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Building Social Bridges
by entrepreneurial thinking



Role models Germany



Edell Otieno-Okoth: „You must walk this path!“

About me:

My name is Edell Otieno-Okoth. I come from Kenya and have been in Germany for 18 years. I have two children, I am married and I live in Delmenhorst in Lower Saxony. I work for Plan International Germany as a consultant in the field of female genital mutilation. I am voluntarily involved with baobab e.V. I speak English, German, Swahili and Luo.

The path:

My path was not easy. Especially difficult for me was the time when I had my children and I couldn't do any regular work. It is a joy to be with the children, but there is also a certain emptiness where you think: "Oh, I would love to do something". I started volunteering for my community, for things that really concern me, and especially for things that affect women and children. This is close to my heart: the issue of female genital mutilation, the issue of equal rights for women, the issue of HIV/Aids, and education: especially women's education. It is like a vocation for me.



Language:

As an African migrant, the first obstacle is language. When I was still in Kenya, I didn't think that the language would be so difficult for me. But I realised very quickly that without the German language it wouldn't be possible, and I quickly got to grips with it and learned a lot in a short time. Within two years I was ready to study. Nevertheless, studying was very difficult. After my first semester, I almost gave up, simply because of the language. And then I thought: okay, I have to do this. I have to go through it. I think that was one of the first times I really realised: when I am so determined to do something, that I can do it very well. That I can surprise myself. After that semester, when I was really determined, my grades improved so much - because I just put all my energy into it. And I also graduated with a very good degree.

Family and work:

It is very difficult to combine work with children and family life, especially when they are still small and need intensive care. Whoever has a child has to expect that more or less and I always appeal: that is no reason to stay at home! If a woman would wait until the children don't need her anymore, the children are of age... That means: Yes! Grit your teeth and get to it.

Qualities:

I have a lot of stamina, and I am very patient. I can have a goal and I am also willing to walk the distance. My greatest gift is the willingness to start small. It doesn't always have to be big right away, it doesn't always have to work out the way I hoped it would, but it will. I think that's true for many of us who come here. There's nothing wrong with starting small. It's also not bad to start there, even in your job, where you might not have expected to be. Your goal is to get to where you want to be. But that doesn't mean you'll get there right away. You have to go this way, and this process is part of your development, and part of the strengthening and part of the experience. You just have to do it to get where you really want to go.

Networks:

I can't praise my network enough. I am employed where I work now because of the experience I have from my network. I am employed at Plan International because of the experience I have from baobab. Volunteering is not just a waste of time, it can become your livelihood. It doesn't have to be, but it can be.

I always wanted to go somewhere where I work with people. And that's what baobab made possible for me: just creating this family for me where I'm very intensively involved with people. And I could see what my involvement brings, I could see how it improved the life of another person. And I am very happy about what I have achieved through my social engagement.

There is no formula for social engagement. Just look up what interests you and pursue it. There is no book where you read: this is how you can get socially involved. Just do it, be open; even be willing to do something for a few hours without pay.

Tips:

Try harder. I have made an effort. But I only made an effort when I realised that I had no way out. And then, at that moment, I realised how much strength I had and how much I could achieve.

Don't set limits. I shouldn't set myself any limits, I just want to achieve this and that and then everything will be great. I don't need any limits. I only realised much later that I had set myself too many limits. And if I set myself these narrow limits, then I only achieve what I strive for. But if I don't set myself limits, but goals, then I achieve much more.

Learn something, anything that interests you. It doesn't have to be something very complex, it doesn't have to be a degree, but if you can study, all the better. Learn something where you can say one day: these are my papers. I am this and that, I have done the training, that is important. Never stop learning. Always keep learning! And be open to new things, be open to new areas.

Role models:

I don't have a completely round role model where I would now say I want to be like this person. There are different role models or people for different areas where I can look up to and admire what they do. In the field of work with migrant women from Africa, Kass Kasadi (director of baobab e.V.) is my role model. Especially in Lower Saxony, I can't see any other person in African communities doing what he does.

In my professional life I have a role model, it's very strange, but: my husband is my role model. He has influenced me a lot. He is a very quiet person in character, but he is very determined. That has influenced me a lot. He has a very high work ethic, always does more than is expected. I have seen how much he could achieve with that.

My mother is a role model for me. She finished school; she is not a highly educated woman. Nevertheless, she worked her way up with her determination to become a bank clerk. As a child, I had no appreciation for that, I just thought: well, my mother works at the bank. But as an adult I saw what an achievement it was. And I have a lot of respect for that.

Goals:

I am relatively new in my current job and of course I have the goal to make the best of it. My goal is also to continue to volunteer for baobab and to be involved in my community here in Delmenhorst. I continue these (voluntary) activities, not as intensively as before, but if someone calls me and has questions, then I get involved.

Success:

For me, success means getting to where I want to be - not only professionally, but also around it: the family, a quiet life with the family and being healthy.



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Co-funded by the
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