



ENELERAI, KENYA

Judy's journey to becoming a ME to WE artisan

A steady job and the promise of a paycheck disrupted the everyday to unlock a future this mama had always hoped for. Meet one of the first women to agree to on-the-job artisan training.

When Judy Cheborkei showed up for her new job, her résumé was made up of farming and firewood-hawking, hustle and hard work. She'd never beaded a single strand of jewelry in her life. But through learning to bead she saw a different future for herself and her family and a chance to realize a belief she'd long suppressed—that she was meant for more.

Sitting in an open field near her children's school in Enelera, Judy tentatively unwound a piece of clear plastic string, then snipped it to what looked like bracelet length before threading it through a needle. Judy's instructor, a Maasai woman born into a family of bead makers, demonstrated how to move the needle in a single swoop to pick up multiple rainbow-hued beads from a tray. Slowly, clumsily, Judy mimicked her movements. So did her new colleagues, long-time Kipsigis friends and neighbors, all beading for the first time, all working for ME to WE Artisans—a decision they hoped would change their futures.

They met for weekly training. At first Judy asked how to do the beading—"Do I pick one bead at a time? Or do I mix? How long should one strand be?"—but every week, she got faster. "I could see the progress. And I loved it, that's why I kept doing it. I enjoyed it, meeting weekly with the other women like that."

Pursuing this new opportunity meant risks for Judy and her family. The time she spent attending the ME to WE Artisans training was precious—time away from tending her corn field, fetching water or collecting firewood to sell at the market. How Judy chose to spend her time determined whether her children had enough food, water and money for school fees. But the mother of five no longer wanted to be defined by her circumstances and was determined to escape the cycle of poverty that had stunted the potential of generations of women in her family.

This wasn't the first time she was trying to break free, but she hoped it would be the last.

PILLARS

♀ OPPORTUNITY

★ EDUCATION

Judy Cheborkei: early adopter, artisan, change-maker



ABOVE: Judy finds a moment for playtime in the morning.

RIGHT: Judy waves her children off to school as she prepares for a day working at the Women's Empowerment Centre close to her home in Enelera.

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Working to break through

Judy grew up near a town called Mulot, a bustling trading center off the one-lane highway in Narok County, Kenya. Her parents were corn farmers. They owned a small plot of land and also worked for hire on neighboring farms to provide for Judy and her 10 siblings. Her mom foraged and sold firewood, while her dad tended their five cows and planted hay to sell for fodder. Neither of Judy's parents had any formal schooling. They hoped education would open up opportunities for their children.

By the time Judy was in Grade 2, she was helping collect water to wash dishes and clothes. By Grade 5 she was spending weekends working on the farm, planting or weeding, depending on the season. Even at that young age, Judy saw that getting an education could be her ticket to a different life. Her role model was a neighboring doctor with an active practice and a nicer house. Judy wanted to go to college to become a doctor, too.

But in Grade 7 Judy dropped out of school. In the weeks leading up to what would be her last day, she was frequently sent home by her teacher because her parents failed to pay the mandatory fees. "I saw for myself that my parents didn't have money," Judy recalls. One morning, she simply stopped going. She accepted it, and her parents never urged her back.

The teenager began working full-time on the farm, as well as collecting firewood to sell at the market. The money she earned helped pay for the education of her younger siblings. Going to college, let alone finishing high school, was a dead dream. She looked for another goal that she hoped would change her future.

The day Judy was married, she was full of anticipation as she traveled to her new home with her husband. She quickly realized her new house was like her parents': one room, with a small-acreage farm.

"Growing up, I wanted to build a nice house and have chairs and a cupboard and a table. I wanted to buy a cow and a goat, and sheep. And I wanted to have land as well." Those things would have to wait.

With babies came the need for additional income. Judy collected firewood and charcoal, like she'd done with her mom. She'd sell it in Mulot twice a week. The work was long and laborious, but Judy's determination to provide remained steadfast. When her own children were sent home for lack of school fees, Judy feared that her daughters' lives would be no different than her own.

