The World's Oldest First Grader

track 1-04

"You're never too old to learn." One man in Kenya proved this famous saying.

A ON JANUARY 12, 2004, Kimani Maruge knocked on the door of the primary school in his village in Kenya. It was the first day of school, and he was ready to start learning. The teacher let him in and gave him a desk. The new student sat down with the rest of the first graders—six- and seven-year-old boys and girls. However, Kimani Maruge was not an ordinary first grader. He was 84 years old—the world's oldest first grader.
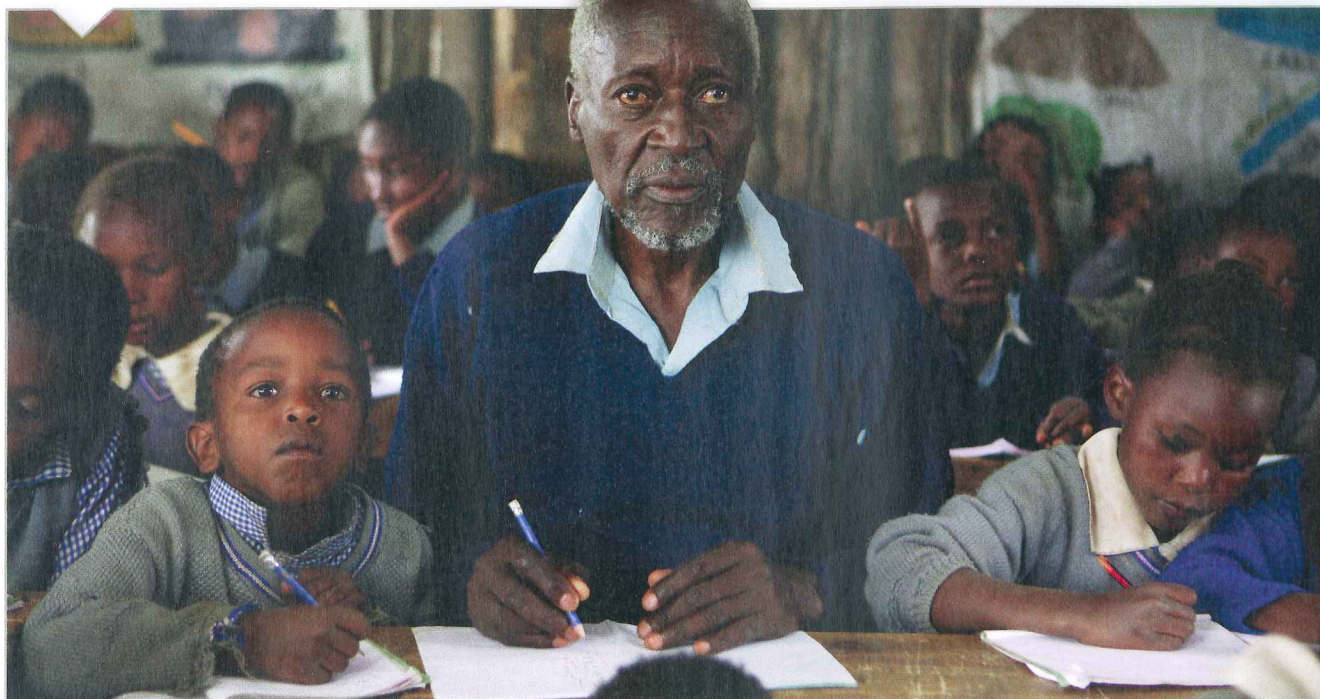
Fighting to stay in school

B Kimani Maruge was born in Kenya in 1920. At that time, primary education in Kenya was not free, and Maruge's family didn't have enough money to pay for school. When Maruge grew up, he worked hard as a farmer. In the 1950s, he fought with other Kenyans against the British colonists. After years of fighting, Kenya became independent in 1963.

C In 2003, the Kenyan government began offering free primary education to everyone, and Maruge wanted an education, too. However, it wasn't always easy for Maruge to attend school. Many of the first graders' parents didn't want an old man in their children's class. School officials[1] said that a primary education was only for children. But the school principal, Jane Obinchu, believed Maruge was right. With her help, he was able to stay in school.

[1] An **official** is a person who has an important position in an organization, such as a government or a school.

▲ Kenyan actor Oliver Litondo played Kimani Maruge in the 2010 movie *The First Grader.*

D   Maruge was a motivated and successful student. In fact, he was one of the top five students in his first grade class. In second grade, Maruge became the school's student leader. He went as far as seventh grade, the final year of primary school. Over the years, Maruge studied Swahili,[2] English, and math. He wanted to use his education to read the Bible and to study veterinary[3] medicine.

E   In 2008, there were problems in Kenya after an election. People were fighting and burning houses in Maruge's village. Maruge moved to a refugee camp for safety and lived in a tent. However, even during those difficult times he continued to go to school. Later that year, he moved to a home for the elderly. He continued going to school, and even taught other residents of the home to read and write.

Inspired[4] to Learn

F   In 2005, Maruge flew in a plane for the first time in his life. He traveled to New York City, where he gave a speech at the United Nations. He spoke about the importance of education and asked for help to educate the people of Kenya. Maruge also wanted to improve primary education for children in Africa.

G   Maruge died in 2009, at age 89. However, his story lives on. The 2010 movie *The First Grader* showed Maruge's amazing fight to get an education. Many older Kenyans decided to start school after seeing *The First Grader.* One of those people was 19-year-old Thoma Litei. Litei said, "I knew it was not too late. I wanted to read, and to know more language, so I came [to school] to learn. That is why it is important for his story to be known."

[2] **Swahili** is a language spoken in much of East Africa.
[3] **Veterinary** refers to the medical treatment of animals.
[4] If someone or something **inspires** you, they give you new ideas or make you want to do something.