrika and their donors for looking into the welfare of prison inmates. We also pledge total commitment to ensure that this initiative is supported by all means.

SSP Margaret Orik
Gulu District Prisons Commander



Our Two Treasured Guests



Meet Yewo Msiska and Grace Mark Mdokhwe, our Project Officers from our partner organisation, the Centre for Legal Assistance (CELA) in Malawi. They are with us for 12 months under the FK Exchange programme funded by FK Norway. The main activity of FK Norway is to support the exchange of employees and members between businesses and organisations in Norway, Africa and Asia where the participants share knowledge and build stronger bonds for cooperation.

CELA is a non-governmental organisation which contributes to the

justice delivery systems and protection of human rights as well as upholding the rule of law in Malawi for the benefit of vulnerable groups. It does this through offering alternative dispute resolution and legal services as well as enhancing accessibility through networking, publications, training, research and advocacy. CELA works mainly in prisons and police establishments, serving prisoners/suspects who have overstayed on remand, prisoners who want to appeal against their convictions and sentencing, the sick and the aged, female prisoners with children, and young offenders, by offering legal

representation, paralegal services, legal clinics, lay visits, camp courts, training, monitoring the human rights situation in prisons and police establishments, advocacy and facilitating stakeholders' meetings with criminal justice agencies on prisoners'/suspects' rights.

Both Yewo and Grace are actively involved in the implementation of various activities in Kampala as well as the Lango and Acholi sub-regions in various capacities.



Grace Mark Mdokhwe

Grace Mark Mdokhwe is a legal expert who worked with the Office of the Ombudsman in the city of Lilongwe, Malawi as a Legal Officer before she travelled to Uganda under the FK exchange programme. Grace developed a passion for protecting human rights through her involvement in improving the lives of vulnerable groups such as women, children, the sick and the youth, as well as vulnerable men in prisons and police custody. As an employee of the Office of the Ombudsman and a member of CELA, Grace has represented CELA and the Office of the Ombudsman at various high-level forums.

Grace has also worked for and consulted with organisations and institutions such as the Ministry of Justice (Judiciary), the Community Services Directorate, the Malawi Prison Service, the Malawi Police Services, Zapinga and Company, Malawi Human Rights Resource Centre and the Paralegal Advisory Institution Malawi (PASI).



Yewo Msiska

Yewo Msiska is an educationist by profession. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Education (Science) from Chancellor College, a constituent college of the University of Malawi. He worked as a teacher and head of the Science Department at Skyway Private Secondary School before joining the Malawi government in the same capacity. Later, he joined CELA as a Programme Officer responsible for managing prison educational and training programmes for the criminal justice agencies in Malawi. Yewo has over time acquired vast experience in dealing with prison inmates, which has improved his understanding of the Malawi criminal justice system. He is passionate about vulnerable groups that are in police and prison custody.

staff Stories

I was enriched and humbled by the Advance Afrika experience. As a trained management consultant and devoted world traveller, I have always been passionate about the business aspect of international development. Needless to say, I readily embraced Caritas Switzerland's organisational culture that is amenable to corporate best practices and the adoption of business principles in their programme work. Living and working in Uganda had never been in my plans but a week-long monitoring visit at Advance Afrika's project premises in 2015 altered the course of my life. I was humbled by the extreme hospitality of the then newly established organisation and its astonishing passion for development work.

It was Fyodor Dostoyevsky who said: 'The degree of civilisation in a society is revealed by entering its prisons.' Support to prison reform is still a largely neglected area of the development sector worldwide because of its closeness to national security and hence its delicate nature but also since prison work is really not easy. Caritas Switzerland's Country Director of Uganda and Advance Afrika's determination to not turn a blind eye to this often forgotten but crucial aspect of society convinced me finally to relocate to Uganda. Looking back on my past 18 months in Uganda, I realise that it was an amazing journey where I was able to bring in a lot of my knowledge and experiences from my previous work in the corporate world as well as my business school knowledge; but even more, I was the one who learnt and got inspired by Ugandan life and by the hardworking, passionate and very creative Advance Afrika staff who became my adopted Ugandan family.

