

MATHARE YOUTH SPORTS ASSOCIATION

Giving youth a sporting chance



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MYSA: GIVING YOUTH A SPORTING CHANCE ON AND OFF THE FIELD

For Arnold Kamau, Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) is not only a source of hope and but also a second home. Born and raised in Githurai, Arnold, just like many other MYSA youths joined the organization through football where he featured for Barcelona FC as a young boy before his affair with the *juala* ball (football made out of waste plastic bags) and consequently zonal league football was cut short by a nasty knee injury at the tender age of ten.

“It was really a big setback for me because I really loved playing football. Football really kept me busy during my free time and this helped me to keep away from bad peer pressure,” recalled the 18 year old.

Unsettled by his injury layoff, Arnold desperately needed an avenue to keep him occupied and rescue him from the fangs of crime and other social vices in the slums of Majengo deep inside Githurai. Fortunately the ray of hope arrived almost immediately in 2009 in the form of the MYSA library that was set up just a walking distance from his home.

At the library, Arnold—a class four student then—had easy access to books which provided a perfect substitute for football since a huge chunk of his free time was spent gathering knowledge. Interestingly it did not take long before his results at school changed for the better. The spindly teenager moved from strength to strength in class and scored 324 marks in the KCPE exam in the process earning a Form One slot at Ng’enia High School in Limuru, Kenya.

“Arnold has been coming to the library since we started out and he is one of the most disciplined students that we have around. He performs very well in school and the young ones really look up to him,” asserts Leah, the MYSA Githurai zone library attendant.

For all his exemplary performance in primary school, Arnold suffered yet another setback upon admission at Ng’enia that kept him out of school for majority of his first year of secondary school education. A series of pneumonia cases saw Arnold fail to hit the required class attendance threshold and as a result he had to be repeat Form One starting 2014 at a school near his home due to his health condition-Kahawa Garrison High School which is 300 metre from home.

Catch up

Despite his predicament, Arnold seamlessly picked up from where he left in primary school. He hit the ground running at his new school where he was among the top five in his class. “I used to go to the library and read Form One books during the time I spent out of school because I wanted to be a step ahead of the rest of the class. This really helped me because when I reported to Kahawa Garrison I was conversant with what we were being taught so the hours I spent in the library really paid off,” pointed out Arnold.

Two years down the line, Arnold—now awaiting to move to his final year of study (Form Four) in 2017—admits that his performance at school dipped after yet another health complication that forced him to undergo a corrective surgery on his nose to stop excessive nose bleeding. However the soft-spoken lad is keen to bounce back strongly and score a good grade that will secure him a place in university.

“My grades have dropped because I have not had adequate time to prepare for my exams. At times I go back to school after recovering from my illness and I find it is examination time. This has really affected my performance but I believe I can improve.

Study groups

“We have already formed study groups in the library and they have been of great help. We are able to exchange ideas and assist each other in finding solutions to exam questions. I wish we could get internet connection in the library because it will help us gain access to e-books which are currently not available in the library. This will help us in research,” added Arnold. In his parting shot, Arnold revealed that majority of his peers have since dropped out of school and others who turned to crime are no more after being gunned down by police. He reckons that MYSA has had a lasting impact in his life. “I am grateful for the chance that MYSA is giving the youth to improve their education through the library services. Personally I spend more time in the library than at home during the school holidays. This is like my second home,” concludes Arnold with a smile on his face.

The MYSA initiated a **SLUM LIBRARIES PROJECT** thirteen years ago and is now running four free community libraries namely: Mathare North in area 4, Githurai in Githurai 45, Mathare and one in MYSA Head Office in achieving a great impact in the affected communities recording over 19,500 registered members using the library at different times of the week as young as 2 years from different background with an average of 80 – 100 with the highest visits being on weekends and during schools holidays shooting to over 300 visits per day. MYSA from an experience with the first Library in Eastleigh realized that if the communities could be provided with libraries and study hall many vulnerable children and youth might choose positive activities that can change their lives and stop them from engaging into harmful activities like drug trafficking, brewing and selling of alcohol, prostitution, theft and many other activities that lead to no good with the aim of improving their lives. The libraries are free to all regardless of age, gender, religion, ability, tribe and economic background, the libraries provides a second home to many children and youth who find the place safe and conducive for reading, studying, research through access to general and school text books, students discussions groups, meetings, socializing, reconciliation and building friendships.

MYSA started in 1987 as a small self-help youth project in the Mathare area, one of Africa's largest and poorest slums. MYSA Kenya sustainability depends on the over 26,000 youth volunteers from the Nairobi slum areas, with over 1,800 boys and girls teams in over 140 leagues in 16 zones, participate in MYSA's sports, slum cleanup, AIDS prevention, leadership training and other community development activities. In 2016 MYSA Kenya will be celebrating 30 years of giving youth a sporting chance on and off the field.

For more information, see www.mysakenya.org.