Seven Thousand Miles Away

On the corner of Duke University’s West Campus bus loop stands a man, removed from the herds of undergraduate students. They’ll occasionally say hi, coming up to ask for directions. But mostly, they walk on by. And he prefers it that way.

Andrew Okongo, a 50-year-old man with rectangular glasses perched atop his bald head, stands across the street from the bus stop. He’s in uniform: a blue creaseless collared shirt, black slacks, black work shoes, and a reflective neon vest with a name tag clipped to it. Looking at him, he looks like any security guard. Just by looking, it’s impossible to tell that he’s running a community’s economy in Kenya from his phone.

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He moved from Kenya to the United States when he was 21, going to Jersey State to earn his bachelor's in Finance. He puts his degree to work at his second job at the Pharma company Merck. There, he works with his wife on his off days from being a security guard. He gets tired but has no complaints - he knew what he was getting into. He wants to provide for his family and stay on track to pay off his 30-year mortgage 15 years early.

Before work he’ll tell his kids: “Daddy is going to make the money!”

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When I walked up to him, he was writing a message to his wife. He writes her a message every night and morning.

It read:

“Madam! Good night, the Love of my life. I hope you have a wonderful night rest, and colorful dreams, too. I love you so much - more than how I imagined to love you.”

Fifteen years ago in Minnesota, he was living in a couple’s basement. When he moved out, she moved in. The couple called him, telling him a nice Kenyan woman named Caroline moved in. His ears perked up. After a little cajoling, he got her number from the couple. The two started talking, and after two short months, Andrew called Caroline’s parents.

“I need your help to marry your daughter,” he recalled saying. “Just give me a chance.”

And like that, having never dated, the wedding was on. He remembers that some of her relatives were skeptical at first, casting side-eyes. But Caroline lied, saying that they’d known each other for two years. Their shoulders relaxed.

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As I was talking to Andrew, his phone would ring every five minutes or so.

He said that people in Kenya are starting to wake up.

Back home - as he calls Kenya - Andrew owns an 800-chicken-strong farm, growing corn to feed the chickens and selling the extra at his cereal shop, an entertainment hall for watching sports, a lumber yard, a barbershop, a bar, a household goods store, and a restaurant. He started with one small shop in 2015. That business funded the next, and the next, and the next.

But not everything is for sale. After each collection of eggs and corn, he always sets aside some for the people in his neighborhood who he knows can’t buy.

“I grew up poor - I know another part. I know what it’s like to not have.”

All operations are handled over the phone. The 7000 miles of distance is almost absent. Every transaction is reported to him over WhatsApp. At all times, Andrew has an earbud in, talking to his employees. He wants to know where every dollar goes.

In his cash-based business, theft isn’t just common - it’s inevitable. Andrew hires an outsider to report inventory directly to him; he hires someone to report what supplies are dropped off. But at the end of the day, he knows that people will steal, and you just have to count your losses.

Andrew’s security job is perfect in his eyes, enabling him to conduct all his business. He has a steady schedule, and the night shift couldn’t be at a better time. Five going on six years, he doesn’t see his plans changing soon.

Remotely, he’s able to employ kids in school, his neighbors, and his family. All the money either goes to his employees or back into the business. He is even able to give out loans to students at 40K to 50K Kenyan Shillings. He helps them, and they help him.

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His family lives in Franklinton, in a house wrapped by a fence and flanked by the houses of two police officers. Andrew likes the added security - cruisers in the driveway and extra sets of cameras. He feels that he’s become a target because of his money; his home in Kenya has 12 guard dogs.

Having 10 kids, seven girls and three boys, it’s hard to know everything. But that doesn’t mean you can’t try. Andrew has cameras with motion-activated phone alerts to see if his kids are trying to sneak off. He has timers on his kids' PCs; if they’ve been on for too long, he can hit a kill switch on his phone. He also likes going on one-on-one dates with his kids, taking them out for a bite at Mcdonald's, or out shopping for new shoes. In that setting, they’re more of themselves, separated from the hectic group dynamic at home. He’s able to find out if someone has been ‘messing up.’

One of Andrew’s favorite things to do with his kids is throwing a family barbecue. He has a big backyard practically made for family gatherings. He sectioned off a part of his yard with a bug screen, facilitating the occasional midnight BBQ sesh.

“You have to try and have fun with the kids - before you know it they’re grown and gone … and won’t want to come back!”

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Andrew stands by a lamppost, his face wrinkle-free in the light. A bus empties a new mass of students onto the concrete, and they trickle past us without a glance. I wonder how he looks so calm with such a hectic schedule.

But he doesn’t see his life that way.

“I wasn’t better than anyone else - God let me come to America. Here, people work.”

And so he works. One earbud in, he talks transactions and logistics. Two eyes up, he’s ready to observe and report.

(1035)

Fact Check

On the corner of Duke University’s West Campus bus loop stands a man, removed from the herds of undergraduate students. [✓] They’ll occasionally say hi, coming up to ask for directions. [✓] But mostly, they walk on by. And he prefers it that way. [✓] [✓]

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Sources

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