



Jane Wangui Wanyoike - My Story

With God's Help, Baraka Women's Center Turned Me to Somebody from a Nobody



My name is Jane Wangui Wanyoike. I was born in 1952 in Njoro to a single parent. I am a single parent, like my mother, to six children: one girl and five boys. My business was buying bananas from Kisii land and bringing them to Nairobi Wakulima Market to sell them to retailers. My children were staying with my mother at that time. I could not afford to stay with them in Nairobi since most of the time I was traveling and had no time for them. We thought my mother would be the best person to stay with them and would mentor them well.

Negative Turn In My Life

One Saturday morning I woke up at 3 am and prepared to go to Kisii to get my bananas as usual. I got to the bus stop and while waiting, a Canter type of a vehicle came and stopped where I was and asked if I was traveling their way. I asked them if they were going to Kisii; they informed me they were going there. I got into the vehicle and we embarked on our journey. They were four men and one woman and were busy chewing *miraa*. We traveled for four hours without making a stop except for people to relieve themselves.

When we arrived at the road branching to Kisii, the driver of the canters did not branch but proceeded with the same road. I enquired where we were heading and they only looked at me and cautioned me to keep quiet. After traveling for another two hours the vehicle stopped again and we all got out. I went and sat alone thinking deeply but I heard gun shots from a police vehicle which was coming in our direction. I realized that all along I was with thugs and they were being chased. They exchanged shots and flew away leaving me stranded, confused, and scared I would get shot.

All this time I had covered my head with a scarf. I opened my eyes when I felt heavy metal on my head, only to realize there were guns pointed at me. I heard one of the officer say: "We have caught the queen mistress planner of the robbery and the way she is pretending." After I heard those words, I was given a beating I will never ever forget in my life. I was beaten unconscious, and later was put in handcuffs and thrown into the police Land Rover. I became conscious after two days in the cell and found myself still in handcuffs and in a lot of pain.

Life In Prison as Condemned

All this time I never knew what was happening to me and why the officers could not believe that I was innocent. Robbery with violence was what I was being accused of and I had no idea where, who, or what was stolen and when it happened. I was taken from court to court in Nairobi, Nakuru, Mombasa, and Kisii, from remand to remand as they continued to do their investigations. By then, nobody in my family knew where I was or what was happening to me. During that time I used to receive beatings on a daily basis so I would confess about our gangster group. There was nothing I could say because this was news to me.

For two years I remained in remand until one day I was taken to court and the judge pronounced that I was condemned and should start my jail term. I learnt that we had been condemned of robbery with violence in a bank, an Indian hardware, and carjacking a canter on the road. I was taken to Langata women prison and locked in my own room and could not leave that room. I could talk to nobody or see any sunshine. I lived with lights on throughout, so I never knew night or day time. I was served my food in the room and could relieve myself in a bucket; the prison officer would remove it once per day. I could only leave the room when going to hospital and other inmates would be locked in so that I don't meet with them. It was hell on earth and wished I would die.

My Candle Went Off

There is nothing of greater value for a woman as when she knows she is suffering for her children and all will be well and she can withstand the pain. I was in prison for 25 years and only one of my sons could visit me, and later he stopped coming to see me. All hopes I had for my children evaporated and I knew they hated me. I really wanted to know what was happening in their lives and how my mother was coping with them since I was not there to provide.

After ten years in prison, I gave up on ever been released and I only wanted to improve my relationship with God. I would spend many days fasting and reading my bible which helped me so much to connect with my creator. It was during this time I received information that my mother and one of my sons had passed on some years back. I was also informed that my only daughter was so bitter with me that she wished I would die in prison because she felt I was a shame to them as a mother. This is the time the truth sunk in me that my candle in life had gone off. This was my hardest moment in life. I hated myself and wished I would die. There was no need of living anymore.

