

Kenyan native tells his remarkable story

Gordon Okumu recently approached the Sentinel about volunteer opportunities in writing, photography and design. First, though, he offers the tale of how he came to find himself on the other side of the world:

A stranger in your midst

BY GORDON OKUMU
For the Sentinel

There is this stranger in your midst, someone you might have met at the Trinity Lutheran Church serving during the Community Supper program or at the Cottage Grove Public Library. You may have met him attending a 912 Project meeting or simply seen him cycling around the City, and you wonder who this com-

mon but unfamiliar face is.

My name is Gordon Okumu. I am a Kenyan Citizen; I was born in 1986 in Migori, a small town in western Kenya.

When I was six months old, my father, a taxi driver, died in an auto collision, leaving me to be brought up by my mother, a single parent.

In early 1990, my mother and I moved to Nairobi (Kenya's Capital). She was employed as a domestic servant and we settled in one of the slums in the outskirts of Nairobi. I was eight months old.

When I was 14, in my last year of primary school, my mother died of typhoid fever. A Catholic priest took pity on me and provided my school fees through high school. I worked nights as a watchman and weekends as a gardener to pay for schoolbooks, school supplies, clothing and food.

After completing high school in 2005, I earned high scores on the national high school exams, landing a job as an untrained teacher in a Catholic girls' high school in Nairobi. While working there, I became interested in becoming a Roman Catholic

priest.

In 2008, I joined the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) and entered the novitiate in Tanzania to prepare for priesthood. However, in 2010, I realized it was not my calling to become a Jesuit priest, and I petitioned for release from the Society. I was allowed to leave and went back to Nairobi.

While still with the Jesuits, I had established contact with Chaplain Jonathan Landon – who was then on active duty in the US Army – and learned about the International Communion of the Charismatic Episcopal Church (CEC). When I left the Jesuit novitiate, I joined a CEC congregation in Nairobi. I was an active participant in that congregation, taking on several volunteer service projects.

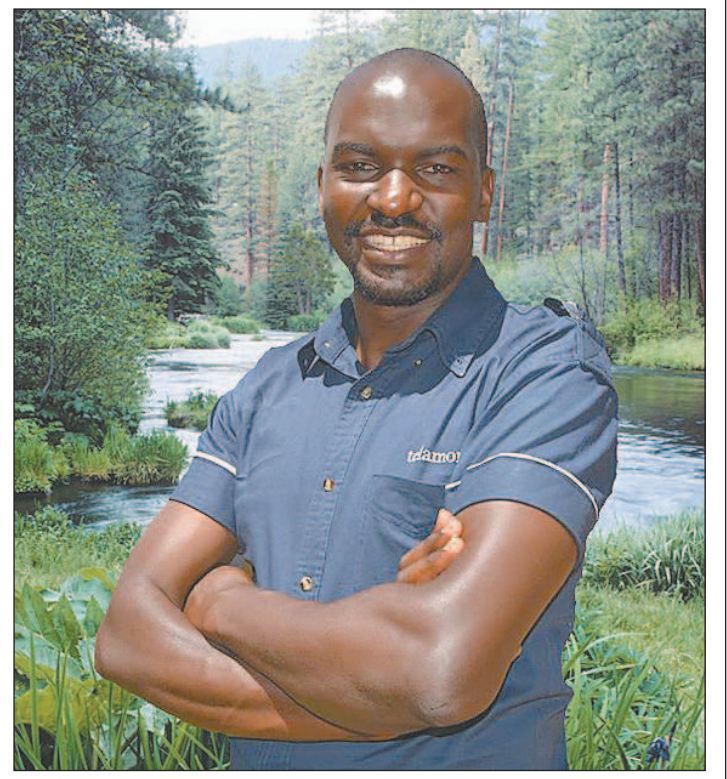
The African College Education Fund, a ministry of the CEC, offered me a scholarship that covered all education and living expenses and enabled me to obtain a diploma in mass communication with majors in public relations and advertising (which is roughly equivalent to an Associate's degree in

America).

While at the University, I was elected a student leader in the university student government, and I developed a strong interest in politics. I formed an ambition to run for the position of Member of Parliament for Suna West Constituency in Migori County (my hometown), and spoke publicly of my intentions to obtain office and lead a determined opposition to tribalism, nepotism and corruption in government, which is rampant in Kenya.

After my first visit to the US in September, 2015, as a freelance journalist covering the Papal visit to the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia, my political opponents appeared to have the idea that I had foreign support for my campaign and was pursuing power for the benefit of U.S. interests. As a result, my life has been threatened, I have been assaulted and robbed, and there have been two attempts to poison me.

