

Riara
University

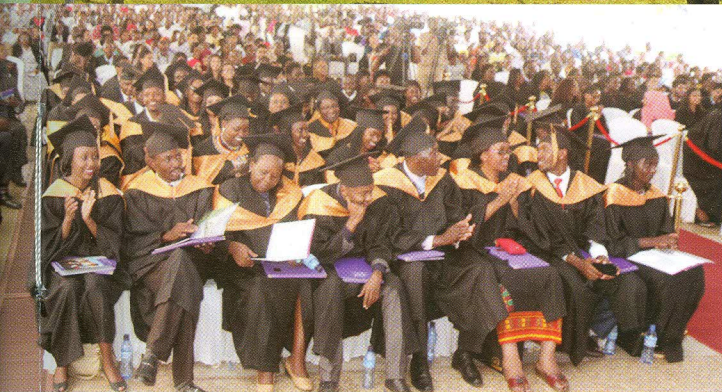
An enduring romance with education



From a small kindergarten to a leading university, this is a story of a couple's passion for education



EDUCATION



Eighty-eight year old Daniel Gachukia remembers the letter like it arrived yesterday.

It was back in the colonial days and he was a student at Makerere University, in the days of snail mail that would take weeks to bring a message that today takes seconds on the mobile phone. It was around 1955 and he'd been at the university for about two years.

The administrator of the then Fort Hall District, what is today Murang'a County, was requesting the youthful Daniel whether he wished to join the administration after completion of his studies at Makerere.

"I answered him very easily, without any hesitation. I told him No, I would not want to join the administration when I leave Makerere. I'd like to be a teacher," he said. It shows you how far back the idea of the Gachukias being involved in education goes.

The decision was pivotal.

He completed his university studies in 1956 and returned to his alma mater, Kagumo, where he'd begin his teaching career.

"Our romance with education goes as far back as that. That's how far back our interest in education goes," says Gachukia.

His wife, is the ubiquitous Dr Eddah Gachukia a towering figure in matters education in Kenya and across Africa.

"I guess one has to enjoy being taught by good teachers. And I can say without any hesitation that I had very good teachers. Not all of them. But you can pick at each stage those that made a very good impression. Going into high school, I didn't want to be anything else," says Dr Gachukia.

She wants it on record that there wasn't much choice because girls back in the 1950s had only a handful of choices; you chose either to be a teacher or a nurse "or very little else."

"I passed (my exams) to go to Makere and like my husband I trained to be a teacher. If you came from Makerere you became a good teacher because they were very thorough in the way they taught you to interact with students. That's an interest I had pursued all along," she says.

It's just over six decades since Mr Gachukia made his determinate statement about what he wanted to

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Journey to the top

- Both Mr and Dr Gachukia pursued education courses at Makerere University.
- Their journey of founding the Riara Group of schools began after they bought a kindergarten situated on the present day Riara Road.
- They then bought land in Imara Daima where they developed a girls' secondary school called Riara Springs.
- Later on in the years, they started Riara University from which the first group of students graduated in March 2017.
- They say that their passion has been driven by the desire to provide world-class education.
- Dr Gachukia served as a nominated MP for two terms between 1974 and 1983.
- The former University of Nairobi professor also served as the President of FAWE, chairperson of the National Council of Women of Kenya and the influential women's umbrella organisation, Maendeleo Ya Wanawake.

1974

Year when Dr Gachukia was nominated to Parliament.



Learning ongoing at the kindergarten where the Riara journey in education began

>>> be and joined by his wife, went down the education route.

It was one day in 1974 when a friend who knew about their love affair with education told them about a kindergarten that was up for sale on Riara Road, which was back then called Balmoral Road.

"We did not have the resources. We needed a lot of help to get it. I was teaching at the university but this was the most exciting thing I had ever done," said Dr Gachukia.

The kindergarten was in the same property as a colonial mansion built back in 1933 and which still stands strong and carries with it the story of what has become one of Kenya's most recognisable educational institutions.

