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Olga Marlin: The dream that made history

She left the comfort of Europe to empower African women. The impact is continental, writes Lilian Aluanga.

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She enjoys eating nyama choma and ugali, knows Kenya better than many post-Uhuru citizens and has witnessed the country's transition from colonialism to Independence

under Jomo Kenyatta, to Daniel Moi and on to Mwai Kibaki.

Most importantly though, she has made her contribution — though quietly away from the media glare — to the making of modern Kenya.

At 27, an age when many women in her birthplace would be thinking of starting families and living in dainty cottages with picket fences, she chose to give up the comfort of Europe and accompanied a group of eight women who were coming to live in Africa.

She landed in Kenya. The country changed her. She embraced it as home, became a citizen, and set out to do her best to make her new home, then trapped in racial discrimination, a better place.

Meet Olga Marlin, a founder member of the Kianda Foundation — the pioneer in setting up a multi-racial

secretarial school at the height of the liberation struggle in Kenya.

Olga made the journey from Ireland in 1960 not out of a sense of adventure, but because of a deep conviction that God wanted her to do something for Him with her life.

Now in her 70's — and still every inch as elegant, charming and poised as she was in her late 20's — Olga remains modest, though happy, about her role in helping lay a foundation for thousands of African women who are now top executives in various organisations both locally and internationally.

To Olga, the eldest child in a family of six, African women were in a vicious circle those days: "They needed education for freedom and freedom to be educated."

And her efforts paid off, judging from the list of some of Kianda's

former students. From Health Minister Charity Ngilu to Evelyn Mungai-Eldon, founder of the Evelyn College of Design; from Pamela Mboya, the late Tom Mboya's wife, to Honourable Victoria Sebagarika, an MP in Uganda; from Christina Kenyatta-Pratt to Gaone Masire-Moyo, the successful daughter of Botswana's ex-president Ketumile Masire; from Zipporah Mayanja, a top Ugandan diplomat in Belgium to Hannah Rubia, the wife of Saba Saba hero Charles Rubia. It is a long list of strong African women, who no matter the direction they took, they excelled.

To date, Kianda, a household name in secretarial studies, has seen hundreds of thousands of girls pass through its doors, a far cry from its humble beginnings in a tiny cottage along Nairobi's Waiyaki Way with only 17 students.

Born in New York City 1934 to Ervin Ross Marlin and Hilda Gerarda van Stockum, Olga remembers travelling a lot as a child thanks to her father's status as an employee of the United Nations.

She attended primary school in Washington, before the family moved to Montreal Canada in 1947, where she completed her secondary school before joining the Trinity College in Dublin for a Masters in Modern Languages.

"My father had always wanted me to go to Trinity College because that was where he studied and also met my mum," she says. Although the family moved back to Canada, Marlin chose to stay on in Ireland, where her life would forever be changed when she met members of Opus Dei (Work of God), a personal prelature of the Catholic Church.

"Never in my whole life did I think I would meet a saint," she says in reference to the founder of Opus Dei, Saint Josemaria Escriva. Olga laughs as she continues, "When I was 10 years old, I used to tell people that I would like to get married and have 10 children."

"My attitude towards life was totally changed and I felt that God wanted me to serve him in some way," she says.

Therefore, when Olga was selected as part of a group of eight women whom St Josemaria chose to send to Kenya, she was only too happy to comply even though she knew it wouldn't be easy.

But nothing had quite prepared her for the shocking reality on the ground. She arrived in Kenya when residential areas were segregated, as were clubs, schools, restaurants, and even the public transport system.

Social interactions between the races was taboo, and Olga and her group soon realised that they would have a difficult time selling the idea of a multi-racial school that would see white students learning side by side with their Asian and African peers.

Initially the idea was to set up a finishing school which would give African women a chance to acquire secretarial skills in courses that would help them get better jobs and uplift their living standards. At the time, Olga says, people thought they were mad to even come up with such an idea, but a female member of the Kenyatta family whom the group met soon after their arrival, gave them the courage to move on.

