

Sylvia Vetta meets
Nancy Hunt, director of
The Nasio Trust, who has
been nominated for a
NatWest Venus
award

An inspirational life

Nancy Hunt's story is an inspiring one. Her journey has taken her from a tough upbringing in rural Kenya to Oxford, and a job with Thames Valley Police – dealing with cases of domestic violence and setting up an initiative to help children at risk.

But it was an incident back in her homeland 14 years ago which was to change her life completely – and ultimately led to the establishment of a charity, The Nasio Trust, which supports orphaned children in Kenya and helps young offenders in Oxfordshire.

I usually begin interviews by asking our castaway where and when they were born. This time my subject could say where she was born – but not exactly when.

Nancy explained: "I was born in the village of Musanda, near Mumias Town in western Kenya. The town was named after my paternal grandfather, a tribal chief.

"The British maintained the tribal institutions for administrative purposes so my father George Mudenyio was the administrative chief. As such he attended the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II and used to proudly show us the photographs.

"He was desperate for sons, but my mother, Irene, bore him nine daughters before she had four boys. I was their 13th child.

"As a girl I was not valued – and that is probably why my father failed to register my birth. Some years later, my sister Betty decided that I needed a birth certificate and she registered me.

"She conjured up the date of January 10, 1970, although nobody knew for certain when I was born. So I have the choice of being either five years older or five years younger!

"I was named Ishmael after my grandfather, but Betty felt that I should have a girl's name and, on the birth certificate, I am Nancy Ishmael Ndula."

Nancy's mother was the daughter of a

preacher and regarded as a suitable wife for a chief. She married when she was just 15. She never received an education and regretted it all her life.

"Although she was illiterate, she was determined that her girls would be educated," Nancy said.

"My mother was an industrious farmer in the village of Ibinda. Each week she took vegetables to sell in the market in the nearby town of Musanda. From the profits she paid for all her girls to go to school. Market days were exciting ones. She chose one of us to go with her."

Nancy said her mother set up the stall and then left her daughter to do the selling while she went off to a club to drink.

"She returned at midday and bought me lunch – and lunch contained a rare thing, meat. That alone made me want to go with her to market."

In his quest for sons, Nancy's father married another five wives and fathered more children.

In this series we ask our subjects what favourite item — perhaps a book, antique or painting — they would like to take with them to the fictional island of Oxtopia.



Nancy Hunt of The Nasio Trust at Harris Manchester College, Oxford

Photograph: Richard Cave

“Growing up we saw little of him. On the rare occasion that he visited, my mother and he would go into the sitting-room and bring out the wind-up gramophone and play music and drink tea,” Nancy said.

“My mother was hurt when he married the other wives and neglected her. Drinking was her escape her means of deadening the pain. She became an alcoholic. When she realised what a waste of her life drinking was, she conquered her addiction.”

“It was not until my father died and I saw my mother weeping at his grave that I realised how much she loved him.”

A consequence of her mother’s alcoholism was that her children went hungry. Nancy said: “She would return from the market, sing drunkenly and throw water on the cooking fire.

“If my siblings had not eaten they would go hungry. I felt ashamed and sad because I had eaten and they would go to sleep hungry. When it was my turn to be left at home, I often went hungry. Unless you have experienced

hunger as a child you cannot really know how it feels.”

When Nancy was 12, her mother arranged for her to go to boarding school in Migori close to the Tanzanian border.

“It took almost 24-hours to get there,” she recalled. “At school I experienced the luxury of having a bed to myself. The downside was that I had no visits and no contact with my family and was lonely.

“Each term my mother gave me the school fees in cash. She folded it in a cloth and tied it around my waist. She told me on no account to loosen or take off any layers of clothing to prevent it from being stolen. It meant the journey was hot and sticky. But I learned to be independent and my school friends became my family.

“Around this time I first read a book for pleasure — a dog-eared copy of a Danielle Steele novel. A bit of escapism. This could be a possibility for the island.”

Nancy was able academically and she won a

place at a Kenyan University to study education with the ambition of following her sisters and becoming a teacher.

There was one big change to her week while Nancy was at university.

“Every Sunday throughout my childhood we dressed in our best clothes, even if it was hand-me-downs, and went to church.

“My boarding school was Anglican and a church service was part of each day. As a student I never once went to church. Now I would not want to do without my faith. I draw strength from it when I am feeling overwhelmed by what I have taken on.”

After graduating Nancy worked for a while in a boys’ school, teaching geography and economics.

Her sister Betty was working for British Airways while another sister, Alice, was with the Kenyan consulate in England. They suggested Nancy come to England with the aim

Continued on page 11

From page 9

of getting an MA before returning to Kenya.

“The fees were £8,000 per year,” Nancy said. “My only hope of raising that kind of money was to work and save. I took a job as administrator at the Intervention Board – part of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) – dealing with outbreaks of disease, such as foot and mouth.”

While living with her sister Alice in Reading Nancy was introduced to Jonathan, who was to become her husband in 1996.

“When we became an item we bought a house in Southmoor, near Abingdon,” Nancy said. “My mother came to England when we married believing that, as I was marrying an Englishman, I would never return to Kenya.”

