MARTIN KIETI
The blind must read what everyone else reads

Until you have met someone such as Martin, you might never understand how much work goes into advocating for others. When starting small programs to partnering with other companies, to speaking in high places for policy change, Martin is out to make sure that the visually-impaired will one day access materials that everyone else is accessing without having to wait for some organization to translate it to braille, or send them someone to read for them. He narrates his life as a visually-impaired person and an advocate for the same to ANN MUTIRIRI.

He squints and brings his phone close to his eyes whenever he wants to explain something that he can't see to so many times and so easily that it is easy to tell he got used to that as his life. This is not to say that it is an easy life, neither is it to say that he has allowed the visual impairment to blind him from living life to the fullest. He works, sits in boards and changes lives. The first time I met him, he was speaking at an orientation meeting for publishers. He helped him understand how they can publish in formats that are accessible by the visually impaired. He articulated, calmly firm and so knowledgeable, it is clear he had been at it for a long time.

Of course, he did not begin with advocacy. As a young boy somewhere in Machakos county attending a local primary school, he remembers sitting at the front row of the class but barely being able to read what was written on the board. He was just congenital low vision, something about having a small cornea right from birth. It was this condition that saw him tattered and bullied much more than others in his younger years of primary school.

His headmaster was very caring. With the right intuitions, he had him stand next to him during school assemblies. "For some reason, he was very proud of me and actually tried to protect me," Martin recalls.

So, instead of standing with the other students, he would be on the 'high-end' queue, which was of teachers facing the crowd of students. This gave other pupils the impression of him as a kind of captain, much to his disadvantage because in this setting, someone who was so close to authority was definitely an enemy to those manned by this authority. To make it worse, the headmaster would often hold him close during those assemblies and send a stern warning to any pupil who tried to bully Martin. Of course, they bullied him even more.

They would pelt a stone at him and run around the corner and obeying to his poor vision, he was never able to tell who had done it. There were also two notorious bullies who made him a target and gave him a beating every day for months on their way home. The school had hundreds of pupils and so they left in crowds when the last bell rang. These crowds would thin as many dropped off at their homes.

Martin's home was about seven kilometers away, and when the crowd was totally gone and only he and his cousin were left, these bullies would emerge from a bush and instruct his cousin to stand on the side as they gave the poor boy a beating.

Were they doing this because they could take advantage of his disability or because they considered him an enemy for being protected by the headmaster? A mix of both, I think," says Martin. After months of this routine, he and cousin thought enough was enough and reported it at home. An uncle hid in the bush the following day and ascertained that the reported event was true and with this evidence, the parents of the two bullies were told and the madness ended.

His big break in those days came with a land rover visit to his grandmother's homestead, where he lived. A vehicle the village in the 70s was a big deal, so everyone that saw it or heard that there was one around, wanted to see what business government officials had in their village. It turned out that it was about him. Someone must have reported somewhere in Nairobi that there was a small boy somewhere in Machakos that was struggling because he was visually-impaired.

These were officials from Thika school for the Blind who had come to assess him. They concluded that he needed to be in a special school, talked over the same with his grandmother and other adults in the homestead and just like that, they went with him to Thika School for the Blind. Here, he had more peace, although he had to adjust to boarding school and the idea of having so many visually-impaired children (many completely blind), together.

He excelled, joined Thika High School for the Blind and later took a Bachelors in Education majoring in French and literature at Kenyatta University. The very history of his higher education studies formed a big part of his mission when he finally got to advocate.

After getting his degree, he taught for eight years at Machakos Technical College and while at it, he also did his Master's degree in French linguistics. Interestingly, the Machakos branch of Kenya Union for the Blind (KUB) usually met at the Machakos Institute for the Blind which neighboured Machakos Technical Institute where he taught. As such, when he was introduced, he began attending meetings and taking part in the union's activities.

A college friend who had become the director of the African Union for the Blind (AUB - the umbrella union for national unions for the blind) got wind of the fact that he was in Machakos and asked to see him. When they met at KUB's offices at Embakasi (that was where AUB in Kenya was also housed), he introduced Martin to the activities of the AUB and welcomed him to go over and help whenever he could.

That began Martin's life henceforth. When he wasn't working or studying, he was at that office doing something or learning something. He learnt just how much there still was to advocate for so that the visually-impaired got a chance to exercise their human rights like everyone else.

In 2004, KUB needed a new CEO and he was advised to apply, which he did, albeit just two days before the close for applications. He had taken time to come to the decision to apply because it meant quitting his government job if he got the position. He got the position and quit his job at Machakos Technical Institute, a move that saw family and friends alarm for him - he was quitting a permanent and

pensionable job to engage in a two-year contract that was only renewable based on performance. He had already made up his mind though. In fact, at the job interview, when asked how long he intended to stay, he said six years and that's how long he stayed. He knew what he wanted to achieve.

Martin revived KUB just like he wanted to, and was able to achieve much during his tenure. Among his milestones, he started a mentorship programme at Kenyatta University aimed at building the confidence of blind students to venture into other careers apart from teaching, which for others like him, had been encouraged because of the surety of employment. He also was part of the process at Safaricom Ltd of adjusting their facilities to accommodate employment of blind people.

He also spearheaded the partnership of KUB with organisations such as Perkins' School for the Blind and Computer Aide International to provide computers with access software for blind students in learning institutions. During his time at KUB, he had to head to work for a person assigned to him by the university to read to him even for revision and therefore wanted to see other visually-impaired students get a better life. He also was a frequent visitor at the Ministry of Education offices, trying to see policies made and others changes to rightly include visually-impaired persons.

To date, Martin sits in many boards whose aim is to give the visually-impaired a better life. He is the chairman of the board of management at the KUB and a member of the board of trustees at Kilimanjaro Blind Trust. He is also the technical advisor for Africa for the Marawice Treaty Ratification Campaign whose aim is to promote access of published works for persons who are blind, visually-impaired or otherwise print-disabled.

After six years as CEO of KUB, Martin worked in other organisations, including IRC (Inclusion Resources for Africa) as an Inclusive Development Advisor where he still works. He also works with Benetech as Program Manager for Africa Region, and the DAFF Consortium as Africa Regional Capacity Development Officer. At both of these organisations, he is dedicated to developing ways, technical or otherwise, of inclusive publishing.

Martin wants to see a world where visually-impaired persons will not have to buy special gadgets to be able to access what everyone else does. He thanks God for the phones that have come with magnification and text-to-speech translation, which anyone can use if they need and ignore if they don't.

"If we keep on providing to these special people special services in a special way, even with the right intentions, we end up excluding them all the more," Martin confidently sums up why he does what he does.