





Castaway 3:16

Nancy Hunt

I can officially describe Nancy Hunt as inspirational because she won the Venus 2015 UK Inspirational Woman Award. I am convinced she deserves that description. Her journey has taken her from a tough upbringing in rural Kenya to being Director of The Nasio Trust – a charity whose Early Childhood Development Centres provide a daily meal, pre-primary education and medical care to almost 400 children there.

But it was an incident fifteen years ago in Kenya which changed her life completely. Nancy was faced with a huge challenge to turn her life upside down and leave her successful career in the Thames Valley Police. She faced it with a certain amount of reluctance but once the decision was made, she set about growing the Nasio Trust with a fierce determination.

I usually begin interviews by asking our castaway when and where they were born. This is the first time the castaway could say where she was born but not exactly when she was born.

Nancy explained: "I was born in the village of Musanda near Mumias Town in Western Kenya. The town was named after my paternal grandfather, a tribal chief. The British maintained the tribal institutions for administrative purposes so my father George Mudeny was the administrative chief. As such he attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and proudly showed us the photographs.

"As chief he was desperate for sons but my mother, Irene, bore him nine daughters before she had four boys. I was their thirteenth child. As a girl I wasn't valued and that is probably why my father failed to register my birth. Some years later, my sister Betty decided that I needed a birth certificate and she registered me.

"She conjured up the date of 10th January 1970 although nobody knew for certain when I was born. I had been named Ishmael after my grandfather. Betty felt that I should have a girl's name and, on the certificate, I am Nancy Ishmael Ndula. A few years ago, I visited my grandfather's grave and discovered that he had died in November 1974. From family stories I had the idea that my mother was pregnant with me when he was dying and that was why she named me after him. So I have the choice of being either five years older or five years younger.





The influence of Irene, her mother

"My mother, Irene, was the daughter of a preacher and regarded as a suitable wife for a chief. She was married when she was only fifteen. As a child she had responsibility for siblings so never received an education and regretted it all her life. Although she was illiterate, she was determined that her girls would be educated.

"My mother was an industrious farmer in the village of Ibinda. Each week she took vegetables to sell in the market in the nearby town of Musanda. From the profits she paid for all her girls to go to school. Market days were exciting ones. She chose one of us to go with her."

Irene set up her stall and then left Nancy to do the selling while she set off to a club for a drink. My mother was hurt when my father married another five wives and neglected her. Drinking was her escape her means of deadening the pain," said Nancy.

"She returned at midday and bought me lunch and lunch contained a rare thing, meat. That alone made me want to go with her to market."

"On the rare occasion that father visited, my mother and he would go into the sitting room and bring out the wind-up gramophone (we had no electricity) and play music and drink tea. A wind-up gramophone is a possibility for the island.

A consequence of her mother's developing alcoholism was that she left the club late and Nancy described their late journey home.

"It was pitch black as we walked the six miles home from the market town. If she saw a rare vehicle in the distance she would hide us in the bushes. She insisted I carry three stones. One in each hand and one on my head in case they were needed to defend us from man or animal. When we arrived home, she would sing drunkenly and throw water on the cooking fire and if my siblings had not eaten they would go hungry. I felt ashamed and sad because I had eaten and they would sleep hungry.

"When it was my turn to be left at home, I often went hungry. Unless you have experienced hunger as a child you can't really know how it feels. We all slept on a mat on the floor, three to a blanket. Sleeping in the middle was best because when your siblings tossed and turned they pulled the blanket off the ones at the end.

"When my mother realised what a waste of her life drinking was, she conquered her addiction," said Nancy. "When I was twelve, my mother arranged for me to go to boarding school in Migori close to the Tanzanian border. It took almost twenty-four hours to get there. At school I experienced the luxury of having a bed to myself. The downside was that I had no visits and no contact with my family and I was lonely.

"Each term my mother gave me the school fees in cash. She folded it in a cloth and tied it around my waist. She told me on no account to loosen or take off any



layers of clothing to prevent it from being stolen. It meant the journey was hot and sticky. But I learned to be independent and my school friends became my family. Around this time I first read a book for pleasure – a dog-eared copy of a Danielle Steele novel – a bit of escapism. Another possibility for the island? ”

A young women in a developing country . . .