It turned out that 1974 was a eventful year for the Gachukias. That is the year that they bought the kindergarten and also the year Dr Gachukia was nominated to Parliament.

"It sort of always took me away but I was always here,"

she said. "I was always here seeing how children learn. Digesting how children come without reading skills and we teach them reading skills so that within no time, we are using English as a medium of instruction."

"That's where it really started. Once you start at kindergarten level, there's no stopping," she said.

And the Gachukias have never stopped. Quite literally.

Graduation

In March this year, they were standing at the head of a congregation of academia to watch the first lot of graduands receive degrees from Riara University, the senior most institution in the Riara Group of Schools that the couple runs.

"What is particularly important for us is that we ended up being two people who are committed to education. That's extremely important. If a man and his wife have a common interest

in a particular field, it helps a lot," he said.

After a few years teaching, Mr Gachukia's career took a totally unexpected turn. He got a scholarship to study French in France. While at it, he met Mr Kariuki Njiri — the man famous for forfeiting his Kigumo parliamentary seat to allow Mzee Jomo Kenyatta join Parliament and attend Lancaster talks ahead of Kenya's independence.

Their meeting, consequential as it would become, was a genial twist of fate.

While in France, Mr Gachukia had asked his wife to be sending him a copy of the *East African Standard* every Friday in order for him to stay abreast with what was happening back home, a task she faithfully undertook.

"In the early 1960s, he was one of the first Kenyans to learn French and the first Kenyan to get a French government scholarship," says Dr Gachukia.



Mr Daniel Gachukia and his wife Dr Eddah at their home which is next to the school.

In turn, Mr Gachukia would send letters to the editor to commentate on the state of affairs back home as Kenya inched on towards independence.

“I started participating in the ideas which were going on in the newspapers and sending my letters to the editor,” he recalls. His interest with what was going on back home would have a direct consequence on his career path.

When Mr Gachukia came home for the summer holiday in 1963 he was introduced “casually” to Kariuki Njiiri, who immediately recognised the name from the newspaper writings.

One thing led to another and soon, Mr Njiiri arranged for Mr Gachukia to meet Mzee Kenyatta.

He was introduced to the founding president and in the course of the ensuing conversation, Mr Njiiri told the president that the young Gachukia was studying French and that “these are the type of people we would need to build our diplomatic corps.” Mr Njiiri proposed that he should study Diplomacy and International Relations.

When he returned to France, he enrolled for Diplomacy and International Relations.

At about the same time, Dr Gachukia was admitted to

the University of Leeds and was then much closer to her husband who was studying across the English Channel, in France.

New job

Back at Harambee House, Mzee Kenyatta had agreed with his friend’s proposition and on return from studies in Europe, Mr Gachukia joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was appointed the Chief of Protocol in 1965.

“It was a very heavy responsibility because Mzee did not travel out to other countries. They came to see him,” said Dr Gachukia.

In 1968, Dr Gachukia returned to the University of

Nairobi for further studies. She was also hired to teach at the university as an Assistant Lecturer at the university.

“I must say that the reason that the University of Nairobi offered her a teaching position while she was still studying was not because she had a teaching background but because they upgraded her Masters into a PhD and gave her a job,” said Mr Gachukia.

Mr Gachukia worked with the government until 1974 when he retired from the Civil Service to join the East Africa Industries, the precursor to present day Unilever. And so it was that Mr Gachukia wasn’t teaching when the opportunity came to buy the kindergarten

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>>> on Riara Road.

Back then, it was Balmoral Road and the kindergarten was similarly named Balmoral Kindergarten.

But in love with education he still was and there was no passing the opportunity. He soon found time to see the property and talk to the owner, who was an English lady. There were 23 children at the time, all English and various other nationalities but there were no Africans.

They reached out to a couple of teachers from Hospital Hill Primary School where their children attended to come to Riara and help to run the kindergarten.

