

Next Issue Video

A Boxer Champions Kenyan Street Kids

by Curtis Klueg / photos by Sean Sprague

Sep 21, 2007 - **Maryknoll lay missionary recalls 'Bokey,' a firm yet gentle mentor to vulnerable youths on the streets of a crowded East African city.**

All along my journey as a Maryknoll lay missionary in Mombasa, Kenya, Fred "Bokey" Achola was my guide and mentor. We gave each other mutual support in our work with street children and prison inmates. As any missionary knows, the real story of their work lies with local people who strive to make a difference in their society for very little money or notoriety. Achola is just that kind of person.

Achola, 38, is usually just called "Bokey," a slang term for a boxer that street kids tagged him with for his prowess as a pugilist in younger days. He was Kenya's welterweight champion in 1991 and fell one match short of making the 1992 Olympic team. A back injury in 1992 put him out of competitive boxing. He's the founder and driving force behind the Mombasa Olympic Youth program, known by the acronym MOYO, to empower and educate youths through sports.

Along with his athletic talent, Bokey has a rare and special gift for dealing with disadvantaged youths. His firm and demanding presence commands respect, yet a disarmingly, almost heart-melting, smile and gentle spirit keep youngsters returning to his side for guidance. Anyone who follows Bokey, as I have, as he walks the streets, meeting, greeting and accompanying street children, immediately recognizes this gift. These children, while filled with love and starving for attention, are often rowdy, undisciplined and intimidating. Bokey treats them with a balance of parental discipline and friendship that acknowledges their grit, wisdom and street smarts.

The youths call themselves "survivors." It is an appropriate label, and Bokey affords them the dignity and respect we might give "survivors" of life's other tragedies. I remember once a street boy was dying of tuberculosis, and perhaps AIDS. Without instructing them, Bokey simply suggested the boys form groups to be present at the hospital and later to arrange a funeral. Bokey recognizes their competency and capability, and like any great teacher, he inspires them to do for themselves rather than micromanaging in their lives.

Bokey found his beginnings with a priest from the Netherlands, Father Arnold Grohl, who also had a special place in his heart for street children and prisoners. Recognizing Bokey's aptitude with rough youth, he drew the boxer to his side and taught him all the priest could. Grohl brought Bokey with him from the capital, Nairobi, to Mombasa.

"To me he is a saint, my mentor and my inspiration," says Bokey of Grohl, who died almost a decade ago. "All I do is a result of his spiritual help."



Maryknoll Lay Missioner Curtis Klueg, left, and 'Bokey' Achola attend to minor medical needs of street kids.



Klueg and Achola with a youth who participates in the Grandsons of Abraham, a program begun by Maryknoll to help street children.



In Mombasa, Bokey met Maryknoll Brother Loren Beaudry and other Maryknollers. After Grohl's death, Bokey continued working among Mombasa's most vulnerable youth through Grandsons of Abraham, a project for street children founded by Maryknoll.

He recalls adventures with Maryknoll lay missionaries on rural social work visits. He tells how Maryknoll Lay Missioner Melissa LePiane saved a 12-year-old girl from being married off by enrolling her into school. Bokey and I made many rural visits together and my most memorable is visiting the family of a prisoner whom they thought was dead. They shouted in astonishment: "He's alive; he's alive!"

Last year, Bokey's life changed when he lost his wife, Jacinta, who at age 31 died from AIDS. Bokey says they discovered she was HIV-positive after taking a pre-nuptial blood test. "Because of the love I had for her and the baby (Jacinta's daughter), I decided to marry her despite her medical condition," he says. They had six years of marriage together.

After losing Jacinta, Bokey took another leap of faith. With more than a decade serving alongside Maryknollers, he ventured out on his own. He established MOYO, combining his love for, and belief in, the power of sports, combined with his compassion for vulnerable youth. MOYO strives to instill dignity, confidence and self-esteem in the 300 youths it serves.

The MOYO program operates out of a traditional urban Swahili dwelling of 11 rooms with a hall down the middle. For months, Bokey poured almost his entire monthly income of slightly more than \$100 into starting a pre-school with two local teachers, saving just enough to cover his rent, food and schooling for his teenage daughter. The little income from pre-school fees went back into the MOYO program. Slowly, Bokey has refinished most of the 11 rooms that prior to his undertaking were nothing but stone walls and corrugated roofing with dirt floors.

Bokey's charisma and dedication have paid off quickly. MOYO not only has a boys-and-girls boxing team that Bokey coaches, but also boasts boys and girls basketball and soccer teams.

Beyond the opportunity for youths to play sports, the MOYO programs have at their heart messages that transcend sport. The first big event was an open-air boxing tournament with a team from Nairobi. In the spirit of good sportsmanship the boxers embraced one another after their bouts, and all along, the thousands of people attending the competition were educated on HIV/AIDS issues. This year MOYO teams will represent their entire province in the national championships. Additional events have included a soccer camp that doubled as a two-day workshop about relationships. Bokey and I teamed up again to offer a three-day Alternatives to Violence workshop to some of his youth teams.

Bokey remained connected to Maryknoll as he assisted me part-time with outreach to the families of prisoners on death row. As a veteran social worker who has spent many years managing the hope and despair, and joys and pains of street children, Bokey conveyed the same compassion and understanding to families of prisoners who are often receiving news of their imprisoned loved one for the first time.

Once, four hours from Mombasa, we found a family that knew nothing of their son's imprisonment and death sentence. The family began wailing and screaming. Bokey, who comes from the same ethnic background as the

family, was able to offer comfort and hope in a way that only a fellow Luo tribesman could, especially since the family spoke very little Swahili or English.

These are just a few of the countless tales, familiar to most missionaries, of local people meeting Christ in the guise of neighbors and fellow citizens, of whom Bokey is a stellar example.

Curtis Klueg and his wife, Anita, of Houston served as Maryknoll lay missionaries in Mombasa, Kenya, from 2004 until this past spring. He worked with street children and death-row inmates and she worked in vocational training for poor youths.

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