Nancy was able academically so she won a place at a Kenyan University to study education with the ambition of following her sisters and becoming a teacher. It is hard for British teenagers to understand the problems facing young women in developing countries. With her place at university, she was entitled to a government loan. Her immediate priority was to buy her first packet of sanitary towels. Lack of them is one of the greatest obstacles for girls receiving secondary education in Africa and some parts of India. Her intimate understanding of the problem means providing underwear and sanitary protection is one of the priorities for the older girls whom Nasio supports.

She says “Teenage girls are known to sell themselves for risky sex with older men just to be able to buy sanitary towels.”

There was one big change to her week while at university. Nancy said,

“Every Sunday throughout my childhood, we dressed in our best clothes even if it was hand-me-downs and went to church. My boarding school was Anglican and a church service was part of every day. As a student I never once went to church. Now I wouldn’t want to do without my faith. I draw strength from it when I’m feeling overwhelmed by what I have taken on.”

After graduating Nancy worked for a while in a boy’s school teaching geography and economics. Her sister Betty worked for British Airways and her sister Alice worked for the Kenyan consulate in England. They suggested Nancy come to England with the aim of getting an MA before returning to Kenya.

“The fees were £8,000 per year. My only hope of raising that kind of money was to work and save. I took a job as administrator at the Intervention Board part of DEFRA dealing with outbreaks of disease such as Foot and Mouth.

“While living with my sister in Reading, Nancy was introduced to Jonathan who was to become her husband in 1996.

“When we became a partnership we bought a house in Southmoor near Abingdon. My mother came over for the wedding believing that, as I was marrying an Englishman, I’d never return to Kenya.”

“After moving to Oxfordshire I took my first job with the Thames Valley Police Force with the bizarre title of ‘Domestic Violence Co-ordinator’. You can imagine the comments that invited, but it allowed me to see how issues interlink and how complex family life can be. My childhood was tough, but when life was difficult there were always adults in the extended family who were there for me. I saw how different it was for children here if their family became dysfunctional after



parents split up or one or both became an addict. The children have to cope alone without extended family support. It affects how they see themselves, often not valuing themselves.”

Nancy’s next job was as an area training officer.

“I loved going out with officers on beat in the city but I found homelessness, often caused by a bad decision or unfortunate event, distressing.”

By this time Nancy and Jonathan had two children. Nigel is now 21 and has just finished a degree in business studies after four years studying in Kenya, while Chantelle is fifteen and recently spent one year in school in Kenya.

As well as working full time Nancy had taken a diploma in Management and Leadership at Oxford Brookes after which she took on a new role in the police force. She commuted to Reading to train newly promoted sergeants and inspectors in leadership, management and diversity. Meanwhile in Kenya, in 2000, something happened which would change Nancy’s life.

The arrival of an abandoned baby

“My mother was working in a sugar cane field. She heard a baby’s cry near the border of her land. This wasn’t unusual. Women take their babies with them to work in the fields.

“The next day she heard it again from the same area. On the third day she went to investigate the cries and found a baby of about three months old lying on a blanket with a bundle of clothes next to him. She had arrived just in time. Ants were eating away at his skin. There was no skin left on his heels. She took him to hospital and arranged for him to get treatment.





"When I flew out to visit the family, my mother always came to meet me at the airport. This time she wasn't there and my sister joked 'She has a baby.' When the little boy she found whom she named Moses was not claimed by anyone, she had taken him home and become attached to him. But she was seventy-nine and was struggling to look after the now six-month-old baby.

"With my experience in the British police force, I told my mother off and made her come with me to the police station to sort out the situation. I went to the desk but my mother sat well away looking unhappy. I explained that she was seventy-nine and they should find a home for Moses. My accent gave away the fact that I lived abroad and the officer looked at my Levi jeans and said. 'You have money. You should do it.'

"I found a home for him with Catholic nuns but Moses never forgot my mother. He always recognised her voice when she visited him.

The Nasio Trust is born

"My sister Lorna was poor and eked a living from a kiosk shop at the side of the road. I returned to Kenya in 2003 to discover that Lorna had started feeding orphans and one day, sixty turned up to be fed. With some other women she started the Nasio Women's group. Nasio was the name of my grandmother. It was a hard decision but they chose to support fifteen of the younger orphans by pooling food and organising volunteer teachers."

