

I Tried and I Made It

Speech delivered by Jennifer Chinenye Emelife, Founder of Teach for Change Nigeria on the 14th of June 2019

In 2018, my students and I read a book called *The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind*. This book tells the story of a young teenage boy who though from a poor village in Malawi, stuck to his dreams of changing the situation around him. He had a great love for school and learning and even though he couldn't stay in school because his parents couldn't afford his meagre fees, William Kamkwamba spent all his free time in the community library where he not only learned to read all by himself, but discovered the answer he has for so long sought: how can I build a windmill to help provide electricity for my village? He'd later become successful. From using old tools in the house, spare parts from his father's rickety bicycle and materials from refuse dumps, Kamkwamba was able to build the first windmill in Malawi. And this brought him more fame than he could imagine.

Soon after his invention, and at 19 years old, William Kamkwamba was invited to be a speaker at TEDGlobal 2007 conference in Tanzania, the first TED talk to be hosted in Africa. Among the few words he shared (due to his limited understanding of the English language), one line stood out for everyone present, "I tried and I made it"

The story of William Kamkwamba inspired my students so much that we started our own TED ED club in the school. The whole experience made my students feel like they matter because they do, and sharing their talks with an audience gave them a boldness they didn't know they possessed and so when, on the Facebook group for TED ED club leaders, I found Uma Nnenna's announcement for the establishment of a TED ED club in an IDP camp, I couldn't help reaching out to her and volunteering to be part of such an important project.

Every Saturday since March, Uma, I and the rest of the team visited the IDP camp, coaching about 17 kids on how to share their stories with the world. It's been a truly difficult task as these kids can barely read, write or speak proper English. They live and survive amidst deplorable conditions but this doesn't take away their dreams and aspirations. One kid tells us he wants to be a millionaire so he can change their lives in the camps, another says he wants to be a soldier so he can fight back Boko Haram for forcing them to flee their homes. A girl says she wishes to be like Malala and encourage girls to seek education instead of marriage. Another girl says she just wants to go back home because she hates the camp, but then again, she can't leave because she's afraid that she will be abducted. A boy says he wishes to become an architect so he can create better designs/structures for houses instead of the tents they sleep in which leaks every time it rains. And a girl says she wants to be a doctor so she can bring free and quality medical health care to the camp.

These are voices no one hears. These are stories often retold by others or imagined. But what does education mean to the child who has barely enough food to eat or shelter?

Working with these kids whose voices you'll be hearing soon has taught me that unlike what we might think, a group of children in torn or no clothes and dirty feet scrambling for food

and clothes do have dreams, beyond the gates of the IDP camp. It is important to stress that every child in the world deserves the right to quality education; the kind we receive in school, the one that transforms the mind.

Yet, in many cases in Nigeria, the marginalized, especially the young and dependent ones, are overlooked in opportunities that could inspire change in them. It's easier to squeeze our noses at the kids begging for food on the streets, throw them a couple of naira through the window, than to actually think of them as individuals with a remarkable future ahead of them.

Yes, children at risk need food. Yes, they need clothing and shelter and access to quality health, but we must all remember that beyond these basic needs, they, like our children who go to posh schools and sleep in comfortable beds, have dreams. And they need people who give them all of these. That beyond the charitable acts of frequent donations, they deserve to have people who will look them in the face and say, "Yes, you can become the president" "Yes, you are going to be a millionaire" Or a gallant soldier or an estate dealer. They need someone to feed their minds so they can have a voice of their own.

One afternoon while writing down our talks, a kid in my group held my hand and looked up at me, a sincere worry on his face. "Aunty, it's too much. I cannot read all these things," he told me. I'm happy to share that three Saturdays after that, he came up to me asking that he gets more lines because he has more things to say. That, for us, is a win.

The records say that 60 million Nigerians cannot read or write and so when we leave here today, I hope we remember to ask ourselves: what can I do differently?

The fifteen children whose voices you'll be hearing today may not sound like pleasant music to your ears, but for us at RABNI TED Ed club, we are so proud of all the conversations that have ensued among us without the course of the program: on being confident, respecting other people's feelings, gender equality, resilience and self control.

This initiative is our own way of saying that we do not only bother about their stomachs (which, to be honest, is very important - some of us cannot fast to save our lives, well, I'm talking about myself, and Janet, maybe, or the MC and perhaps one or two others here) But yeah, we are hoping that through this program and others which we plan to continue in the future, these kids will one day, like William Kamkwamba, stand before a bigger audience and say, "I tried and I made it".

Thank you.