
THE TWGA TIMES

PRESERVATION, CONSERVATION, AND EDUCATION

TWGA



Letter From the Director

*“Real courage is in living
and suffering
For what you believe.”*

-Christopher Paolini

This month’s quote from Christopher Paolini is especially fitting this month. This is why. . .

My letters to you are usually filled with updates on our progress and all the growth happening. But this month I felt I had nothing new to share. In each letter, I strive to keep vision and enthusiasm alive. Yet this month, it seemed the vision had faded, and the enthusiasm had waned.

I took a long look at our nonprofit’s finances and our agenda for the year, and I felt a deep sense of hopelessness. Suddenly, it all seemed too big. I saw our mission likened to Sisyphus, endlessly pushing a boulder up a hill only to watch it roll back down just before reaching the top. For four days, I sat in that emptiness.

In a moment of despair, I called Jeff and said, “It’s over. I’m broken. All I feel is defeat.” He answered before I could take my next breath. “You can’t give up! You run the ship. If you go down, we all go down!”

I had forgotten how many people have a stake in this dream. But the hopelessness held fast and in my weariness I kept asking myself: Why are you doing this?

I listened, but no answer came.

Sitting on my sofa at five am, trying to journal, I decided to listen to some old John Denver music. His lyrics and melodies were always a comfort. As the random playlist moved from song to song the spirit of beautiful Mount Kilimanjaro who guided me up her steep slopes. She answered through that John Denver song, that in 50 years of listening, I had never heard.



*"In this hour of quiet contemplation
The stillness of the dawning calms my mind
I face the day with heartfelt exaltation
The light is both a promise and a sign
African sunrise, shine on a brand new day
African sunrise, show us a brand new way
Give us a brand new morning
Show us forever beginning to stand on our own
African sunrise, smile on my African home"*

African Sunrise- John Denver

"Show us forever beginning..." And just like that, I remembered why I'm doing this.

I am doing this because the Empress gave me a promise. I am doing it for those who have felt the magic of Africa—and those who long to. For the giraffes and the Maasai and my family there and my family here. I am doing it for those who love the Earth, and the animals and humanity. I'm doing it for all of us. Because this mission is the beginning of forever.

And as you read this I want you to know, I am doing it for you. This will be your home. You are part of the promise and part of the mission. The Empress of Kilimanjaro, through John Denver and Christopher Paolini reminds us all; *courage is living and suffering for what you believe.*

The People Behind The World Giraffe Alliance



This year we are highlighting the people who make and create TWGA. Follow their stories and the journeys that brought them to The World Giraffe Alliance.

Meet Kefas

Kefas Mollel is co-director of The World Giraffe Alliance and the founder of Go2Kili. Here is his story. . .

In Arusha, where I grew up, tourism is everything. It's the backbone of the economy. If you need work, tourism is the industry with the most promise. But not everyone gets a job there.

I come from a big Maasai family, and I never had opportunities for school. I was the middle child that everybody depended on. I cared for the little ones and kept the older ones out

of trouble, day after day. I didn't see a future for myself and I had to break away. I wanted something more, a better life, so I ran away to work in the Tanzanite mines.

Mining is a brutal way to make a living. It is one of the hardest, most dangerous jobs in the world. The mines are full of risk—collapses, toxic fumes, and even violence. There are no safety standards, no safety gear. It's a lawless world. Violence is normal. People disappear. The men I worked with had nothing to lose, and for some of them, killing was just part of life. I wasn't like them. I wasn't a bad person, but I was trapped in a place full of bad decisions.

We weren't even paid wages—all we had was the hope that one day we'd strike it rich. Every miner had the same dream: Tomorrow is the day I'll find my fortune. That dream kept us going, even when we lost friends to accidents. I spent four years chasing that empty promise.

One day, one of my closest friends fell sick and ended up in the hospital. I knew he was doing poorly, but I was too caught up in the grind to go see him. One evening, I was lonely and exhausted and it came to me that I hadn't seen my family in almost a year. I thought about my friend lying in that hospital bed for weeks. I asked myself: What am I really doing here?

That night I dropped everything and went home. I stopped at the hospital on the way and found my friend lying there barely able to move, and I thought, if I keep going down the same road, will I end up here?

I knew I couldn't go back, but I had no other options and no plan. All I could do was hope my family would take me in again. When I walked in, they couldn't believe it! They were so happy I was alive. And honestly, so was I. After hearing my story, one of my relatives who worked in a hotel took me aside and said he could find me a job as a mountain porter. I jumped at the chance.

That's how it began. I had a real job with real wages.

The day I set foot on the mountain for the first time something inside me changed. Kilimanjaro felt familiar—like maybe, just maybe, I was supposed to be there. *The rest of Kefas' story will be in the April issue of The Twiga Times.*

Team Twiga just keeps growing!

Meet the Dream Builders



Elizabeth Bichler (intern) Aspen Thorstenson (Lead Architect) Justin Oleson (Architect)

Aspen Thorstenson – Architect | Founder

Aspen is the founder of CREATE DESIGN + DEVELOP and a licensed architect with a passion for transforming ideas into well-crafted spaces. With experience across South Dakota, North Dakota, Nebraska, and Iowa, she specializes in multifamily housing and commercial design.

Justin Oleson – Architect | Partner

Justin brings over 18 years of architectural experience to the firm. Licensed in South Dakota and Wyoming, he began his career at RSA, progressing from intern to partner. Justin focuses on building strong, lasting client relationships. His collaborative and thoughtful design approach continues to yield meaningful, innovative designs for clients.

Elizabeth Bichler – Intern

Elizabeth brings creativity and enthusiasm to the project working closely with the two partners and developing her skills in this creative field.

With their combined expertise and dedication, This dynamic team is playing a crucial role in shaping the future of the Wasafiri House—ensuring a design that is both classic and eco-friendly. We're so grateful to have them on board!

Meet John Mark

Say hello to the newest member of Team Twiga, **John Mark Kabango!** John Mark is a Ugandan resident who is currently studying law in India. His aunt Margaret worked with Michele at Chatsworth High School and the two met in 2023 when Michele's plane was unexpectedly re-routed to Uganda while en route to Tanzania. Margaret arranged their meeting and the two felt a kindred spirit. John Mark is committed to conservation and thrilled to join our mission to protect giraffes. His passion and dedication make him a valuable addition to the team. We welcome you, John Mark!



Giraffe Babysitters and the Ladies Who Lunch



A new study by Zoe Muller of the University of Bristol, published in *Mammal Review*, is reshaping our understanding of giraffes. Her research shows that giraffes can spend up to 30% of their lives in a post-reproductive state, similar to elephants and killer whales.

This supports the "grandmother hypothesis," which suggests that older females help raise younger generations. In giraffe communities post-reproductive females assist in caring for calves, forming "daycares" where they take turns babysitting so mothers can rest, eat, and stay alert for predators.

Despite their reputation as loners, giraffes form strong, long-term bonds. They have preferred eating companions or "lunch buddies." They form lasting friendships, and even show signs of grief. Mothers and grandmothers remain particularly close, reinforcing the idea that giraffe societies are more interconnected than previously thought. Understanding these dynamic relationships helps us have a deeper appreciation for these complex creatures.