

Paul Lorem Aminathia Founder's Story & the Origins of Kinyeti Academy

At the beginning of the South Sudanese school year in February of 2024, I will be launching Kinyeti Academy, a model K-12 school in the capital of Juba. Between April 2022 & February 2024, I will be working full-time on the planning and launch of the Academy with an international board of advisors, educators and organizations experienced with starting schools in very challenging educational conditions.

We are actively seeking funding partners to support this work. As the founder of the school and its primary advocate, I know that potential friends of the Academy will want to know something about my background and why I have been preparing for many years to dedicate myself to this project.

Early Childhood in Mahiria Village, South Sudan



I was born in a rural and remote southeastern part of South Sudan, where we lived in thatched roof huts with no school or health facility. It was never the intention of my parents or any member of my large extended family to send me to school. I descend from a traditional ruling family of the Diding'a tribe, estimated to constitute about 2% of South Sudan's population. My grandfather was the chief of our village until his death in 2013. He had five wives, of which my grandmother was his first wife. Consistent with cultural traditions, most of my grandfather's family affairs revolved around my grandmother's house. He owned many cows, sheep and goats, which made the family wealthy by local standards. My father and his brothers looked after the family's cattle. As soon as I weaned, my parents took me to a cattle camp where young boys traditionally started their journey to adulthood by looking after calves. At around age four, however, I contracted tuberculosis and so had to return home to live with my mother.

During this time, a devastating civil war engulfed Sudan, which pitted the government based in Khartoum against the Sudan People Liberation Army/Movement predominantly based in the southern region of the country. In brief, southern Sudan and other non-Muslim regions had long been marginalized, lacking virtually any infrastructure, investment or representation. We had no school or health facility in my village, for example. So my mother treated my tuberculosis with traditional concoctions of herbs. Not surprisingly that treatment did not help my condition.

Growing Up in Kakuma Refugee Camp, Northern Kenya



After coming in contact with people who had spent time in Kenya, my mother learned I might possibly receive real medications if she brought me to Kakuma Refugee Camp. Thankfully, she followed through, and we crossed the border into Kenya, where my father escorted us to the camp and then returned to our village. After I had been treated successfully for a year in the camp, my father returned and took my mother back to our village. I never saw them again, as they became two of the war's many victims.

In the refugee camp, I was left an orphan in the custody of a fifteen-year-old relative who acted as my guardian. We lived in a group of 12 boys, all of them older than me. Having no clear idea what my parents expected me to do when they returned to our village, I followed my playmates to a make-shift school operated by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Leaving Kakuma Refugee Camp

During my early years in that school, teachers conducted classes under a tree, with at least 500 children per class. At the beginning we had no notebooks, pencils or schoolbooks, but we would practice letters by writing on the ground in the dirt. Unsurprisingly I made little progress at first. By my third year, however, I was motivated to begin a long and extraordinary educational journey. Realizing the limitations of my school, I began spending time at a library in the camp's Ethiopian section, supported by a Lutheran aid group. I learned so much there that at the tender age of 10, I was teaching what I knew to the other children in my class. When it finally came time for me to take the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education national exams, I obtained the second highest score in the entire district where the camp was located. As a result, and even though I was a Sudanese refugee, I won admission to Alliance High School, arguably the best secondary school in Kenya. That is how I was able to get out of the refugee camp.

I continued to do well at Alliance and the school nominated me for a scholarship to the African Leadership Academy (ALA), a highly notable school in South Africa that draws talented students from all of Africa, and which seeks to train the next generation of African leaders. As I was preparing to graduate from ALA, the school leadership recommended me for admission to Yale University in the United States. Yale arranged for me to take an additional year of preparation on scholarship at the Hotchkiss School in Connecticut, and then Yale provided a full scholarship that made it possible for me to earn my Bachelor's Degree in Economics in 2015. From there I went on to postgraduate work as a Schwarzman Scholar, earning an M.A. in Global Affairs with a focus on Economics/Business from Tsinghua University in China in 2018.



Founding

Kinyeti Academy

My schooling opportunities were, in effect, miraculous for an orphaned refugee from South Sudan, and I have since worked in both private and governmental capacities in both Kenya and South Sudan. Ever since I left Africa for college in the United States, I have been determined to prepare myself for a mission: opening educational paths for other South Sudanese school children. Educators often talk about transformational experiences, yet there are few who could imagine the nature of mine. Since returning to South Sudan in 2019, I have realized how few children attend any school at all here, and of those who do how poorly prepared most are for the work of building a country. Only a handful of our primary school graduates would be capable of the work required, for example, at Alliance High School in Kenya. It is clear what these deficiencies mean for our country: we will never be able to develop stable political and social leadership or engage the global economy unless and until we vastly improve our educational system.

I am prepared to make my life's work the development of a functioning, aspirational and comprehensive schooling model for South Sudan. No one can pretend that the path to do so is clear, the conditions stable or the challenges less than severe. I am not afraid of these circumstances. I have faced them all my life. Now I am embarking on a mission to find a group of supporters and colleagues who also believe that such challenges can and must be faced for the good of all.

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