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PROFILE

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HOW CARING MEANS SHARING: ELMARD RIGAN'S MENTAL HEALTH OUTREACH IN KIBERA

Born and raised in Kibera, the largest informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, CFK Africa psychological counselor Elmard Rigan is uniquely qualified to speak about the mental and physical challenges of growing up in an informal settlement. Rigan will never forget the struggle of living in small quarters and missing meals. Yet, it seems he will also never forget the value of sharing, a principle visible in every aspect of Rigan's life and work.

From a young age, Rigan said he wanted to become a lawyer. However, near the end of his time in primary school, Rigan was introduced to drugs, a life-altering moment that ultimately led him to rehab.

"I really thought that it was this rehab place, this scary place with evil people who were just not fit for society," Rigan said. "But lo and behold, I met a different lot of people at rehab, just people that had struggles, that had difficulties."

After his first counseling session, Rigan's interests shifted to mental health, defining a purpose that still drives him today.

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“I want to give back to society what I was given in rehab, what I was offered,” Rigan said. “Because there are a lot of people that want the same kind of help but they’re not sure where or how to get it.”



Elnard Rigan, psychological counselor at CFK Africa since 2018, started with the nonprofit as a volunteer. Rigan’s work centers on counseling and mental health education in the informal settlement of Kibera in Nairobi, Kenya.

Ultimately, Rigan’s desire to help people by sharing the lessons he learned at rehab led him to study counseling psychology at The University of Nairobi. His desire to share the impact of counseling only grew after learning a single public facility, the Mathari National Teaching and Referral Hospital was responsible for offering mental health services to all 47 counties in Kenya. Rigan began as a volunteer at CFK Africa in 2016.

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Rigan began working at CFK as an HIV testing services provider. During his three months with CFK he also offered supervised counseling services. While another job would take him away from CFK, he said he was welcomed back with open arms several months later.

In a show of support, indicative of the character of CFK staff, Rigan said, “It’s not just every day that you leave somewhere and they still will have me back after giving you a very, very wonderful farewell party.”

Since his return in 2018, Rigan has hit the ground running. A part of CFK’s Education and Livelihoods and Youth Friendly Services team, Rigan works with clients in Kibera to offer counseling services and other mental health guidance. He’s also responsible for CFK’s integrated mental health services approach, establishing counseling desks in each CFK facility.

Under the supervision of Rigan and other colleagues, CFK offers both individual and group counseling sessions. Group sessions are needs-oriented, Rigan said, offering sessions based on commonalities like age, illness, and issue.

“We want this to be all by them, so that they find solutions amongst themselves that will be beneficial to them as members of that particular group,” Rigan said.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Rigan said his work took on a new form. The pandemic, which revealed gaps in mental health support and exacerbated issues of domestic violence, rape, and suicide in the community, meant CFK staff and volunteers had to meet people differently.

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“We started off by reaching out to various affected households or families to tell members of the community like, ‘Hey you don’t have to suffer in silence,’” Rigan said.

“There’s this facility, this organization, that offers counseling services for free.”

Rigan said while Kenyans are more receptive to therapy than they were 10 years ago, the country still has a long way to go in the realm of mental health. Now back in the office, Rigan continues his important work with CFK, while also creating new ways to share information about mental health with a wider audience.

Starting soon, Rigan hopes to focus his YouTube channel on podcast-like content, covering a new theme of mental health each month. In addition, Rigan said he plans to continue making guest appearances on local and national news stations, sourcing spheres of influence to reach more people. In the meantime, information about CFK Africa’s mental health initiatives can be found on their website cfkafrica.org.

“I mean, you never know whose life it will change,” Rigan said.

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