A Light at the End of the Tunnel

Where there is smoke, there is hope for fire. After 25 long years in prison, one Thursday evening I was called by one of the officers and informed that I was needed by the senior officer. I was escorted to her office and she ushered me to one of the seats but I was reluctant to sit down. She requested I have a sit and informed me that my God has heard my prayers and I would be discharged the following day. I never got excited and she asked me why I still looked sad. I informed her I had lost hope in everything and didn't know where I was going and I was leaving what had become my home. She told me I could go to my children but I informed her they had rejected me and wished me dead and my mother had passed on while I had been in prison. When I left her office I started crying because I didn't know where and who to go to. My children didn't want to see me. I also didn't know if the community would take me.

The following day I left prison and went to Majengo a slum area, to look for my cousin. I was weak as I was not eating well and I had also aged so much. I was able to trace my cousin and started staying with her and her sister. My younger cousin never liked me from the word go and would spread rumors about me that I was a criminal and had been in prison for more than 25 years. This really broke my heart and many people started avoiding me. By that time my sons heard that I had been released; only one son came looking for me. He was happy to see me but I could not go to stay with him because he was staying with two other men. I requested him to accompany me to our rural home in Njoro to visit my mother's and son's graves. That was the hardest moment as I sat between the two graves and explained to my mother what had happened to me and where I had been. Our house was falling down and nobody was in the homestead. It was a neglected compound.

Scars Turns to Stars

Every scar one has is a shining star to each person's life. When I came back from Njoro, I found that my few belongings had been thrown out by my cousin's sister. I took my belongings and went to a nearby house and slept outside for two weeks. It was at the beginning of the third week when a Good Samaritan lady near the place I was staying came to inquire why I always slept outside. I shared my story with her and she had mercy on me and got me a single room made of mud. I looked for big cartons and started sleeping on the floor. The woman helped me to get a place where I started a business selling tomatoes, onions, and *dhanias*. She gave me 200 Kenyan shillings as my starting capital and the business started well. I could always get 100 shilling profit; I would buy lunch and supper for 90 and would save 10.

After two months the woman who had started the business for me brought a pastor to me. He informed me he always mentored and preached to prisoners and ex-prisoners. He listened to my story and we prayed together. He later told me he would introduce me to an organization where I would be trained in entrepreneurship, beading, and also will have my business mentored. The following day he

came for me and took me to Baraka Women's Center where I met Teresia Mwangi the Manager. She gave me a warm welcome and later introduced me to Wanjiru Ngigi the Program Director. I sat with Wanjiru and shared my life history and, sure enough, she gave me a listening ear and a shoulder to cry on and never condemned me. She never got tired when I cried. She kept



reassuring me all will be well and promised that Baraka Women would walk with me. At the end of the session I was feeling relieved and my soul was at peace. She also boosted my business with 200 shilling to add into my stock. She informed me she would teach me more about entrepreneurship, and will always be there to mentor my business. This was the first time after so many years I had people who believed in me and never condemned me for my mistakes.

Baraka Women's Center has been there for me. I always make frequent visits to the Center because it's now my second home. In addition to therapy, I am also training in entrepreneurship, leadership skills, and beading. My business is progressing well and every day I have a reason to smile and want to live .

Never lose hope even when the world seems to crush on you because God will always send an angel to protect you and rescue you. Your story is your weapon, and be willing to share it to the world. I'm encouraging many young women and old women who are desperate and have lost hope to visit Baraka Women's Center to gain back what they have lost in life . It's never too late to start again. I am in love with who I am and with Baraka Women's Center. Long live Baraka Women's Center!

Story told by Jane Wangui Wanyoike at Baraka Women Center, Nairobi, Kenya May 2019

Interview and transcript by Wanjiru Ngigi, Program Director, Baraka Women's Center, Nairobi, Kenya 254-721-417993

Contact: Baraka Women's Center Manager: Teresia Mwangi 254-721-381008
BarakaWomen2015@gmail.com