



Celebrating a Matriarch

DR. EDITH WANJIKU GITAO

14th March 1937 -16th May 2017



Eulogy

DOCTOR EDITH WANJIKU GITAO was born on March 14th 1937 at the King George Hospital now known as Kenyatta National Hospital. She was the first born child of the late Sospeter Gitao Kamau and Winifred Wangari Gitau of Muthua, Uthiru village, Upper Kabete.

EARLY CHILDHOOD

Edith's father was multi-talented, working as a farmer, motor-mechanic, mason, carpenter, Sunday school teacher, ACK church Elder and Committee Member while her Mother worked steadfastly beside him as a housewife and a farmer. After Edith came nine younger siblings: Mary Nyakiaro Kamuyu, Naomi Wairimu Njuki, Mishek Kuria Gitau, the late Mary Nyamathue, Loise Gathoni, Lucy Wanjiku, Rachel Wahu, Gladys Nyokabi, Jane Mwihaki, and James Munuthi. Edith, like every other African girl of her time, carried out daily chores in the home such as cooking, cleaning and caring for her younger siblings.

Her childhood was during the Mau Mau uprising and she was often called on to take food to the men who were hiding in the bushes who included her grandfather, Mishek Kuria. Later, Edith who was a natural storyteller, would regale her children with stories of those terrifying walks through grass taller than her, wondering what wild animals might be lurking in the bushes ready to pounce on her.

EDUCATION

Edith's father, a forward thinker, believed in education for girls. In January 1944, he enrolled his daughter at Uthiru Primary School where Edith sat the Kenya African Preliminary Examination (KAPE) in 1947 and excelled, coming second in the whole school.

Edith's anecdote about going on to Mary Leakey Intermediate school showed her determination in the face of what she deemed to be unfair discrimination. The elders had cancelled her name from the list of those admitted on the basis that she was too small. Edith on hearing this sought her father's help and he responded by travelling with her on his lorry all the way to Kijabe to seek an alternative intermediate school. Edith wept. She did not want another school, she wanted her rightful place in the school to which she had originally gained admission. The next morning her father took her back to see the late Emma Njonjo, then the African headmistress of Mary Leakey Intermediate School.

Emma Njonjo listened to Edith's case, agreed with her that she had won her rightful place at the school, and gave her 20 minutes to run back home, pack her bags and join the school. That's how Edith joined Mary Leakey Intermediate institute and became the youngest of the 50-member student body at the time. Her fellow students doted on her, showered her with favours and even occasionally carried her around on their backs. Edith loved to recount how it was here that she learned Agriculture, Baking and Sewing, life skills which became assets later in her life as many who enjoyed her famous banana bread classic will testify. Edith held this school close to her heart and served as a member of the Board of Governors from 1974 to 2011.

Eulogy

Edith's education went hand-in-hand with her spiritual growth. She learned about Christ early from her father who gathered his children to read the Bible together and say nightly prayers. She was baptized and confirmed at the ACK Mother Church, Kabete, now known as St Paul Church. Her Sunday school class would be held under the same Sycamore tree where her Standard 1 and Standard 2 classes were conducted. She often shared memories of her tall uncle James Munuthi holding her hand to take her to Sunday school and of walking with her father as he reverently carried his Bible which was never to be dropped.


Edith came to know her Saviour Jesus personally during the East African revival which swept across East Africa in the 1930s and 1940s. At a meeting held at the PCEA Kikuyu church, when the preachers from Burundi, Rwanda and Tanzania made the altar call, she walked to the front as a young girl and gave her life to Jesus Christ. Thereafter and steadfastly through the years, Edith sang that she had decided to follow Jesus and there was no turning back. She kept her word to the very last.

The women of the 'Tukutendereza' movement were very concerned about the spiritual growth of the new believers and met weekly with them for fellowship, encouraging Edith in turn to mature other young believers. Edith was trained in Sunday School ministry which is how she began her lifetime of teaching Sunday School, by serving children in the Kabete community.

In January 1953 Edith and her best friend Esther Nguhi were chosen to travel to Uganda to study at Buloba Teachers College. This is where Edith qualified as a T3 Teacher. On completion of her Primary Teachers' Training course in 1954, she returned to Kenya where the Bishop-in-charge offered her a Teaching Job at her former Kabete Girls Intermediate school. She taught various subjects there from April 1955 through to December, 1957.