Borrow funds

Dr Gachukia remembers that they both had to rely on Mr Gachukia for the resources to purchase the property because “banking regulations at the time did not allow lending to women.” They arranged for a facility from the bank and got it and as Dr Gachukia puts it today, “it was by the sheer grace of God.”

“By the time we were acquiring the kindergarten and this home where we have lived ever since, he was nowhere near education. But banks, by regulation, would not have lent to women, I needed him very much. That was the partnership. But in terms of teaching, that was my docket. At Leeds I also had specialised in teaching language,” said.

“When I came back, I went to help develop a curriculum for teaching children in school. That prepared me

very well,” said Dr Gachukia. The kindergarten population grew and at one point they had to rent out space from the neighbouring East African Wildlife Society. The society would later sell a part of their property to the Gachukias.

They ran the kindergarten at such a high standard, that parents whose children had already joined primary school came to ask whether Riara would enroll their children.

“Some of them went to primary schools and came back to say that they were learning in Standard One what we had already taught them in Riara,” said Dr Gachukia.

“I think there was some truth in it,” added Mr Gachukia. “Children do not lie easily on that kind of thing.”

So a decade after buying the kindergarten, they started the primary school section with just five pupils in Standard One.

The school would move to become a great performer with many of their pupils repeatedly topping national examinations and dominating headlines.

Women’s education

In 1983, Dr Gachukia left Parliament, after serving two terms, and went on to become the founding director of the Forum for African Women Educationalists, an NGO, for the next decade.

“In the next decade, the primary school became fully formed and the media was very interested with what was going on here. We also

needed very badly to move into secondary education because our children were going to other schools and doing very well,” recalls Dr Gachukia.

Due to her work with FAWE, promoting education for girls, they agreed that they start a girls’ high school which is now called Riara Springs.

By taking the decision to open the school and targeting the middle class, they happened to bark up the right tree. Kenya’s population had grown from about 10 million at the time they were buying the kindergarten headed to 20 million. There was also an increasing appetite for quality education and the rate of urbanisation was creating greater demand.

The Gachukias remember that when they acquired a property in Imara Daima for the purpose of building the secondary school, their choice attracted criticism from some of their friends who suggested that they should probably have sought property in Karen or other upscale suburbs.

“I told them that you know what, the parent whom we want to serve, the middle level parent, is not in Karen



I told them..., the parent whom we want to serve, the middle level parent, is not in Karen and Westlands, they are actually near Imara Daima. They are the younger parents and these are the people who are looking for good education for their children.”
Dr Gachukia

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Number of years since the Gachukias began their journey in developing the Riara Group of Schools

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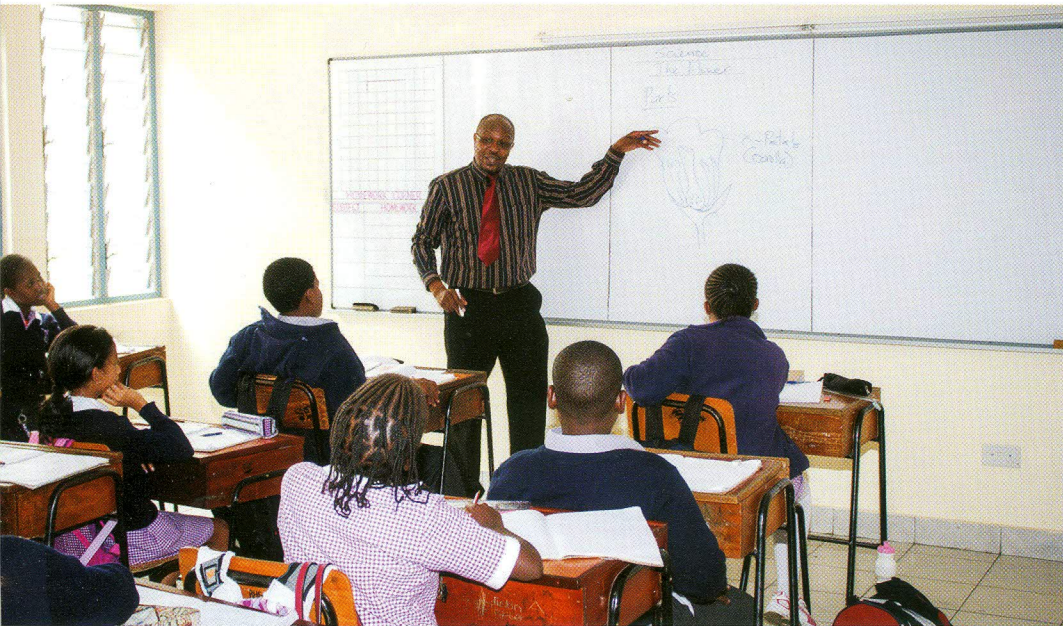
Today, 17 years later, the Riara Springs kindergarten

