

The logo for Woman's Day, featuring the words "Woman's Day" in a white, serif font against a solid magenta background.

The Letter That Changed My Life

By Jennifer Haupt

Seven years ago, while volunteering in Kenya with the Red Cross, I met a 15-year-old boy named Julius who deeply touched my heart. He showed me around his village of shacks with no running water or electricity, excitedly explaining his dreams of becoming a teacher and maybe even a journalist someday. What struck me wasn't the poverty he lived in, but the richness of his heart. He had nothing but his dreams, yet there was something special in his eyes. I wanted to help make those dreams come true, but I didn't know how. I just encouraged him to study hard so that he could succeed.

When I returned home, I wrote to Julius several times, and even though years went by without an answer, I still prayed that this bright child wouldn't lose his spark. Then, in 2007, I finally received a letter from him. I was thrilled.

Julius apologized for not getting in touch sooner, admitting that he wasn't confident enough in his grammar to send a letter before then. He wrote that my words of encouragement had helped to keep his dreams alive, and he wanted to share some good news: He'd been accepted to college.

Julius was also fulfilling one of his other dreams: teaching at his church elementary school. The church couldn't pay him, so he worked in construction as well, earning \$5 a day, to help feed his family. He didn't ask me for money, but I could read between the lines. So I decided to send him \$1,000, the cost of a year's tuition at community college. I did it as much for me as for him. I've always felt a need to help others, and I thought this was a way to make a real difference in one child's life.

Today, Julius is a college graduate with a degree in journalism. We continue to exchange letters, now mostly by e-mail, writing about our families, the future of our countries and much more. My relationship with this young man has colored the way I view the world. I used to be overwhelmed by all the problems, wondering how I could possibly make a dent. Now, I see that one-on-one connections can make a difference. — WD