After moving to Oxfordshire, Nancy took a job with Thames Valley Police as a ‘domestic violence co-ordinator’.

“You can imagine the comments that bizarre title invited,” she said.

The experience proved invaluable when Nancy was involved in setting up an initiative to help young people on the verge of getting into anti-social behaviour build new lives.

Nancy said: “It allowed me to see how issues interlink and how complex family life can be. My childhood was tough – but when life was difficult there were always adults in the extended family who were there for me.

“I saw how different it was for children here if their family became dysfunctional after parents split up or one or both became an addict. The children have to cope alone without extended family support. It affects how they see themselves, often not valuing themselves.”

Nancy’s next job with the force was as an area training officer.

“I loved going out with officers on beat in the city but I found homelessness, often caused by a bad decision or unfortunate event, distressing.”

By this time Nancy and Jonathan had two children. Nigel and Chantelle. Nigel, 21, has just finished a degree in business studies after four years studying in Kenya. Chantelle, 15, recently spent one year at school in Kenya.

As well as working full-time, in 1999 Nancy studied for a diploma in management and leadership at Oxford Brookes, after which she took on another new role in the police force.

She commuted to Reading to train newly promoted sergeants and inspectors in leadership, management and diversity.

Meanwhile in Kenya, in 2000, something happened which would change Nancy’s life.

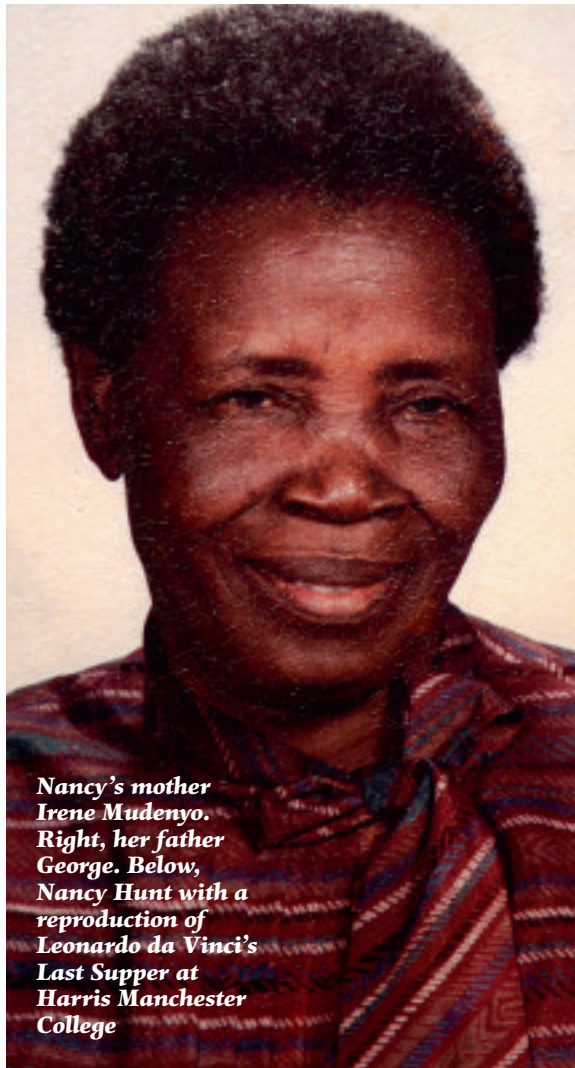
“My mother was working in a sugar cane field. She heard a baby crying. This was not unusual. Women take their babies with them to work in the fields,” Nancy said.

“The next day she heard it again from the same area. On the third day she went to investigate the cries and found a baby of about three months old lying on a blanket with a bundle of clothes next to him.

“She had discovered him just in time. Ants were eating away at his skin. She took him to hospital and arranged for him to get treatment.”

When Nancy next flew out to visit the family, she was expecting her mother to meet her at the airport as she normally did. “This time she was not there – and my sister joked ‘She has a baby’,” Nancy said.

Continued on page 13



Nancy’s mother Irene Mudenyio. Right, her father George. Below, Nancy Hunt with a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Last Supper at Harris Manchester College

“In 2007 my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I wanted to care for her in the last months of her life. Just before she died my mother made me promise that I would not abandon the orphans. Hundreds of people came to her funeral. They all had stories to tell of how she had helped them. You do not have to be a hero to change the world”



“I look at the disciples and realise they all had flaws. Whatever our weaknesses, we can all change the world for the better – we just have to want to”

From page 11

“When the little boy, whom she named Moses, was not claimed by anyone, she had taken him home and become attached to him. She was 79 and was struggling to look after a six-month-old baby.

“With my experience in the British police, I told my mother off and made her come with me to the police station to sort out the situation. I went to the desk but my mother sat well away looking unhappy. I explained that she was 79 and they should find a home for Moses.

“My accent gave away the fact that I lived abroad and the officer looked at my Levi jeans and said ‘You have money. You should do it.’

“I found a home for him with Catholic nuns but Moses never forgot my mother. He always recognised her voice when she visited him.”