Edith still dreamt, however, of pursuing further education and was fortunate to be invited back to Uganda for further studies, at King's College, Budo, where she joined Form 3 in 1958 and completed Form 4 in 1959. She was awarded an O Level Cambridge School Certificate following which she returned to Kenya to take up teaching positions in 1960 at Lioki Intermediate Girls School and at Bahati DEB Primary School in Nairobi.

In 1960, Edith was invited for an interview by Dr. Munyua Waiyaki, the late Tom Mboya and Mrs. Ruth Njiiri. This is when she made the promises that if she was given the opportunity to further her education abroad, she would return to Kenya to fight ignorance and poverty among her people. Following the interviews, Edith was selected in September 1960, along with 400 other Kenyan scholars, for the Kennedy Foundation African Airlift Program. The Program airlifted students for further studies to the United States of America. She studied at Southwestern College, Winfield, Kansas, U.S.A. qualifying for a B.A Degree in Double Major, Sociology and Psychology in 1964. She then went on to enroll at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) for partial Masters Degree in Social Welfare.



Eulogy

MARRIAGE & FAMILY

Edith Wanjiku was married to the late Dr. James Karani Gitao at St John's Episcopal Church in Stockton, California, on August 22nd 1964.

She went on to be a devoted mother of five children, raising Catherine Sheila Nyambura, Philip Anthony Gitao, Winifred Wangari Mwige, the late Ruth Mary Njeri, and Sospeter Nathan Gitao.

She was the wonderful singing, playing, dancing and loving Cucu of seven grand-children - Ruby Pearl Wanjiku Leftwich, Vanessa Wangari Leftwich, Thandie-Malaika Wanjiku Gitao, Gakenia Mwige, Tugi Mwige, David Mutana Mwige, and Luke Karani Gitao.

She was also the loyal and loving mother-in-law to Gregory Leftwich, Regina Wambui Gitao, Kenneth Nyaga Mwige, and Dr. Wanjiru Gitao.

James and Edith were married for 47 years until James went to be with the Lord on 25th October 2011.

WORK EXPERIENCE

Edith and James returned to Kenya in April 1966 where Edith was immediately employed at the Ford Foundation, Regional Office for Eastern and Southern Africa, Nairobi, where she had the opportunity to apply her knowledge to build her country. She rose steadily through the ranks from her entry position as a General Services Officer to eventually becoming Regional Administrator and Assistant to the Representative, the position from which she retired in July 1985. Before she retired, Edith undertook the pivotal task of ushering the Ford Foundation Nairobi Office into the world of modern technology in 1983, successfully implementing her training and knowledge in Information Technology.


After retirement, Edith ventured into private business with her late husband and became a Director of several enterprises, including Bradens Ltd, Akiba Properties (K) Limited, Central Impex Enterprises Limited, Akiba Properties Estate Agency Ltd, Emmanuel (K) Travel Agency - Holy Land Pilgrimage Tours.

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LIFE MISSION AND PURPOSE - AKIBA SCHOOLS

In January 1993, Dr Edith Gitao's life mission came to the fore when she took a bold step to fulfill a promise she made to God and her country in 1960 – the promise to fight ignorance and poverty. In January 1993, she established Akiba School in Kangemi, Nairobi.

'Elimu ni Akiba, Education is a Treasure', was Edith's mantra. This mantra gave the school both its name and its slogan. Akiba School was the first private low-cost school to be established in Kangemi slums and was founded on the Christian principles of Faith, Hope and Charity to the poor. The school continues to provide education from baby class through to high school, transforming the lives of about 400 children from Kangemi slum and surrounding low income areas each school Term. As the children are from very poor families, Akiba School also has a feeding program for the children.



Eulogy

To her last day, her heart and mind were focused on serving and blessing the school and the students of Akiba.

In addition to her work at Akiba, Edith's strong passion for Education led her to extend the use of her talents in the committed service of other schools, as a Member of the Board of Governors, Mary Leakey Girls School, Kabete (1974 - 2011), and Chairlady, Uthiru Secondary School Board of Governors (1985 - 2009) where she was honoured with the naming of a dormitory after her.

