

**A homeless youth asked a stranger for food. The man responded with a question that changed the kid's life forever.**

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By John Blake

"He was shoeless and hopeless," Jacques Masiko says of the youth he encountered on a Ugandan street. "He wanted somebody to give him a meaningful life."

Peter Mutabazi spotted his target one evening as the man walked through a crowded marketplace. The man was alone and smartly dressed in a button-down shirt, khaki pants and professorial eyeglasses. He sauntered through the food stalls, oblivious to Mutabazi getting closer with each step. This guy doesn't have a clue, Mutabazi, then 15, thought as he closed in on the man. Not once did he check over his shoulder or put his hand to his wallet to make sure it was there. Easy marks like this don't come along very often.

Mutabazi needed all the luck he could muster at that moment. It was 1988 in Kampala, Uganda, and he had been living alone on the streets for five years. He was just one of thousands of homeless kids trying to survive in his country's capital city during a perilous time. Uganda's economy had been devastated by a civil war, coups and an HIV epidemic.

Young Peter survived by theft and by begging. He'd typically approach a shopper to ask for a handout while offering to carry their grocery bags — only to swipe some food from the bags as he ferried their groceries to their cars. Before he could do the same with this stranger, though, the man wheeled around and faced him. The man then smiled and asked him a question that was so unexpected that the teenager involuntarily took several steps backward. It represented a danger that the streetwise Mutabazi had not anticipated.

That question, and the answer he gave in return, would change his life forever. Today he's a foster-dad hero

Mutabazi opens the front door to his elegant, five-bedroom home in Charlotte, North Carolina, and greets his visitor with a wide smile. A white Tesla sits in his driveway and two well-groomed dogs — Simba, a goldendoodle, and Rafiki, a labradoodle — yelp and

bark. The well-manicured lawn in this suburban neighbourhood is a far cry from Kampala, but Mutabazi's journey would have not been possible without the stranger he encountered more than 30 years ago.

Today, Mutabazi may be the most well-known foster dad in the US. He has fostered 47 children and adopted three more. The interior of his home reflects Mutabazi's formidable parenting duties. A well-stocked kid's playroom stood to the immediate right of his foyer, complete with stuffed teddy bears, a giant poster of dinosaurs, and another poster in giant, colourful letters that declared, "I WANT YOU TO BE bold, gracious...fearless, determined and YOU!"

This is the version of Mutabazi that the American public has seen in recent years. He's written two books, amassed more than 870,000 Instagram followers and been widely featured in the media for his foster-care work. Portraits of Mutabazi show him hugging and playing with his children, many of whom are White. Their photos—a dark-skinned African immigrant bonding with White, blond children—offer a glimpse of another world beyond America's persistent racial divisions. Anthony, Mutabazi's first adoptee, is now 19 and says he wants to be an advocate for foster care like his dad. Mutabazi, 52, says he never imagined being where he is today.

"Dreaming as a street kid is lying to yourself," he says. "We didn't dream because dreaming wasn't something that we were taught. Dreaming of a better place was lying to yourself, and you don't want to lie to yourself every day."

"My father used to say to me, 'I wish you were never born so I didn't have to feed you'"

But there has been a crucial voice missing from stories about Mutabazi. It is the voice of the man who taught him to dream. It is the man who met Mutabazi in the Ugandan marketplace and inspired him to write in his memoir, "My entire life hinges on receiving undeserved kindness." Who is that man? And of all the street kids in Kampala, why did he single out Mutabazi?

The man's name is Jacques Masiko, and his life has had its share of drama, too. Now 77, he still lives in Uganda. A jovial man who talks with a slight British accent, he says when he first met Mutabazi, he saw a teenager that was alone, emaciated and traumatized.

“He was shoeless and hopeless,” Masiko tells CNN. “He seemed to want a connection. He wanted somebody to give him a meaningful life.” Back then he was a ‘garbage boy’ too afraid to dream. Mutabazi’s journey from the streets of Kampala to America could have been derailed many times during his youth. He’s compared it to going to the moon —it feels that improbable.

