



# From Big Apple **TO BIG IDEA**

**G**abrielle Fondiller is an unlikely figure to come across in the Likoni district of Mombasa; but this young New Yorker has made it her home since graduating from Wesleyan University, Connecticut, in 2007.

For many of Likoni's young people, Gabrielle has become a beacon of hope as she leads a groundbreaking initiative to help its disadvantaged children and young people to reach their potential through scholarships, mentorship and career guidance.

Children dropping out of education early because their parents can't afford it is a big problem in Kenya. "Nationally the drop-out rate for children after primary school is about 40 per cent," says Gabrielle. "In the Likoni area of Mombasa it's between 45 and 50 per cent. Nearly half the population of Kenya end their education after primary school. That's not a very promising statistic for the future of the country."

Gabrielle is passionate about

By Robert Deaves

locally created and youth-driven development and has devoted the past six years to providing a small but valuable solution to this challenging problem.

### Hatua Likoni

At just 21 years old, she moved from her home town of Brooklyn, New York, to Kenya and co-founded Hatua Likoni, an organisation dedicated to helping the township's top students gain the skills and credentials they need to contribute to and benefit from Kenya's growing economy. Hatua means 'step' or 'a step forward'.

The idea came after she spent a semester abroad carrying out an independent research project in Likoni, where she interviewed street vendors about the economics and politics of their trade. Likoni is the poorest area of the city.

"I was working with a translator named Peter Kwame and he and I developed close relationships with



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the people we were interviewing," says Gabrielle. "So after a few months of this we wanted to say thank-you in some way. We realised that the one thing they would do if they had more money was to pay for education for their kids."

So that's what they decided to do. "I thought that I would go home, finish university and give a couple of thousand dollars a year.

**Hands up**   
Happy faces



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I would give the money to Kwame and he would pay school fees for these kids and that would be it."

Then she was given the opportunity to return to Kenya after her research work in Likoni won her the Brodigan Award for Public Service in Africa. This was a turning point in her life. "It provided a bit of funding that enabled me to come back. It was wonderful because, had I not won that prize, I might have taken one of the other opportunities I had after graduating in New York City and I might never have returned."

Gabrielle is a powerful advocate for Hatua and very sincere in her ambition to improve the circumstances of young people in Likoni. Most incomes in Likoni are between US\$2 and US\$4 per day; enough to afford food and one room's rent, but not medical bills or school fees. In an area where the formal employment rate is about 15 per cent, most people are street vendors. Secondary schools cost families a minimum of KES 20,000 per year per child. For many Likoni families it is unaffordable.

### Scholarship

"We continued the same research and we expanded the scholarship programme," says Gabrielle. "We selected students from the public primary schools based on merit and need. Today we support 192 kids from Likoni. We currently have

two in primary, 136 in secondary schools, 17 in their gap year, 10 in college and 25 in university.

"We identify children who would otherwise have dropped out of school after the eighth grade (age 13 to 14) and we pay fees for them to attend different secondary schools all over Kenya. We also do mentoring for our secondary school students during the school holiday, focusing on personal development, life skills, civics, career guidance and entrepreneurship. Instead of dropping out of school or becoming disruptive to society, they end up with a college or university degree and an avenue to a professional career."

### Achievements

The success of the programme is clearly seen through the achievements of the children. It seems there is no shortage of bright, hard-working children in Likoni. "Fifty per cent of our secondary school students are in the top 25 per cent of their class, while 24 per cent are in the top 10 per cent of their class," says Gabrielle. "Of our 35 students in college and university, 26 per cent got an A or A minus in their end of secondary school exams. Compared to the national average of 2.6 per cent, our students outperform the nation by 10 times."

What of those children who are unable to join the programme? "That's always the next question.

### The school

Ready to learn and achieve

We are starting a new programme from 2015 to place our gap year students as teaching assistants in Class 8 classrooms throughout Likoni's public primary schools. This frees the teacher to teach rather than do marking and administration jobs. The teacher can then focus on their primary responsibility. And we will pay our students to do that, so it's a win-win for our students and for the students in the classroom. We are looking for local companies to sponsor the programme and we will have each of our students in the classroom wearing T-shirts branded with the sponsoring company's logo. It won't be that expensive but will have a big impact."