"You have arrived at a very good time to open a school for girls. Our women need education to become self-reliant, respect themselves and make themselves respected. This can

only happen when they are financially independent. Your school should provide them with the necessary skills," the Kenyatta family member said.

After a brief teaching stint at Kenya High School, then a whites-only school, Olga moved on to carry out their vision.

By 1961, after months of giving music lessons and coaching students in various subjects to raise money, the group was ready to start.

But there was a problem. One of the students was Goan and the city council would hear nothing of registering Kianda, first located in Valley Arcade — a white residential area — and two with a non-European student on board.

They would first have to seek the approval of the residents, the council said.

Her proposal to the residents was flatly rejected and Marlin was crushed. "It was simply one of the worst moments of my life," she says.

She then knew that they would have to move out of the area if their mission to give African girls a chance to study was to be fulfilled.

One of her students offered to help. Her father, Paddy Rouche, owned an estate agency in Nairobi's Westlands and had just identified a parcel of land along Waiyaki Way (Kianda School's present location), which was on the border of a reserve on which the Japanese embassy also stood.

At this time, the government also decided to declare some plots in the area multi-racial and Kianda (Kikuyu for valley) finally found a home which would be led by Olga until 1980.

It would be the first of several educational institutions put up by the Kianda Foundation in its quest to uplift the educational standards and general welfare of women in Kenya.

Registered in 1961 in Nairobi, its development has over the years given rise to a primary and secondary schools as well as the Kibondeni Catering School and the Kimlea Girls Technical Training College in Kiambu.

The latter has saved hundreds of girls from the degrading and exploitative child labour rampant on the coffee plantations in the district.

Although Marlin now had a place to put up the classrooms, a more difficult task awaited her — convincing African parents to allow their daughters to enrol for secretarial courses at the college.

"Most of them were hesitant to allow their daughters to be trained as secretaries and feared that they would become wayward and get lost in Nairobi," she says.

Eventually, they got their first African student — Evelyn Mungai-Eldon — who set the pace for her peers and was an articulate, hardworking student able to hold her own even though she was obviously different.

Says Olga, "She used to walk to school everyday and was bright and very competitive in class."

Evelyn did well in her studies and landed a job with the East African Community on completion of her one-year training.

Kianda increasingly became popular, especially with large organisations in the region due its high quality training. It attracted students and

teachers from as far as Greece, Mexico, Spain, US, Ireland, France, Egypt, Ethiopia, Botswana, Uganda, and Tanzania.

At Independence, the school lost some of its white students, who in fear of reprisals from Africans, chose to go back home. But the numbers picked up again as the demand for secretaries grew in a newly independent Kenya and the wider east African region.

So impressed with Kianda College were companies that they proposed the start of a bonding programme with the college. Under this programme, the organisations agreed to pay a year's fees for the girls, inclusive of boarding and pocket money, so long as the girls signed an agreement to work with the companies upon graduation. Bursaries were sourced for girls

from poor backgrounds without corporate sponsorship.

Long before the country gained independence, Olga had forged deep friendships with the wives to some of the men who were later to hold high positions in government. Most of them had gone through Kianda and Olga made up her mind to ask them for help.

While some of her colleague went overseas to raise funds from well-wishers, Olga sought out her old students. One of them was Pamela, who married Tom Mboya. Another was Hannah, the wife of Nairobi's first African Mayor, Charles Rubia.

She recalls a visit to Rubia's office at the time: "He was very gracious and understood my dilemma and the need to empower these girls. I will never forget what he said to me: 'Olga, we knew each other when you

were nobody and we were nowhere.
I will help you'."

She remembers Tom Mboya as a robust trade unionist whom she was humbled to meet.

"I was introduced to Tom by Jemima Gecaga (a sister to Dr Njoroge Mungai)." Her ties to the Mboya's would later see him sponsor several students to Kianda before his tragic death through an assassin's bullet.

Just before he died in 1969, Mboya sent the current Kisumu Mayor Prisca Ouma to meet Olga.

She was the last student he was to send to the college.

The Sunday Standard, by Lilian Aluanga (Nairobi, KENYA)

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