Dr Gitao was also a member of the Kiambu District Education Board, Vice Chairlady of the Kenya Private Schools Association (KPSA) Nairobi Branch, and Past Committee Member, PTA, Loreto Convent School, Valley Road, Nairobi where both her daughters attended school. She also served for 6 years as a Member of (NIST) Nairobi International School of Theology and as Vice Chair to the Board of Trustees of International Leadership University (ILU).


On June 17th 2012, Dr. Mrs. Edith Gitao was conferred a United Graduate College and Seminary International Honorary Doctorate Degree in Humanities.

THE ANGLICAN CHURCH OF KENYA

Having committed her life to Christ in 1949, Edith and her husband joined the All Saints Cathedral and worshipped there from 1966 to 1968, before moving to St Mark's Church in Westlands in 1969. Here, she took up service as the Sunday School Superintendent, no doubt influenced by her induction into Sunday School ministry years earlier after she became a Christian. Over the years she continued in service of the body of Christ, taking up several roles along the way.

She was commissioned as a Lay Reader by Archbishop Manasses Kuria in 1988 and went on to become the longest serving Lay Reader at ACK Nairobi Diocese at St Mark's Church, Westlands. She was also a Member of Parochial Church Council (PCC) at St. Mark's Parish, Westlands, on which PCC she has served for several decades until her death.

In addition, she used her gifts to serve the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) in the following ways: the Diocesan Synod of Nairobi from 1971; the Standing Committee of Synod Diocese of Nairobi; the Board of Finance Diocese of Nairobi; the Chapter House - All Saints Cathedral, Nairobi, Provincial Committee as a Secretary; Member of 1993 Commission for the sub-division of Diocese of Nairobi and creation of Diocese of Kajiado; Member of the Year 2001 Commission for the subdivision of Nairobi Diocese; Member - Management Board, St Nicholas Children's Home, Karen, Nairobi; Director - Maridadi Fabrics (Incorporated) Project in Pumwani, Nairobi



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Edith joined the Nairobi Diocesan Literature Board in the 70s. Her interest in Christian devotional writing continues to date, as expressed in her writing for the Scripture Union of Kenya (Uteithio wa O Muthenya) the Kikuyu Daily Guide until 2014.

MOTHERS UNION

As a committed member of the Anglican Church of Kenya's Mothers' Union Organisation, Edith served as Chairlady - Mothers' Union St Mark's Parish, Nairobi from 1982 to 2009. She served the Mothers Union in several other capacities including Provincial and Nairobi Diocesan Treasurer, Chairlady of the Pastoral and Social Work Committee and member ACK Mothers' Union Provincial Committee.

NAIROBI PRAYER BREAKFAST

Edith fellowships as a Member of Prayer Breakfast Fellowship Group which meets every Wednesday early in the morning.


GIRL-GUIDE MOVEMENT

In 1950 Edith Gitao was introduced to the Girl Guide Movement by the late Mrs Emma Njonjo who was the Deputy Head-Teacher and Head of Girl-Guiding at the CMS Intermediate Kabete Girls School, as well as her mentor and friend. While there, Edith became a Patrol Leader and keenly got involved in a lot of extra-curricular activities such as camping in the forest at Karen area or Governor's Garden, now State House Gardens, needle-work, tailoring as well as cookery.

She was among the 6 Kabete Girls School Patrol Leaders selected to welcome Her Majesty the Queen of England as Guards of Honour on Mama Ngina Street when Nairobi became a City. She was also one of the 12 girls chosen to form the Guard of Honour to receive Princess Elizabeth when she landed in Entebbe, Uganda. The Princess showed her appreciation by gifting each girl with a dozen tea cups, saucers and tea kettle to take home!

As member of the Girl Guides Movement in Kenya and Uganda, Edith went on to become a Girl Guide Captain of Companies at Kabete Intermediate Girls School and Kings' College, Budo, Uganda. She also joined the Red Cross in Uganda, and the Scouts Camp Fire Girls Movement in the United States.

Until her passing, Edith was a member of National Council of Kenya Girl Guides Association and Honorary Treasurer Trifoil Guild, Kenya Girl Guides Association. She is also a past Honorary Treasurer - Girls and Boys Brigades - Interdenominational movement in Nairobi.