My personal highlight was the organisational capacity assessment where Advance Afrika proved to be on a par with the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development corporate entities! Advance Afrika has truly impressed me with an extremely high level of professionalism and transparency which makes working with them a very smooth and fun experience and, most of all, it is a good example to defy deeply-entrenched stereotypes about Africa.



Stefan Roesch

A former employee of Caritas Switzerland in Uganda, Stefan currently works in Asia



Sharon Aloba

Project Assistant

It all felt like a dream at the beginning. How was I going to get inside prison to have a word with prison inmates? Or even worse, how was I going to interact with ex-prison inmates? What would the community think of me? However, most times we tend to judge what we don't see or have little information about and it keeps us away from knowing the truth. My work with Advance Afrika has improved my understanding of what life in and after prison means. On several occasions I have interacted with those behind bars and most of them are very positive about the life they hope to live after prison.

Advance Afrika restores hope of a better life after release from prison among the prison inmates who have lost hope. Now most of them are positive about going back into their communities regardless of the way they will be received. They are willing to be fully reintegrated and to act as change agents among youths owing to the entrepreneurship and life skill trainings they acquired while in prison.

It is very difficult to contain my emotions and joy when I visit an ex-prison inmate to give them start-up support or even just to check on them. The smile on their faces says a lot. Most youths end up in prison owing to the increased unemployment level in the country. As a result, when they get something that can occupy their time, they have less time to engage in criminal activities, hence making society free and safe for all.

Rehabilitation and reformation are not a pipe dream

My journey with Advance Afrika started 15 months ago. It has been a tremendous and learning experience owing to the dynamic nature of work in prisons and the community. My previous experience of working with young entrepreneurs in rural northern Uganda came in handy and enabled me to understand the plight and despair among youth prison inmates. Working with Advance Afrika enabled me to understand that these inmates are respectable persons in their communities but this can only be possible if they are economically empowered.

Prison social workers play a vital role in re-shaping the mindsets of prison inmates through prison projects like trainings in entrepreneurship and life skills. This, however, takes place on the onset of the inmate's realisation of the need to regain their self-esteem and respect from the community. The trainings we conduct have proven to be mind-changing as they are eye-openers to youth ex-prison inmates, some of whom had earlier dropped out of school owing to factors like peer pressure and financial challenges.

After training, ex-inmates realise the value of education and get the determination to support their education needs by starting up small businesses to enrol back in school. In Kitgum district, one of the youth had dropped out of school owing to financial constraints at home. This attracted wrong friends to him and saw him sell stolen items, behavior that got into prison. While in prison he developed plans to maximise his piggery project that he set up with support from Advance Afrika. His aim now is to save money and complete his studies, but also to take care of his family.

Another youth ex-prison inmate started planting vegetables upon returning home and hopes to use his savings to enrol back in secondary school as he manages his gardens. This attests to the great impact of organisational projects in shaping the mindsets of the country's future leaders.

Life after prison is still a challenge to many ex-prison inmates owing to their fear of how the community will receive them. After being actively involved in reintegrating ex-prison inmates, I came to realise that family members play a key role in shaping the lives of their young people. Most disintegrated families give children too much freedom and this leads to reckless living by exposing them to conflicts with the law, peer

influence and laziness. They are also led to admire material things that they cannot afford and end up acquiring them illegally. Showing love to an incarcerated person by visiting them, reconciling with the victim or complainant, forgiveness and restoring hope in them is the greatest contribution any family member can offer. This leads to complete rehabilitation and reformation of an inmate.