Orphaned children began to play a larger part in Nancy’s life in 2003. Her sister Lorna was eking out a living selling from a kiosk shop at the side of the road. She started feeding orphans and, one day, 60 children turned up to be fed.

Nancy said: “With some other local women she started the Nasio Women’s Group. Nasio was the name of my grandmother. It was a hard decision but they chose to support 15 of the younger orphans by pooling food and organising volunteer teachers.”

But then Lorna then died suddenly of a stroke, aged just 45.

“Everyone was concerned about what would happen to the orphans,” Nancy recalled. “After Lorna’s funeral I asked to see them. I will never forget that day. They were distraught – they had lost the person who cared about them. I knew I could not walk away.

“Jonathan and I asked everyone who usually gave us Christmas presents to instead give money to feed the orphans. Before long we had raised more than £1,000. We registered the Nasio Trust as a UK charity.”

To begin with, Nancy was chair of the trustees. The organisation has grown rapidly and there are now six trustees with Jonathan as chairman, Nancy is the full-time director of the charity which is based in Abingdon.

She said: “I had not intended dropping my career. Initially I contacted Save the Children and Oxfam and all the big charities I could think of to see if they would take on the project. But ultimately I had no choice but to take it on myself.”

As it turned out Nancy’s work in Kenya had an impact back home in Oxfordshire in 2003.

She explained: “A police officer in Berinsfield was concerned by the lifestyle of some young people there. I suggested showing them a video of the conditions the orphans had to cope with, including a leaking roof in the old kiosk’s kitchen.

“When we arrived at Berinsfield Youth Club some of the teenagers were drunk – and most of them were complaining, effing and blinding about having to watch a boring video.

“After it finished one of the girls said ‘What are we going to do to fundraise to repair the roof?’

The teenagers devised lots of ideas and started to raise money for the repairs.

“We raised much more money than we anticipated,” Nancy said.

She explained that government rules forced the demolition of the original kiosk – so the trust set about raising £30,000 to create a



purpose-built centre. Four of the Berinsfield teenagers went to Kenya to help paint and decorate it.

“They were overwhelmed,” Nancy said. “One young man’s father, mother and siblings were all in prison. He told me that he is sure he too would be in prison if I had not taken him to Kenya. Suddenly he was valued; the children loved him. He realised he was not the bad person he had thought he was – and that he could make a different life from the one his background predicted. Now he works and has a child of his own and is a good father.”

Since then, more than 100 young offenders from Berinsfield, Abingdon and Wantage have been to Kenya to help on Nasio Trust projects – and none have reoffended.

From 2005, The Nasio Trust took on 40 extra orphans each year and needed a bigger centre. Nasio’s policy is not to build orphanages.

Nancy explained why.

“Once you put a child in an orphanage away from his community you handicap him. When he leaves he is on his own to readapt into society. Where there is extended family often elderly, the orphan sleeps at home. They come to the support centre in the morning to be fed.

“If he/she is HIV positive we give them their medication. We provide pre-school education. When they reach primary school age, we buy their uniform (a condition for admission). Our centres are close to the schools so they can have lunch at the centre. We find a family, sometimes staff members, to take on those children with no extended family.

“In 2007, my mother was diagnosed with cancer. I wanted to care for her in the last months of her life. Just before she died my

Kennington Overseas Aid has this year been fundraising for the Nasio Trust’s Spirulina project. Spirulina is a high-protein food supplement good for people with HIV. Visit the website www.koa.org.uk to discover more.

Nancy Hunt will be at Kennington at St Swithuns’ Hall on November 26 at 8pm, when a cheque will be presented to her.

mother made me promise that I would not abandon the orphans. She said: ‘Whatever you do never leave those children and build a centre in the community where I found Moses.’

“Hundreds of people came to her funeral.

They all had stories to tell of how she had helped them. You do not have to be a hero to change the world,” Nancy said.

“This illiterate old lady had changed the lives of hundreds for the better. When I eventually built the second centre, I named it after her. My uncles said I should have named it after my father. I said: ‘Why what did he do? He was born to his title, but Irene earned the respect of the community.’”

Before returning to England in 2008, Nancy decided that she needed time to reflect on what had happened.

“I decided to climb Kilimanjaro to raise money for Nasio – but also to give me the peace and silence to reflect,” she said. “How could I return to my career with the extra responsibility my mother wanted me to assume? When I eventually reached the summit all my emotions came out. My life had changed forever. I grieved the loss of my mother and the loss of my career, but came down in the knowledge that the 140 children Nasio was supporting were my children and I could not abandon them.”

We had not talked much about Nancy’s desert island choices. She said: “I was not exposed to art as a child. The first reproduction I saw was Leonardo da Vinci’s *Last Supper*. I look at the disciples and realise they all had flaws. Whatever our weaknesses, we can all change the world for the better – we just have to want to.”

Nancy chose to be photographed at Oxford’s Harris Manchester College. It only admits mature students thus giving opportunities to those who miss out – and that appeals to her.

■ The Nasio Trust, Nuffield Way, Abingdon, OX14 1AE, call 01235 856290, www.thenasiostrust.org