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The Riara Group of Schools has over the years invested in a blossoming portfolio to include Riara Spring Girls' High School (top) and Riara University (bottom).





Riara Primary School has a population of about 1300 students.

>>> has a population of nearly 500 children while the primary school's population is about 1,300.

Building it was never a bed of roses.

With only the field and architectural drawings, they had to turn to borrowing to finance the infrastructure.

"We would take our drawings to this bank and the other bank. We would have to justify and prove how we were going to pay. That's how we know banks and I can tell you now, that's the way KCB Bank has been with us for many years," says Dr Gachukia.

"That's the kind of bank that any entrepreneur needs. Somebody who believes in what you are trying to do. Someone who knows that it's a partnership. In growing, we need our banks to come with us and support us."

"For a long time, what we may call the big banks of those days were really British banks, at least in culture. I must say this; for British banks, education was not a business. Therefore, they could not see why we would go to them and come back to borrow to build more classrooms. They never saw a school as a business," says Mr Gachukia.

"Thank God, that culture is now behind us."

Mr Gachukia is glad that his father sent him to school back then and told him that it was the only wealth that he could bequeath him.

Today, he nostalgically repeats conversations with his late father about education and with a look of gratification splashed across his face, remembers the decision to become a teacher and not an administrator.

"There is nothing better I'd rather be doing in my life than what I have been doing in the last 40 - 50 years," said Mr Gachukia. "I'm glad I committed myself to pursue my life in education, to build schools and there is nothing else I'd rather be doing."

Secret to success

Dr Gachukia says that building an educational institution is no mean task because it requires personal attention to detail. Her husband says that they succeeded in building the famous institution because they ran no other business.

"If we were running our schools as a side business because we have a supermarket somewhere or a farm in Nakuru, we would not have got where we are," said Mr Gachukia. "But my wife

and I have no other business and have not had any other business since we came here."

The other secret, says Dr Gachukia, is their relentless pursuit of quality and investing in their teaching staff.

"We've always had not just passion but ideals. We've always said that we're going to produce quality education. We invest a lot in capacity building of our teachers. We have been very, very fortunate with the teachers," she says. The octogenarian couple remember with nostalgia the many teachers who have and still work with them and pay tribute to their dedication to the schools' progress.

Mr Gachukia says that as with any business, an entrepreneur in the education sector must also brace themselves for challenges.

Overcoming challenges

"Any business that anybody starts will have challenges. It's for you to know how to manage those challenges; make sure you look at your forecasts, your expenses, revenue streams and so on. There's no magic in it. It's being realistic and practical and in the case of schools, being 100 percent involved in the management of that business," says Mr Gachukia.

He says of KCB Bank: "They know they are with us in our school business. Any bank likes to feel that they are supporting what can be called a national effort. And what more than education as a national effort. We are fortunate that we are working with a bank that understands that."

"Challenges are there; we have to tighten this, tighten the other, we have to jump over hurdles which are sometimes too close to each other. But we have managed to get to the point where we feel that actually our bank understands us and we understand their requirements and reasoning. We got to a point where our bank regards us as a partner," he added.

