

My Story/Statement of Purpose, Bethuel Mbugua

I have always drawn as far back in my past as I can remember. Art has always been part of me, when I grew up in Kenya and when I moved to the United States. Art has always been a tool that I use to express myself and to communicate with others my memories, my life, and my personal experiences.

I was born in a village located in the western province of Kenya among the Kipsigis people. My father taught me how to speak Kikuyu, my mother-tongue, and Swahili. We relocated to the central province to be amongst our Kikuyu people as soon as I turned two and a half years old. My father wanted me to grow up in an environment that would nurture my customs and traditions. Not too long after we settled down, my father and mother separated. My father took care of me from the time I was two and half years old until I moved to the United States at the age of twelve. My relationship with my mother fell apart when we moved to a different part of the country.

By the age of seven, I made headlines after I snuck past the President's security line during a public fundraising. The sole reason for me to attempt such an act was because my father was determined to send me abroad for an education. If it meant that I see the President, then that is exactly what I had to do. We relocated several times until we moved closer to Nairobi with hopes that by some miracle an opportunity would arise. My father (with very little formal education himself) took me out of school to tutor me in biology. He took me to the Kenyatta National Hospital libraries where he taught me how to take notes, memorize what I had written or what he had written, and then repeat the information back to him. One day to see how much I had retained, he had me lecture about the brain and heart in front of students at a local primary school. We then began to visit more primary schools to repeat the same lecture. Finally, these visits included high schools and national universities.

Late 1990, a fourteen year old chess whiz, K. Kangugi, and his family made a visit to Kenya. His father had read my story in a Kenyan newspaper and informally invited us to meet him. After the initial meeting, Kangugi's family expressed their desire to help me attend the Hunter School in New York with their son. However, they wanted me to take an I.Q. test before committing to take me with them.

People around the country were curious to find out how I would perform, but after the test, a nationally recognized psychiatrist indicated that I was just above average. This outraged people who believed otherwise. My sponsors were not impressed and eventually decided not to help me further my education. They left me in Kenya where they had found me within days after the results. I was left without any leads except letters sent to newspaper editors and interviews from the Kenyan Department of Education suggesting that I be removed from my father and sent to school. As young as I was, I realized that my life was in other people's hands and that I could only do so little to help myself out.

Two years later when I was 12 years old, I met Lenore Blum. I had been living with the math students at Kenyatta University. One day the head of the Math Department announced that everyone was to attend the Pan-African Math Conference which was being held in Nairobi. It was a 10 day event, and during that time many people approached me to ask me if I was one of the math competitors. I would retell my story how I ended up there. On one of those days, prior to end of a

meeting, I met Lenore who was more than curious, rather more determined to help me achieve my goal of attaining an American education somewhere in the United States.

Both my personal life and my student life in the United States began at the Mirman School for gifted children in Los Angeles. I began school only a week after Lenore came to pick me up at the airport in San Francisco. During my first two years I experienced problems communicating with others. Due to my cultural and language barrier, I repeated 7th grade twice. It was in art class that I first felt comfortable and accepted, and excelled well above others. Communicating became easier for me through art. Art became my language to convey to others what was in my mind, how I was feeling, and what my life was like in Kenya.

As far back as I can remember, I grew up drawing on village dirt roads using sticks or just fingers trying to outdo other children. As kids, when it rained, we would gather together and shape mud to make movable toys. When hangers were available when I was a little older, my friends and I would bend wires to make toy cars, or simply use charcoal from wood fires to doodle on flat pieces of bark. Therefore, art has always been around me, and I grew up with art as means of expressing myself to others and my peers. The transition from Kenya to Los Angeles was very traumatic. Art was my way of removing my emotions and placing them on paper. I first realized that I had some talent in art when some of my drawings were selected and placed on the main office bulletin board. This happened more than once and it fueled my need to do more. The encouragement to keep drawing came from my teachers and peers, and that made me more interested to see what I was capable of doing.

I then attended Harvard Westlake where my main focus was to get into college. Even though my main goal was to study biology and eventually enter medical school, I never abandoned my passion for art. Each year I enrolled in an art class, painted and drew comics at home. I was considered one of the top painter/drawers in my high school art classes.

I made sure that I turned in drawings to be published in the student literary magazines. It was an honor when I turned in several paintings and drawings to my teacher who then selected a few to be displayed in our art gallery. Throughout my senior year, my art teacher and others suggested that I apply to art school. They knew how much I love art, but they didn't realize that the main reason I had come to the United States was to be a doctor. I knew what I loved doing, I just couldn't let my father down and others whom I felt had such high expectations for me.

I was admitted to Macalester College and finally graduated with a biochemistry degree. Studying biochemistry began to become a chore. I was not really interested. My goal was to be a doctor because that is what was expected of me. I found it extremely hard to really be involved in art while taking biology courses, going to labs, and working to help pay for my college education. However, I made sure that I was somehow involved in art. I took a few art classes, was approached by some student and staff organizations to create logos for them, and submitted each year drawings to several student shows and literary magazines. I even placed second in some shows. By my junior year I had decided to minor in art, but time was not on my side. Now that I am finished with college and biochemistry, I have decided that I have the time, the same passion, love, creativity, and imagination to fully devote myself in art.