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Kianda at 60!

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Last month the Kianda Foundation celebrated its 60th anniversary through a virtual event at which the keynote speaker was the chairperson of the Foundation, Olga Marlin. No one could have been better placed to play that role, as she was one of the

four determined ladies who launched this pioneering initiative for educating African girls and women in Kenya.

Olga Marlin was a young education graduate from University College, Dublin when she was told that Opus Dei wanted to contribute to the development of women in Kenya. She and her young colleagues, all in their mid-twenties, came here in 1960 at a time when African women enjoyed no access to quality education – in stark contrast to their white counterparts in colonial Kenya.

For the four women the institution would have to be multi-racial and inter-ethnic from the start, a place where the different races and ethnic groups could get to know and appreciate one another. It had to be open to students of all creeds –

Catholic as well as non-Catholic, and even non-Christian.

Kianda College was the first project of the Foundation, offering training in secretarial and business studies, the only one of its kind at that time. And the name 'Kianda', meaning a 'fertile valley' where everything flourishes, was proposed by one of its great supporters, Jemimah Gecaga (the first African Woman in the Legislative Council and the first woman MP).

Opposition to such an institution was rife due to racial segregation, with some white parents refusing to send their daughters to the same school as African girls, and at a time when the general feeling was that Africans lacked the capacity to study to the level of their white counterparts.

Another speaker at the 60th anniversary celebration was the first African student to attend Kianda

College, Evelyn Mungai (now my wife), who graduated in 1962. She told the e-gathering that with independence imminent Africanisation began, and she became one of the first African women to be employed in government at a professional level.

Margaret Curran, another of the founding four of the Kianda Foundation, took her in hand to go to offices for interviews. At one of these, my wife recalled, the white man responsible for recruitment (most such people at the time were white men), could hardly believe that an African could handle professional jobs, as they had never been exposed to one who was suitably qualified. Yet when Evelyn Mungai completed his test he could see that this was indeed possible.

Kianda College set the pace for other Kianda Foundation projects,

including Kibondeni College, which in 1967 became Kenya's first women's hospitality college. Ten years later Kianda School opened, following requests from former students of Kianda College who wanted the same level of quality all round education they had received for their daughters. One of the first students at the school was First Lady Margaret Kenyatta, who is also the patron of the Kianda School Alumni Association.

Over the years, other educational institutions have been established, including Kimlea Girls Technical Training in Kiambu (which saved hundreds of girls from the child labour that was rampant on the coffee plantations there), Tewa Technical Training Centre in Kilifi County and other education centres in Nyeri, Kisumu and elsewhere. The Foundation also runs other projects, including Kimlea Clinic, Faida Youth

Centre, Fanusi Study Centre and Kimlea Business Centre. In addition, they also organise social initiatives such as the Children's Health Programme, and promote women entrepreneurs among low income women through the Business Women Support Programme.

Their focus is now on strengthening the existing institutions to ensure that the students receive the best education possible. Given that the Kianda institutions and programmes are highly subsidised to ensure that even the most disadvantaged have a chance at quality training, to support them the Kianda Foundation Ambassadors was launched this year. Through it, well-wishers offer monthly financial support towards scholarships and to allow more girls to benefit from formal and vocational courses, plus reaching more women for entrepreneurship training.

Unthinkable as it is today, where women have broken so many glass ceilings here in Kenya as elsewhere, it's good to be reminded how dramatically different opportunities were for them only 60 years ago. And learning about the heroic role played by Olga Marlin and her colleagues at the Kianda Foundation I saw how critical their pioneering efforts were.

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