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SERVICE TO ILU'S BOARD OF TRUSTEES

Dr Edith Wanjiku Gitau has been a member of the ILU's Board of Trustees since it was set up in 15th August 2011. She has served ably as the Vice-Chairperson ever since. She has been greatly committed to ILU and has demonstrated the highest degree of commitment and integrity by attending the meetings in time and sometimes chairing the meetings of BOT whenever the chair was away.

At the point of her death, Edith had served the University's Governing Council for six years from 22nd August 2002 to 26th April 2008. In essence she has served the institution under two principals and three Vice-chancellors. She therefore, gave ILU no less than 15 years demonstrating a rare show of commitment. She effectively represented the BOT Chairman during the award of Letter of Interim Authority by the then Minister of Education, Hon. Prof. Jacob Kaimenyi at the Commission for University Education (CUE) flanked by the then Chairman of ILU's Governing Council, Mr Benedict Omollo.

Hers was not a commitment borne out preference but a commitment born out of conviction and resolve. We admire and thank God for the grace of commitment given to our departed sister which was also manifested in her sense of timeliness for meetings.

Her service at ILU may have inscribed her life and body with indelible marks of sacrificial service.

PROFESSIONAL SERVICE TO WOMEN

Edith has always been committed to improving the lives of other women. She has served as


Assistant Secretary and Member of Kenya Association of University Women concerned with

Higher Education for Women; and also as a Member of the National Council of Women of Kenya as well as of the American Women Association.

Edith was a Delegate representing the Church World Service at the United Nations World Conference on Women Decade held July 15 – 16, 1985. She served in this conference as Chairman of the African Night Committee, Karibu Centre, which hosted international delegates and guests at the All Saints Cathedral. She is also a Member Zonta Club of Nairobi, Milimani, an Inter-racial Ladies Social Club, a member of the Nairobi Networking Group of Professional Women and an Hon. Treasurer at United Way Kenya.

OTHER INTERESTS

Edith had a strong interest in farming. Apart from farming coffee with her husband, she also grew roses commercially as well as tuber roses and green beans for export at various times. She was more interested in farming for the common good however, and so the bananas, avocados and beans she harvested were for the benefit of the children in Akiba School rather than the market.



Eulogy

Edith also loved languages, and took a course in French in 2006. She travelled widely around the world including Uganda, The United States, The United Kingdom, The Netherlands, France, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Israel, Egypt, Hong Kong, Singapore, Indonesia, India, Tanzania, South Africa and Rwanda.

HER IMPACT ON OUR LIVES

Edith was a Matriarch in the Church of Christ in which she served diligently and faithfully, a Matriarch in the larger Gitau/Gitao family which she served with love and dedication, and a Matriarch in the society which she served with zeal and purpose. She was a loving, motivating and supportive sister, auntie, mother, mother-in-law, grandmother and 'Shosh' to many, many children at Akiba School, in all the institutions and places that she served in and in the Church. We celebrate her life as we remember her humorous conversations, her warm smiles, her American 'twanging' and her infectious laughter.

HER ILLNESS

Edith was healthy all her life. The diagnosis that she had Uterine Cancer came as a great shock to her early in March of 2016. She truly put up a good fight, stoic and smiling and gracious amidst her pain. She bore her suffering and the coming to terms with her condition with grace and was blessed to be in the care of a team of able doctors and committed nurses, one of whom included her own niece, Dr Gladwell Kiarie who was a Godsend in her bewildering hour of need.

Edith celebrated her improved health, after she was declared to be in remission mid-2016. She enjoyed the improvement but not for long. In the early months of 2017, Edith put on a brave face, contending privately with her pain. God had allowed her a period of relief and extended her lease of life which she relished packed full with service to God and others. In her last month and during Easter, she even took a flight to Mombasa to attend the 3-day Kenya Private Schools Association annual conference, never missing a single session regardless of how she felt. She then spent 2 days walking on the beach with her grandchildren, dancing, singing and telling them stories. She returned to Nairobi and packed in yet another busy week before she was finally hospitalized.

At about 10:00 am in the morning hours of Tuesday 16th May 2017, Edith Wanjiku Gitao was called home by her Lord and Saviour whom she loved and served all her life.

It is not possible to tell the full story of Edith's remarkable life, but we can summarize it in the words of the psalmist David. Even now, we know her testimony is: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever".