

MAINMAN

Campus hustler, now a homes guru

LEE KARURI

is a founding member of Homes Afrika, a real estate giant associated with luxurious projects like Longonot Gate. The architect started his business at 22 while studying at the University of Nairobi. He shares his remarkable journey with **EVELYNE OGUTU**

For those who do not know you, how would you describe yourself?

I am a Kenyan entrepreneur, a husband and a father. I started my own company when I was only 22 years old. I am the chairman of Home Afrika, a real estate company that was recently listed in the Nairobi Securities Exchange. I am also the chairman of Dimensions Architects and Interior Decoration, a firm I co-founded when I was 30 years old. I am also a chairman of Resorts and Cities the mother brand for Longonot Gate, founded three years ago.

What pushed you to start a business that early and how did you manage, given that you were studying Architectural Science?

It was not easy for me in campus. After my father passed on while I was still young, my family and had to find ways to make ends meet. When I joined campus, I needed to do something or find a way to get money to support my mother educate my younger siblings. I came up with the idea of designing models to sell to architectural firms. I used to supply my models to Symbion Architects, which was then a leading firm in East Africa. The money I got from my proceeds would then be ploughed back to the business and I would send some to my mother to pay school fees for my siblings.

That seed that you planted while in campus is what has blossomed into a multi-billion empire...

Yes, we started like a small *chama*. I must admit that starting the business was not easy. I partnered with a colleague and we combined our pocket money savings in order to buy materials, which were used to make the model.

When the business began to take shape and grow, I liaised with my lecturers and the department to give us a small space to do our business. With the good grades I had and the determination the lecturers saw in me, they agreed to give us the room, but at a small fee, which we would pay monthly when we received our payment from clients. Seeing the success of our business, other students volunteered to be part of the project and with time, we began to pay them a little fee for their support when clients paid.

How did you branch off to real estate?

In 1994, I partnered with Chema Katua to start the Dimensions Architects Company along Ngong' Road. But in 2005, I decided to venture into real estate and that is how Home Afrika came up. Now we have landmarks such as Migaa Golf and Country Club, Kikwetu, Lakeview and Morningside, among others.

You sound like you came from a humble background?

Yes I did. I was brought up in Kikuyu, at the University of Nairobi staff quarters where my father was a lecturer. However, when I had just turned 20, I lost my father and we had to move

to a semi-permanent house. I was forced to take up the responsibility of assisting my mother. We are 11 in our family and so it was a herculean task for my mom who had been widowed.

This experience taught me that life is a journey with a lot of challenges but in all this we must find our purpose.

You managed to join the prestigious Alliance Boys High School. How did the experience shape your ideals?

Alliance is one of the most respected schools in Kenya. The school leaders instilled in us values of being responsible and always being ready to serve. Successful people had also graduated from this institution and we had to ensure that we were not the team to lower the standards. In my sixth year, I was appointed the head boy where I lead more than 700 students.

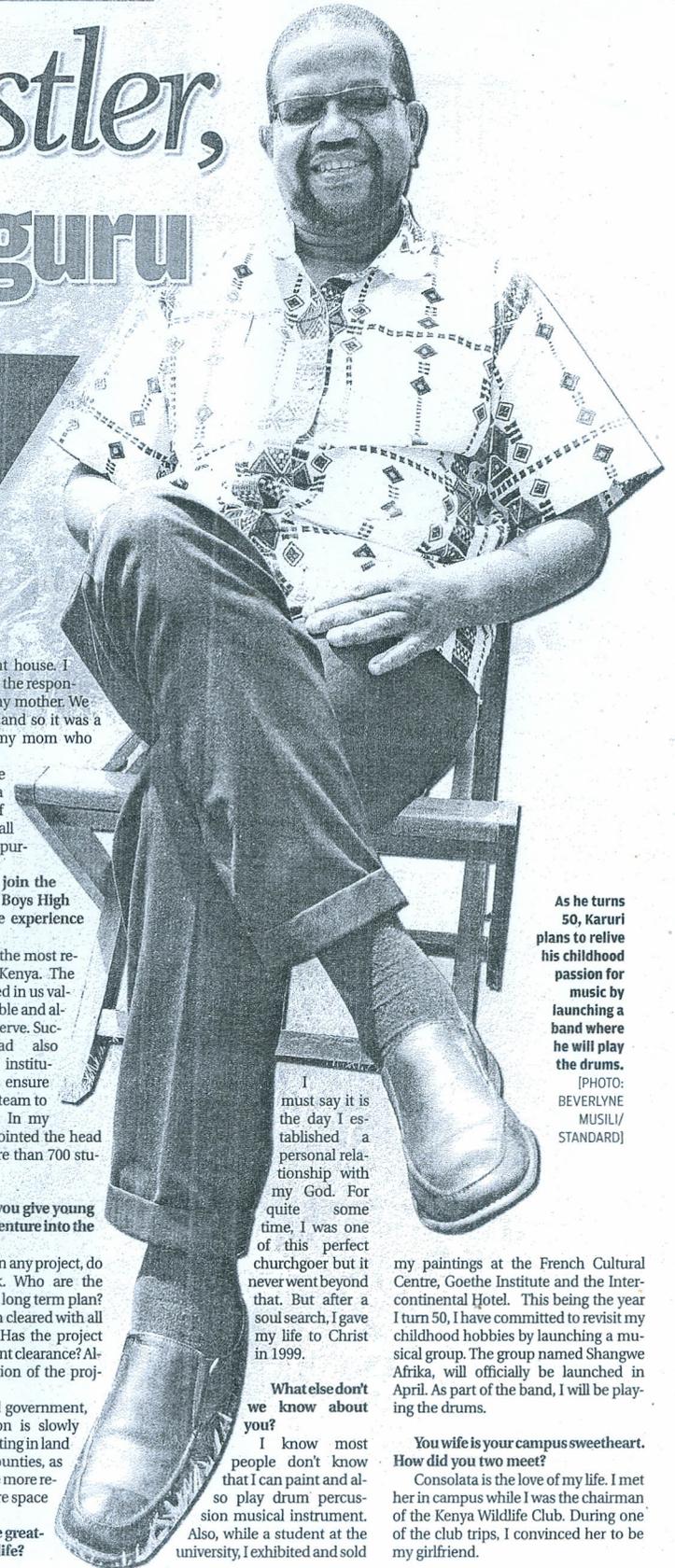
What tips would you give young people who want to venture into the real estate market?

Before you invest in any project, do a background check. Who are the owners? What is their long term plan? Is the land in question cleared with all government bodies? Has the project received all government clearance? Also consider the location of the project.

With the devolved government, urban rural migration is slowly taking place. Try investing in land and projects in the counties, as they are cheaper, have more returns and there is more space and opportunity.

What has been the greatest highlight of your life?

“With the devolved government, urban rural migration is slowly taking place. Try investing in land and projects in the counties.”



As he turns 50, Karuri plans to relive his childhood passion for music by launching a band where he will play the drums.

[PHOTO: BEVERLYNE MUSILI/STANDARD]

I must say it is the day I established a personal relationship with my God. For quite some time, I was one of this perfect churchgoer but it never went beyond that. But after a soul search, I gave my life to Christ in 1999.

What else don't we know about you?

I know most people don't know that I can paint and also play drum percussion musical instrument. Also, while a student at the university, I exhibited and sold

my paintings at the French Cultural Centre, Goethe Institute and the Intercontinental Hotel. This being the year I turn 50, I have committed to revisit my childhood hobbies by launching a musical group. The group named Shangwe Afrika, will officially be launched in April. As part of the band, I will be playing the drums.

Your wife is your campus sweetheart. How did you two meet?

Consolata is the love of my life. I met her in campus while I was the chairman of the Kenya Wildlife Club. During one of the club trips, I convinced her to be my girlfriend.