

Helen Fallon, retired Maynooth University librarian meets African people living in Ireland. Through sharing stories we can reach a better understanding of each other and our hopes and dreams.

Sharing Our Stories

From Meru to Maynooth: Isaiah Gitonga tells his story...

Early Days

I come from a rural farming community in Meru, in Eastern Kenya. It's on the slopes of Mount Kenya, so seeing snow in Ireland wasn't a new experience for me! My first language is Meru and Meru is also my ethnic group. In Kenya we have forty-two ethnic groups, each with its own language. The Meru number less than a million people. We grow coffee, tea, corn, beans and khat, which people chew for its mildly stimulating effect.

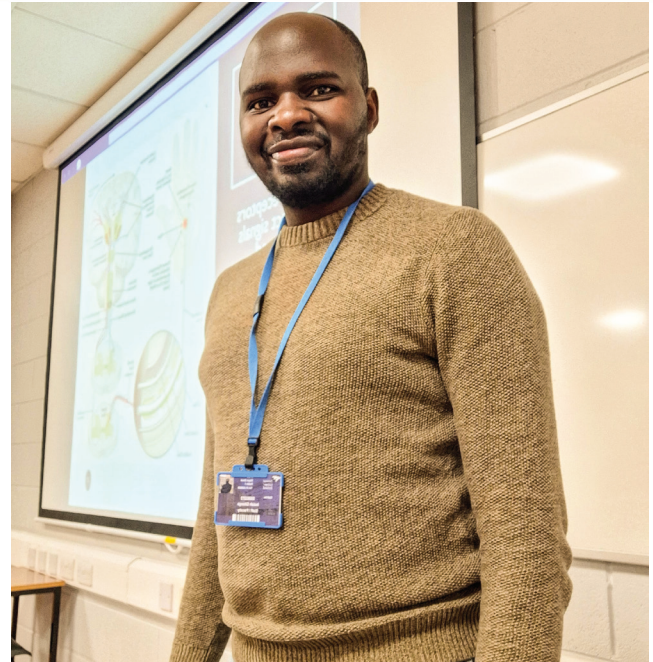
I'm from a family of five, two girls and three boys. We lost our parents very early, my father in 1994, when I was six and my mother when I was finishing primary school. After my mother died my oldest sister Mercy took on the role of mother to the family. I was the oldest boy, and in our society considered head of the family, so I had to make a lot of decisions from an early age. We had one acre of land and grew maize (corn) and red kidney beans. My sisters would mix the beans with the corn and cook it in water on a three stone fire. We often went to sleep hungry.

Catholic Education

I attended the local mission primary school. The Fathers were local Kenyan and there were also Italian and Irish priests. They instilled in me the importance of getting an education. I learned from them that this was the way out of poverty. They supported my family, with



Mount Kenya viewed from Meru county, Kenya.



Isaiah Gitonga from Kenya is currently studying in Ireland. His background is in nursing and mental health; his thesis focuses on “the role of connected health in supporting the psychological well-being and overall quality of life for people living with and beyond cancer”.

(Photo: I. Gitonga)

food and small donations of money to buy paraffin for the lamp so I could study. I also got support from the community and lay teachers. I did very well in primary school and in 2002, aged 13, I went to the Catholic-run St Cyprian Boys secondary school. I stayed there during the holidays, cleaning classrooms and doing other tasks to cover my school fees and lodgings. The encouragement from the Church and my teachers kept me going when things were tough. I loved school and was particularly good at mathematics and sciences. I featured on the front pages of a national newspaper when I got my exam results in 2007. I got a straight A and was among the best in the province (we had provinces before the 2010 constitution where we now have county governments).

Career Choices

I wanted to study medicine because I remembered

visiting my mother when she was in hospital. I saw the compassion the nurses showed to her. To this day, I don't know what she died from. She came home to die, and I was with her at the end. She was buried in our home compound – next to my father – which is part of our tradition.

The Church and local community organised a fundraiser for me to go to the University of Nairobi, three hundred kilometres from home; there I did a four-year degree in Nursing. While studying I worked part-time with the organisation "I Choose Life-Africa" which was involved in HIV education. HIV was very prevalent in Kenya at the time.

The World of Work

When I finished university, I was posted to complete a one-year internship at a general hospital located in the coastal town of Mombasa. The hospital was severely under-resourced, and the challenges were exacerbated by the uncertainty resulting from the devolution of healthcare and the rapid transition to county governments assuming control of hospital management. During my internship, I successfully completed rotations in all the mandatory departments, including medicine, surgery, maternity, specialised clinics, and psychiatry.

After the year, I applied for a research assistant position with the Africa Mental Health Foundation in Nairobi, which was dedicated to community mental health research, with a focus on raising awareness and acceptance of mental health issues. People with psychosis or other mental illnesses were frequently thought to be bewitched and brought to witch doctors or herbalists; their families were often ostracised. Because we were the only foundation in Africa dedicated to mental health research, researchers came from all over the world to conduct research. I managed a number of projects and was promoted a few times. One project involved doing a survey of the prevalence of mental health issues in cancer patients. Seeing how high the incidence was motivated me to do a part-time master's programme in public health at the University of Nairobi, focusing on psycho-social aspects of cancer. I was also supporting my family who were still in school, so I was paying their school fees and also helping my sisters who each had one child. One of my brothers is now a teacher. Because my sisters had no formal education, their opportunities have been very restricted, which is still very common for women in rural Kenya.

Moving into Research

In my post, I was interacting with people from different countries. I became friendly with a researcher from the

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Netherlands, who was in Kenya to gather his PhD data. He recommended me for a scholarship for a PhD programme in the Netherlands. Although I was accepted, I wasn't able to get leave from work to take it up. I decided to leave the foundation and I started a small non-governmental organisation IKUZE Africa, which means Grow Africa. It focuses on research in mental health. We received our first grant from VOICE, which is funded by the Netherlands to carry out a pilot program to improve work and employment opportunities for women with mental health conditions.

In 2019, my friend in the Netherlands came to Maynooth to do a postdoctoral programme. He sent me information about Irish PhD scholarships. There was a global call for applicants for funding across five Irish institutions funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI). I applied and was one of two people from Africa accepted. That was May 2020. I went to Google maps to see where Ireland was!

Maynooth Days

I'm now in my fourth and final year of a PhD programme in the Psychology department at Maynooth University. My thesis focuses on the role of connected health in supporting the psychological well-being and overall quality of life for people living with and beyond cancer. I have a strong collaborative relationship with both the National Cancer Control Program and the Irish Cancer Society for my research. I'm actively engaged in global oncology initiatives, particularly through my involvement with the International Psycho-Oncology Society.

I receive exceptional support from my supervisors, and I have access to a wealth of resources, including an extensive collection of books and journals. I previously worked part-time in the University Library and currently hold a part-time lecturer position at the National College of Ireland. Prior to this, I served as a graduate teaching assistant at Maynooth University. I also recently completed the mandatory work placement component of my PhD at S3 Connected Health, a specialist digital health solutions company based in Dublin.

Family Life

I met my partner, Jackie, when I was studying at the University of Nairobi. She was in Kenyatta University studying forensic science. We married in a traditional service in 2017. We have two children; Myles is six and Arianna is three. I'm hoping to find employment here when I graduate either in a university or within the industry, and have my wife and family join me. ■

Helen Fallon worked in libraries in Sierra Leone, Namibia, Tanzania, Saudi Arabia and Ireland. She is now retired and focuses on writing.