The cycle of poverty looked likely to repeat itself, until a new opportunity disrupted her day-to-day.





Beading is a tradition in Maasai culture. Expert beaders share their knowledge and skill with Kipsigis women eager for the opportunity to earn a fair wage.

For all the ways Judy's life has changed with the security of a steady job, her biggest joy is knowing she can afford her children's education.

A new normal

In 2010, Judy heard about a community meeting to be held at the Motony Primary School, where WE Charity was actively building new classrooms and a water project. Women from surrounding communities were invited. Judy recalls that WE Charity had also started building new classrooms at her children's school in Enelerai, but she wasn't familiar with the organization's other development work.

She was one of more than 200 women to attend the meeting. "Neighbors from all sides came to Motony," Judy remembers. Women from Salabwek, Pimbiniyet, Kipsongol and, of course, Enelerai.

The women who had traveled the greatest distance, more than five hours by car, were from an area called Kajiado. They were from the Maasai tribe, and beading is part of their culture, whereas most of the local women in attendance were Kipsigis and had never beaded before.

Sitting on the ground outside the school (there were too many women to fit inside a classroom), the women listened to Leah Lato Toyianka, a Maasai leader from Kajiado. She explained that the women from her community worked with ME to WE, the social enterprise and sister organization to WE Charity, to sell their Maasai jewelry. They earned a steady income, where previously they had struggled to sell their pieces at a local market for a fair price. Mama Leah offered to teach the women gathered how to bead, so they could earn an income as artisans as well.

Judy knew many of the women at the meeting from their long walks together to the market to sell firewood. She and her neighbors eagerly accepted the proposition. "I was very grateful," Judy says. "I was told I would be paid for my work. I never had any doubts that I wanted to do it." This was the opportunity she had been waiting for.

Before long, the training turned into a full-time job. Judy's daily routine shifted. She stopped going for firewood and concentrated her efforts on being the best artisan. Soon, she and the other emerging artisans were making more money than ever before.

With her first pay packet Judy bought the materials to build a toilet for her house. Then she bought a goat, and next, a cow. She outfitted her house with the furniture she had dreamed of growing up—two wooden benches, four chairs, two tables. Soft lace covers were placed over most surfaces, a small style luxury. She and her husband bought more land. She opened a small shop. She also attended financial training provided by WE Charity to manage this influx of new income and started to put away money for savings.

For all the ways Judy's life has changed with the security of a steady job, her biggest joy has been knowing she can afford her children's education. She expects that all her children will surpass her Grade 7 education, hopefully complete high school, maybe attend college.

"I never thought I would get here," Judy says with pride. "My children will be able to get jobs because they'll have an education. Doctors, pilots or even teachers."





In 2018, Judy started to work out of the newly opened Women's Empowerment Centre, a bright building across the road from the school her children attend, with those same neighbors—artisan originals—who were present at the initial training. ME to WE Artisans employs more than 1,600 women in Kenya. Although many women choose to work from home, every day more than a hundred women arrive at the center (their office) ready for work.

As always, Judy will be there, deftly tying a knot in the thin thread, pulling tightly so the beads kiss one another, completing her piece before she expertly moves on to the next one. Whether she makes a staple ME to WE Rafiki friendship chain or a unique item for a seasonal collection, her creation goes beyond the individual piece. She creates *kimnatet*—the Kipsigis word for empowerment.

WANDA O'BRIEN

FACING PAGE TOP: *The Women's Empowerment Centre acts as headquarters for ME to WE Artisans in Kenya, but it also offers financial literacy training, banking facilities and childcare services for working moms.*

FACING PAGE BOTTOM: *Evelyne Rop, ME to WE Artisans coordinator, reviews the quantity of beads needed for the latest order.*

ABOVE: *Nashilu Dapash (left) and Judy (right) bead Rafikis, friendship chains made by ME to WE Artisans and worn around the world.*



Each morning, Judy prepares tea for her children. Once they are at school, she splits her time between working at the Women's Empowerment Centre and managing the small shop she's opened with her artisan earnings.

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