He was born in a village near the Ugandan and Rwandan border and grew up in a thatched hut with his parents and three siblings. He never owned a pair of shoes or slept on a mattress as a child. But worse than the poverty was the verbal and physical abuse from his father. “My father used to say to me, ‘I wish you were never born so I didn’t have to feed you,’” he tells CNN.

Peter ran away at 10 years old because he says he feared that his father would murder him one day. More brutality, though, awaited him in Kampala. He banded together with a group of street kids who survived by theft, cheap labour and something worse — prostitution. There was little pity from adults. Drunks often beat them for sport.

One man threw acid into the face of a kid Peter knew. Another kid was beaten to death by another man. Many of his friends simply disappeared.

Peter’s “home” was a patch of dirt near a garbage dump. The stench from the garbage attached itself to him, and he struggled to sleep with flies crawling in his nose. He was so afraid to fall asleep in public because of what a stranger might do to him that he once went five days without sleeping. He called himself “Garbage Boy.”

“When you live around garbage and you smell like garbage and people treat you like garbage, it’s hard not to think of yourself that way,” he wrote in his memoir, “Now I Am Known.” Then one day, he spotted Masiko walking through the market. Then a stranger asked him a dangerous question. As the two faced each other in the marketplace, the man asked him a simple question. “What is your name?”

Peter hesitated. It was a dangerous question because no adult had ever asked him that when he was on the streets. Not giving his real name was a form of self-defence. His anonymity helped the street kid build psychological armour. He could remain calloused if he saw himself only as Garbage Boy.

But this stranger was challenging him to remember his humanity—and to trust an adult.

“He was scaring me,” Mutabazi says today. “Kindness meant danger. You’re trying to treat me like a human being and that’s dangerous because I know you’re going to ask me for something I don’t want to give or you’re going to force me to give it to you.”

Peter told him his real name. Masiko peeled a couple of plantains from his grocery bag and gave them to him. The boy felt uneasy, but he had found a dependable food source. Whenever Masiko visited in the months that followed, Peter sought him out for more food.

And then a curious pattern developed. Masiko plied him with more questions:

“Would you like to go to school?” “Would like to have dinner with my family?” “Would you like to go to church with us one day?” It wasn’t easy for Peter to answer. Change, even from his hellish situation, felt threatening. He couldn’t envision being more than Garbage Boy. “Dreaming wasn’t part of my ecosystem,” Mutabazi tells CNN. “I did not want to believe. Hoping was lying to yourself. And I didn’t want to lie to myself.” He went on to college and a career as a child advocate

He kept saying yes, though. Masiko enrolled him in a boarding school and persuaded Peter’s mom to allow her son to move in with his family. And gradually, Mutabazi discovered why he could now dream: He couldn’t have picked a better person to target in the marketplace. Masiko is the father of six biological children with his wife, Cecilia, but he literally cannot count how many children he has helped throughout his life. A natty dresser who favours Kangol-like wool hats, he was at that time in the late ‘80s also the country director of Compassion International, a Christian humanitarian aid organization based in Colorado that’s dedicated to lifting children worldwide out of poverty.

At first, the teenaged Peter struggled to bond with Masiko’s family. He wouldn’t join the family dinner table until everyone else was seated. He’d jump out of his seat and start clearing the table and washing the dishes rather than relaxing with the rest of the family in the living room. He often sat near a door during dinner, bracing himself for the moment Masiko would erupt in anger and beat his wife, like his biological father did. Peter Mutabazi: “All my life, I didn’t feel I belonged.” “With him, I saw something I’d never seen before,” Mutabazi says about Masiko. “He sits with his family and they’re laughing and