As a community-based non-governmental organisation (NGO),

**"Instead of dropping out of school or becoming disruptive to society, they end up with a college or university degree and an avenue to a professional career"**

Hatua Likoni relies almost entirely on voluntary donations and sponsorship to achieve its objectives. It also works alongside a number of local organisations and other community-based organisations (CBOs) and NGOs in Likoni. Funding is always a problem, says Gabrielle; but the programme has hundreds of supporters in Kenya as well as in the USA and the UK.

"A lot of it comes from international foundations; but we get about 15 per cent from Kenya sources and our goal is for that to grow year on year. Locally, we are supported by Safaricom Foundation, Jaffer Foundation, Rafiki Bank and Base Titanium, among others."

In many ways there is a strong synergy between the work of Hatua and the local economy. Mombasa employers often face a lack of locally skilled people, forcing them to take on employees from Nairobi. "By helping to educate the local youth we are helping employers



### Support

Eager pupils

find new employees locally," says Gabrielle. "Companies can also help by offering internships and by encouraging employees to be mentors within our organisation. Any professional who is interested in being paired with a student can contact us and we can make that happen."

### Commitment

Gabrielle has made a long-term commitment to the township – underlined recently when she bought a strip of land along the coast to build her own house.

"When I first came to Kenya what I loved most about it was the fact that the culture is so people-orientated and much less materialistic than I was used to; and the fact that neighbours really come together and support one another. I think today that's still the most appealing part of Kenya. I also love my work; I love what I do. It's very satisfying to spend all day helping people. And I have the privilege of being very close to the students that we support. It's not just about writing cheques; we are with them all the way. I feel like I am a Mama to a lot of children; and that makes me really happy.

"I always thought I would do community-based development; but I always thought I'd do it in my home town of Brooklyn. So I think I am doing what I always thought I would do, but in a different location and a better climate."

For more information on Hatua Likoni's activities or ways to help, visit [www.hatualikoni.org](http://www.hatualikoni.org)



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## QUICK CHAT

**Q.** What do your family think of this?  
**A.** My family are very supportive. They just wish Kenya was closer to New York.

**Q.** What other activities do you get involved in?  
**A.** Last year we organised for all of our gap year students to give HIV education to their peers in local schools. We trained them as peer educators and they created a drama about HIV. They then went around to 46 different schools over six months and performed the drama. This year our gap year students are going to teach a financial literacy course throughout the secondary schools in Likoni.

We are also planning free medical camps for Likoni residents and we support the Likoni community football league, which has over 30 teams play matchers every Sunday. It's a great initiative.

**Q.** Where are you based?  
**A.** Our offices are located in the Likoni Youth Empowerment Centre, which is open seven days a week. We established and run the library there.

**Q.** What do you do to relax here?  
**A.** I've joined the Mombasa Yacht Club and I sail every Sunday afternoon. When I was a teenager I sailed at a YMCA camp on Rhode Island. After I

was 18 I never had the chance to sail, so it's great to get back into it.

**Q.** What is a typical day?  
**A.** The best thing about my job is that every day is different. There's no such thing as a typical day.

**Q.** For you, what is the hardest part about living in Likoni?  
**A.** There are downsides. I would love to be closer to my family, but I try to visit them often. And there are challenges. Likoni has its good and bad sides and I am not going to sugar-coat it.

**Q.** And the best?  
**A.** I love living here and would like to stay here indefinitely. People are kind and look out for each other. I always feel like people are looking out for me.

**Q.** Transport?  
**A.** I don't have a car but I often ride a bicycle.

**Q.** How can people help?  
**A.** The best way to help Hatua educate Likoni's youth is by signing up as a sponsor. As a sponsor you'll make an automatic monthly donation to support the education of one of our students and we'll send you regular updates. You can also communicate with your student directly through email and Facebook.



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