But then Lorna suddenly and tragically died of a stroke aged only forty-five. Nancy said:

"Everyone was concerned about what would happen to the orphans. After the funeral I asked to see them. I'll never forget that day. They were distraught; they had lost the person who cared about them. I knew I couldn't walk away. Jonathan and I asked everyone who usually gave us Christmas presents to instead give money to feed the orphans. Before long we had raised over £1,000. We registered the Nasio Trust as a UK charity. To begin with I was the chair of the trustees. Now we have grown so rapidly, we have six trustees and Jonathan is chairman and I direct the charity full time."

"I hadn't intended dropping my career. Initially I contacted Save the Children and Oxfam and all the big charities I could think of to see if they would take on the project. They work within two hours' drive from the airport and Mumias is eight hours away. I had no choice but to take it on myself."

At it happened Nancy's work in Kenya did have an impact here in Oxfordshire. Nancy explained:

"An officer at Berinsfield was concerned by the lifestyle of some young people there. I suggested showing them a video of the conditions the orphans in Kenya had to cope with including the broken roof of the kiosk kitchen that needed repairing. When we arrived some were drunk and most of them were complaining, effing and blinding about having to watch a boring video. After it finished one of



the girls went into the kitchen came back with some biscuits made them all sit down and said 'What are we going to do to fundraise to repair the roof?'

The teenagers devised lots of ideas and started to raise the money. "It was much more than we anticipated," continued Nancy. "We were forced by government regulations to demolish the kiosk so we set about raising £30,000 to build a centre. Eventually we raised enough to take four teenagers to Kenya to help paint and decorate it."

The Berinsfield kids were overwhelmed. One young man's father, mother and siblings were all in prison. He told me that he is sure he too would be in prison if I hadn't taken him to Kenya. Suddenly he was valued; the children loved him. He realised he wasn't the bad person he had thought he was and that he could make a different life from the one his background predicted. Now he works and has a child of his own and is a good father."

Since then over 100 young offenders from Berinsfield, Abingdon and Wantage have been to Kenya to help on Nasio Trust projects and none have reoffended.

From 2005 Nasio took on forty extra orphans each year and needed a bigger centre. Nasio's policy decision is interesting: they do not build orphanages. Nancy explained why:

"Once you put a child in an orphanage away from his community you handicap him. When he leaves he is on his own to readapt into society. Where there is





extended family often elderly, the orphan sleeps at home. They come to the support centre in the morning to be fed. If he/she is HIV positive we give them their medication. We provide pre-school education. When they reach primary school age, we buy their uniform (a condition for admission). Our centres are close to the schools so they can have lunch at the centre. We find a family, sometimes staff members, to take on those children with no extended family.”

“In 2007 my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I wanted to care for her in the last months of her life. Because I didn’t know how long I needed to be away, I chose to resign. Just before she died my mother made me promise that I wouldn’t abandon the orphans. “Whatever you do never leave those children and build a centre in the community where I found Moses.”

“Hundreds of people came to her funeral we couldn’t fit them all in the compound. They had stories to tell of how she had helped them. You don’t have to be a hero to change the world. This illiterate old lady had changed the lives of hundreds for the better. When I eventually built the second centre, I named it after her. My uncles said I should have named it after my father. I said ‘Why what did he do? He was born to his title but Irene earned the respect of the community.’”

Before returning to England in 2008, I needed time to reflect on what had happened. I decided to climb Kilimanjaro to raise money for Nasio but also to give me the peace and silence to reflect. How could I return to my career with the extra responsibility my mother wanted me to assume? I eventually reached the summit and all the emotions came out. My life had changed forever. I grieved the loss of my mother and the loss of my career but came down in the knowledge that the 140 children Nasio was supporting were my children and I couldn’t abandon them.”

“If I can only take one thing to Oxtopia it would be Leonardo’s Da Vinci’s Last Supper. I wasn’t exposed to art as a child and it was the first art reproduction I saw. I look at the twelve disciples and realise they had flaws. Whatever our weaknesses we can all change the world for the better we just have to want to.”

Nancy Hunt

Born: 1970

Occupation: Director, Nasio Trust

Castaway Items: Leonardo da Vinci’s original masterpiece The Last Supper (or a reproduction as in Harris Manchester College)

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www.thenasiotrust.org