talking. I thought it was a show, a joke.” Peter realized he’d become part of the family when Masiko extended him one small courtesy at the dinner table one day. He pointed to an empty seat at the table and said it now belonged to Peter. “All my life, I didn’t feel I belonged,” Mutabazi says. “But for them to put an extra seat out for me, I felt like, Oh, I’m special. I’m good enough to sit with everyone.” Masiko also often invited international travellers to the family dinner table because of his work through Compassion International. Meeting these guests – many of them accomplished professionals – helped expand his dreams for his own life, Mutabazi says. Mutabazi would go on to graduate from a Ugandan university with Masiko’s financial help before winning a scholarship to study and eventually earning a degree in crisis management from Oak Hill College in London. He moved to the US in 2002 to study theology and is now a senior child advocate at World Vision, an international Christian aid organization that sponsors needy children and provides emergency relief to struggling families. The psychological journey Mutabazi has taken is, in some ways, more daunting than the physical distances he’s travelled. But Mutabazi says Masiko has always been his North Star. He wanted what Masiko had — a loving family, education and a life dedicated to helping others. When he had doubts and needed strength, he often thought of Masiko. The man constantly told Mutabazi how smart and brave he was. “He became my idol,” Mutabazi says about Masiko. “There was nothing I couldn’t do.”

Masiko has followed Mutabazi’s success from afar. His voice softens when he talks about Mutabazi’s role as a foster dad. “It gives me great joy to know that my labour has not gone in vain,” he says. ‘The biggest investment you can make is in people’ When asked today why he helped Mutabazi, Masiko cites his religious beliefs.

“My faith in Christ compelled me to love Peter more than anything else,” he tells CNN.

There was also another source for his actions. “I want to help somebody move from point A to point B,” Masiko says. “I saw in Peter great potential.” There may be another reason as well, says Josh Masiko, one of Masiko’s six children. He says his father also grew up in poverty with a distant father who had many wives, something that is not uncommon in some polygamous African cultures. “His memory as a child was being pushed aside,” says Josh Masiko, who currently works for Google in Atlanta, Georgia. His father helped many kids who were like Mutabazi, Josh Masiko says. His parents constantly opened their

home to needy kids, feeding them and paying for their schooling, he says. Often the younger Masiko said he had to temporarily give up his room for kids or strangers. “He just gives,” Josh Masiko said of his father. “He’s still paying school fees for people I don’t even know.” “It gives me great joy to know that my labour had not gone in vain” —Jacques Masiko. And now, some of those who Masiko helped are giving back. Masiko was recently diagnosed with prostate cancer. He needed to raise \$11,000 for the surgery but didn’t have the money. Hundreds of the former children he helped over the years—many of them now doctors, engineers and lawyers—banded together to pay his costs. He is undergoing chemotherapy now. “I’m strong in spirit even though my body is still weak,” he says. When he left Uganda for America when he was 18, Josh Masiko says his father gave him some advice. “He said the biggest investment you can make is not in ... wealth and not in (material) stuff. It’s in people. If you invest in people, you can never go wrong.” When asked how much he has invested in kids like Mutabazi, Masiko pauses and tries to dismiss the question with quick laughter. “You don’t blow your own trumpet,” he says. When pressed, Masiko says he’s lost count of how many kids he’s helped. He then mentions a young woman who came to work as a maid in his house several years ago. “I told my wife I see potential in her,” he says. “So, we sent her to school and last year she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in social work.” Mutabazi is now one of his most prominent beneficiaries. Masiko has flown to the US to meet Mutabazi’s adopted and foster kids. He marvels at Mutabazi’s rapport with them.

“He pours his life into their lives,” Masiko says. “It gives me great joy to know that my labour had not gone in vain.” “This afternoon I read a message Peter sent to me” via email, he says. “And, oh my goodness – he said, ‘You are my hero. My mentor. My hope.’ That message lifts my spirits.” In his memoir, Mutabazi describes one of his biggest fears: “All my life I lived in fear of becoming like my father.” That fear came true. He did become like his father — not his biological one, but the man he now calls dad. And maybe one day, the smiling foster kids who appear with Mutabazi in photos will be like Masiko, too.

John Blake is a CNN senior writer and author of the award-winning memoir, “More Than I Imagined: What a Black Man Discovered About the White Mother He Never Knew.”