My visa remained in effect, so I returned to the U.S. and have submitted an application for political asylum. However, I have not abandoned the



courtesy photo

Okumu has already made himself known in Cottage Grove in a short time here through his volunteerism.

hope of returning to Kenya as an activist working for positive change in the government of my country.

While in the U.S., I am living with the Landons and currently volunteering at Trinity Lutheran Church in the Community Supper program, at the Cottage

Grove Public Library and now the Cottage Grove Sentinel.

I consider my volunteer service to be an offering of thanksgiving in response for God's salvation and provision and also an opportunity to get to know more about my new home, Cottage Grove!

Cottage Grove again named Tree City, USA for 2015

Tree dept., care ordinance and forestry budget help meet requirement

Cottage Grove was named a 2015 Tree City USA by the Arbor Day Foundation in honor of its commitment to effective urban forest management.

Started in 1976, the Tree City USA program, sponsored by the Arbor Day Foundation, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service and the National Association of State Foresters, is celebrating its 40th anniversary this year.

Cottage Grove achieved Tree City USA recognition by meeting the program's four requirements: A tree board or department, a tree-care ordinance, an

annual community forestry budget of at least \$2 per capita and an Arbor Day observance and proclamation.

"Tree City USA communities see the impact an urban forest has in a community first hand," said Dan Lambe, President of the Arbor Day Foundation. "Additionally, recognition brings residents together and creates a sense of community pride, whether it's through volunteer engagement or public education."

Trees provide multiple benefits to a community when properly planted and maintained. They help to improve the visual

appeal of a neighborhood, increase property values, reduce home cooling costs, remove air pollutants and provide wildlife habitat, among many other benefits.

More information on the program is available at arborday.org/TreeCityUSA.

The Arbor Day Foundation is a million-member nonprofit conservation and education organization with the mission to inspire people to plant, nurture and celebrate trees. More information is available at arborday.org.

Kennedy students robbed while working

A group of high-school students experienced a sour end to their work week when they discovered that their bus had been burglarized as they worked.

Matt Hall, Kennedy High School instructor and head of the Kennedy Conservation Corps, which offers job experience to students for conservation-related programs, said that he and a student work crew had parked at the weigh station on the southeast edge of Cottage Grove while they

prepared the pollinator garden under construction at nearby Row River Nature Park for planting on Friday, April 8.

The day was a hot one, Hall said, so he left the windows on the bus open. Upon return, Hall said that three backpacks and a firefighter-style hard hat were discovered missing. One student was found to be missing the driver's permit and house keys that were in his backpack; another was missing a case containing about 20 CDs, while another had an "expensive hoodie" and wallet stolen.

"It was my bad for not closing the windows," Hall said. "It was one of those learning moments for me, for sure, and I felt really bad for them. It was a bad end to a really great day."

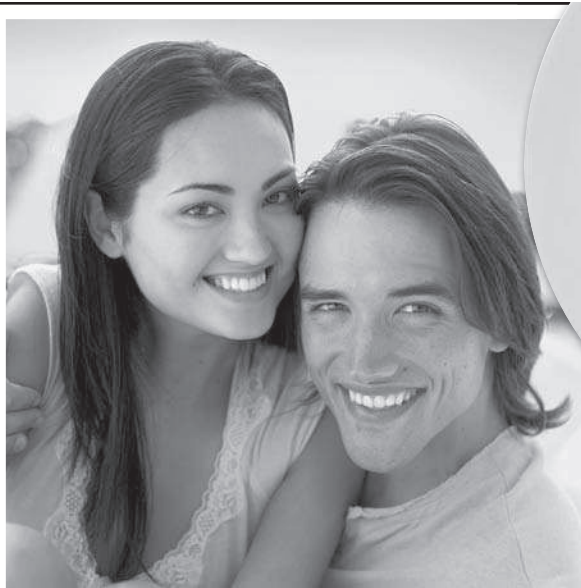
Seniors gear up for Lion King pageant

Cottage Grove High School will host its 22nd annual Lion King pageant on Saturday, April 30 at 7 pm at the high school Cafeteria.

The event includes dances, skits and lots of laughter. This annual fundraiser supports Children's Miracle Network, where all proceeds go to Riverbend Hospital's Neonatal Intensive Care Unit and the Pediatric Unit.

Over the years, organizers say CGHS has raised nearly \$250,000 for CMN. This year's contestants are: Nico Cornelius, Justin Epperson, Elijah Foreman, Brad Geisler, Brandon Hughes, Kendrick Murphy, Payton Presley and Jayden Tucker.

Tickets are sold at the door for \$10. They may be bought at the high school next week or are available at the door for the same price.



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