I always strive to involve local leaders, family members, relatives and the community while following up on ex-inmates with the hope that our interventions will enable them to appreciate the efforts of the Uganda Prisons Service and Advance Afrika towards the rehabilitation and reintegration of their own people. I also encourage them to stop the stigmatisation of ex-prison inmates but instead embrace alternative conflict resolution avenues in solving disputes. This allows those who have done wrong to accept the responsibility for their actions and also remain productive and responsible persons in their communities.



Immaculate
Achan

Community Liaison Officer



Egwar Daphne Christine

Prisons Liaison Officer

Learning to overcome my fear

I joined Advance Afrika in August 2014 as a volunteer. At that time, the organisation only had three members of staff and I became the fourth. As a volunteer, I never took home any pay. I only got transport facilitation that sometimes would come from the Country Director's own pocket. This was weird, but because I needed transport, I would take it.

Much as I was fresh from university, with no work experience, the organisation trusted me with project work. After three months, I was tasked to organise a breakfast meeting for Members of Parliament with the United Nations Association of Uganda. It was my first activity and a very challenging one at that because I was new in the NGO world. Because of consistent support from my colleagues, the meeting was successful and our partner was happy.

After six months of volunteering, I was offered a one-year contract as a Project Assistant. This meant a lot to me because I felt I was contributing to the achievement of the vision and mission of the organisation. This new role demanded a lot from me, drawing on skills most of which I had learnt on the job.

One task I recall was when we organised an entrepreneurship training of prison inmates at Lira Main Prison in 2015. I and the Country Director were scheduled to attend the opening of the training. Unfortunately, he was not in Lira. We talked on the phone and he told me he would travel in the night and be in Lira on the day of the training. Early the next morning, I was at the prison ready to welcome him to start the training. About ten minutes to the start of the training, he called and apologised about having been unable to travel the previous night. He told me he trusted me to ably represent the organisation.

At that moment, I started trembling because I had never before interacted closely with prison inmates. I sat at the back of the training room and, all of a sudden, I developed a terrible headache. After organising the trainees, the social worker in charge of the training announced that they had a special guest from Advance Afrika who was to address them. For a minute, I could not move my legs. However, I had to gather the confidence to represent the organisation. I gained courage and addressed the trainees regarding who we are and about the project in general. I could read from their facial expressions that they didn't understand a thing I was saying. This freaked me out and I cut my speech short.

When I sat down, the Officer-in-Charge showed me a video recording she had shot. I shared it with my boss and, surprisingly, his comments were very positive. That was my breakthrough with prison work.

Today, I work as the Prisons Liaison Officer. My role demands that I act as a link between prisons and the organisation, which also requires close interactions with prisons and prison inmates that I can now do without fear. Unlike in the past, I have made more friends in prison than outside prison.

The work we do as an organisation has made me realise that prison is not 'jail'. I have seen so many good things, such as freedom of worship and normal kitchen activities, take place in prison. While some inmates tell stories of their normal homelife, others engage in daily work to make money through activities like basket-weaving, farming and singing for entertainment. This makes prison a home away from home.

I have also seen Advance Afrika grow from four to 27 staff and I am happy to be a part of this growth. Every day I wake up knowing that I am part of a dedicated team who put in an extra effort in contributing to the social and economic life of prison inmates. What motivates me to come to work every day is seeing an ex-prison inmate putting into use the knowledge and skills we give them during trainings. This is the reason we move to all the 28 prison units in northern Uganda to ensure the knowledge and skills are given to the inmates. I would love to see a safe and free society where young people live in dignity and realise their full potential.

VISION:

A safe and free society where young people live with dignity and realise their full potential

MISSION:

To empower vulnerable youth so as to promote economic development and the prevention of crime and antisocial behaviour, by:

- 1. Facilitating communities to Recognise and Redress the root causes of criminality amongst their young people.**
- 2. Enabling the Rehabilitation, Reformation and Reintegration of those who have offended**

VALUES:

Dignity, Respect and Integrity



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