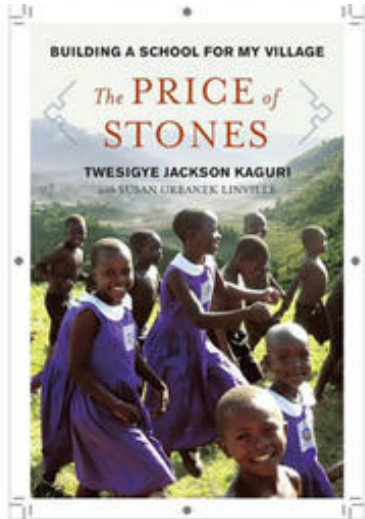


The Price of Stones

A Ugandan vows to open a school for the AIDs orphans of his village.



The Price of Stones: Building a School for My Village By Twesigye Jackson Kaguri with Susan Urbanek Linville Viking 271 pp., \$25.95

By Terry Hong

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If you're reading this review, \$4 lattes or \$15 lunches are probably not shock-inducing numbers. Now think about this: "Two dollars feeds a child for a week.... Fifteen pays for books for a trimester. We can do so much with so little." With pure gratitude as he begins a meal with students from his Nyaka AIDS Orphans School to celebrate Uganda's Independence Day, Twesigye Jackson Kaguri states a simple fact. "One of these giggling children might even become the future president of Uganda," he marvels.

Kaguri dreams big. And not without merit. Presented simply and humbly, Kaguri's story – and that of the giggling children – debuts this month in his unforgettable memoir, **The Price of Stones: Building a School for My Village**.

Born and raised in rural Nyakagezi in southwest Uganda, Kaguri learned the value of education early from his older brother Frank, whose kindness and generosity he idolized. In spite of their father's disdain, Kaguri excelled at school, eventually joining Columbia University's Human Rights Advocacy visiting scholars program.

Even as he discovers that "many in New York considered Africa a country, not a continent ... [that] all Africans were the same" he also marvels at "the freedom of expression [he] found in America." He pointedly notes his "amaze[ment] that primary through high school education was free."

By the time Kaguri journeys home after his American adventure, his beloved brother was dying of AIDS. His oldest sister, then her baby son, rapidly followed. Kaguri returned to the US – and the love of his life; he married Beronda, whom he had met while living in New York, and the couple eventually settled in Michigan.

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By 1991, 15 percent of Ugandans were thought to be infected with HIV/AIDS and almost 100,000 Ugandans were dying from the disease every year. All around, families were disintegrating: in a population of 31 million, over 2.2 million children have lost one or both parents to AIDS.

This lost generation of orphans becomes the focus of Kaguri's life work. On his first trip home as a married man in April 2001, Kaguri cannot turn orphans away. "Because of the stigma of AIDS, many children are abandoned.... [F]amilies take the parents' property and use the orphans as household servants or hire them out as prostitutes." Kaguri realizes only education can help these children escape destitution and servitude. Beronda recognizes the immediacy of the situation: " 'These children don't have time,' she said. 'They need a school *now*.'"

The heartwarming journey from dream to reality is filled with tremendous challenges, utter faith, and Social Security check donations: "This is the true price of stones." On Jan. 2, 2003, Nyaka AIDS Orphans School officially opened with 60 students – all orphans – receiving free education, including free books, uniforms, health care, and food. A birthday cake – not a tradition in Uganda – was presented to the students "to symbolize their passage from orphans to students." Each wore purple-and-white uniforms, "because [purple] symbolizes happiness." The school motto proclaims, "'For Our Children's Sake.'"

Nyaka has not stopped growing since. From clean water tanks first for the school, then an installation for the village, to the school's Anti-AIDS Choir which travels to spread awareness about HIV/AIDS, Kaguri raises funds throughout the US and lands back home to nurture the staff and students and empower their growth and success.

The children's stories are nothing short of miraculous. Even the most heart-wrenching story of bright, inquisitive Scovia who succumbs to AIDS, asking to be buried in her uniform, "so she will not worry about dressing up when Jesus calls," is testimony to Nyaka's committed dedication to each of its students.

As Nyaka is a primary school, Kaguri identifies the most promising students, and pledges to provide for their educational future. "You mean there is *electricity* at the school?" Fiona asks in delighted wonder when she is told she will be able to read at night. Izidol declares he will be a medical doctor one day and build hospitals: "No one will have to die then," he intones.

So remember what half that latte can buy for a Nyaka student? Read "The Price of Stones" and you will be inspired to action – whether you pledge your time, pull out your wallet, or at the very least buy the book for your local library. The choice is yours. "I have done what I can, Frank," Kaguri tells his late brother. "And there is more that I will do," he promises.

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