*** Do you have a dream?**
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Quality has been their hallmark

Nothing gives the Gachukias more pleasure than the riot of sounds that wafts into the mansion they've called home since 1974. It is adjacent to the school playground.

The only other source of pleasure that competes with this gratifying feeling is when an old student drops by to say hello.

The other day, a young man, says Mr Gachukia, came and asked to see him. When the young man was shown into his office, he had a young woman in tow.

"The young man went to university in Australia and works there in a bank. He had brought his fiancée to Riara, he told me, to show her the sandpit in which he used to play in his kindergarten days. What could be more satisfying?" said Mr Gachukia.

Dr Gachukia chips in; "What we have found very exciting in the long journey is to see a young man or woman who comes and says guka, cucu, (grandpa, grandma) I was in kindergarten here and have come to join university."

"At our age," continues Mr Gachukia, "what pleasure can you see than to get a person coming to say 'I wanted to show my fiancée the sandpit where I used to play'?"

Dr Gachukia says that watching little children come to kindergarten and begin to acquire cognitive abilities gives her great pleasure adding that she derives great joy when children learn and then go out and change the world.

Is there money in education? Dr Gachukia actually says that passionate educationists cannot make overnight profits.

"Education is not the place to get money because you keep trying to improve your product and the staff," she says.

Take the Riara University dream for instance. After years of success with kindergarten, primary and secondary school level, they felt they needed to do more.

The dream to build a university was actually born out of travels to the Far East, to nations which had been British colonies in the same generation as Kenya was but which had made greater economic strides.

"We started asking ourselves what their secret was in developing that fast. My wife and I came to the conclusion that the key to this development is not politics but education," said Mr Gachukia. "Those countries have built educational institutions where they are producing manpower for their social and economic development."

"What was more natural for us than to move to



the next step? My wife and I saw the university as the institution which will give Kenya the cutting edge for social and economic development. And we are very grateful that KCB Bank supported us," says Mr Gachukia.

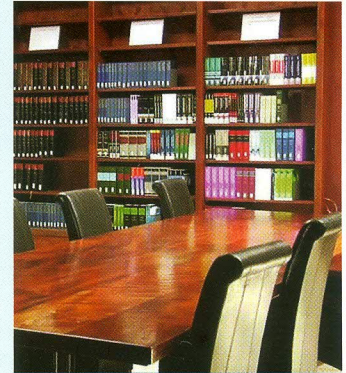
Dr Gachukia says that the dream for the university was also driven by demand after they saw how Form Four leavers without opportunities to further their studies or struggling to raise fees to travel abroad for the same.

They felt that a quality institution – designed to match any in the world – would attract students.

And since quality education was their hallmark, they weren't going to abandon that ideal.

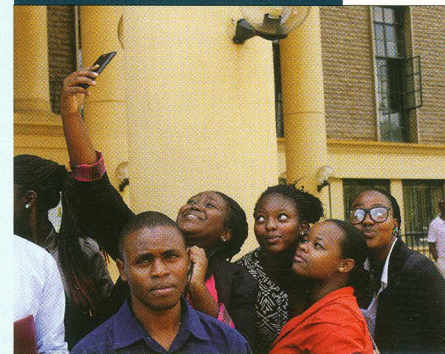
"We have injected top-flight professors," says Mr Gachukia. "They come from some of the top universities in Britain, the US, China and South Africa. Competition is increasing even at university level and only quality will take us to the next level."

"We offer quality of life; quality of teaching; quality of facilities; IT centers and so on," adds Dr Gachukia. "Teaching is not all lectures and taking notes; they have to do 50 per cent of the work themselves. This is the kind of education that we are trying out at Riara University but very successfully too. What is already happening is great. One of our students who graduated in March has already been accepted to Harvard for a Masters," said Dr Gachukia.



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Mr Gachukia



March

Month this year that the first batch of students graduated from Riara University

