

AUDIO PODCAST TRANSCRIPT: KENNEDY ODEDE

0:00:02 REETA: I'm Reeta Roy and this is Transcending Boundaries, a podcast that features deep conversations with exceptional leaders. Each episode dives into the lives of women and men who have changed their communities, their countries and the world for the better. Join me to discover the relationships, experiences, and insights that have shaped their remarkable journeys.

Today we're honored to host a visionary social entrepreneur and an advocate and champion for the transformation of urban informal settlements. He has spearheaded initiatives that have brought education, healthcare, clean water, and economic empowerment to millions of people in informal communities across Kenya.

He has also co-authored several books, including Find Me Unafraid: Love, Loss and Hope in an African Slum, providing a deeper look into his life and work. I am thrilled to welcome the founder and CEO of SHOFCO, a true champion of community driven change, Kennedy Odede. Kennedy, welcome, and thank you so much for making the time to be here.

We're just going to start by learning more about you and your childhood. I know, and I think our listeners know, that you grew up in Kibera, in Nairobi. It's one of the largest informal settlements in the world. Tell us a little bit about that childhood, and tell us about how you experienced, perhaps important moments in your life during your childhood.

0:01:50 KENNEDY: Yes. So, thank you. So, I see myself as my family moved from western part of Kenya, looking for opportunity. And they were young and they ended up in Kibera slums informal settlement. And, it was, tough, right? And so for me, it's a very, I see myself as a Kibera is part of me, because that, for me, that's what really kind of grew me.

I had, I saw so much love in Kibera. I saw so much community. I saw so much oneness, togetherness. At the same time, I saw so much hardship. So growing there, I learned a lot about creativity, right? Because as a kid, nobody could buy me toys. So we go take mud and make our own cars. And it was just amazing knowing your neighbors, but at the same time, poor sanitation. You get sick quickly, right?

You live in, we used to live in a 10 by 10, outside there is a sewage, running sewage, right? There is no toilets. People are struggling to, to get job. There is violence with the police. You know, uh, death is common. You know, you lose your friends. You don't know. If you leave your house you are not sure you're gonna make it back.

And it also really make you, yeah, so it also make you feel like there is, there is, there's no, there's no future. So when enough was enough, that's when I ran away and I became a street boy, right? And I was looking for escape, right? So being on the street was also tough, but it gave me more independence.

Right? Yeah. So I see myself as someone who has been really built really, and feeling really Kibera is part of my DNA, right? So I, I, I used to be really sad and asking myself, why am I here? Why am I in this poverty? You know? Uh, it was really, it was a, it was a tough thing growing up, that hardship.

0:03:54 REETA: It sounds incredibly tough in so many ways, and yet you spoke about love.

0:03:59 KENNEDY: Yes.

0:04:01 REETA: Love around you and I know there always are, in moments in our lives where people who are there, who are present, who come out at the right moment? Will you talk about a couple of them? Please do.

0:04:19 KENNEDY: Yes. My time living in Kibera community, many people inspired me. I will not lie about that because the one thing I really admire so much It's even as I went I went to America, New York, but something powerful, Reeta, that I saw in Kibera, like you are a child of so and so. You are a child of everyone in the community. For me, that's love. You do something they're like, you know, there's not about, uh, your only child in your family- the Ubuntu spirit was in my community. So you feel a little bit, there's a link. So that was really, really powerful. Just knowing that even though we have less, even though people look down on us, but there was something we had that you couldn't take away, which is love.

Okay. And then this love goes deeper to someone who really inspired me mostly is my mother. My mom is, she's just an amazing woman. Never went to school. Had me when she was 15 years old, but never gave up. And a couple of stories I learned from her, even before I became a community organizer, she was the one doing organizing with women.

Merry go around, you know, her money was being stolen sometimes. She'd never tell the group, she'll go and wash clothes, you know, and bring back the money again. Nobody will know, right? That the money was taken away. And then, uh, she told me that if you see a snake, you don't have to wait to look for something to beat the snake.

She said that whatever you have, beat the snake. For her, any problem you face in your life, you don't have to wait. If you want to help, you don't have to wait to be rich. Oh, one day I'll be rich and I'll help people. Mom says no. If you can't help people with what you have now, no way. So for me, I learned that values from her.

Another thing is that as kids, neighbors could have some nice food cooked there because we live in a congested place. Live in small places, so we were not allowed to eat in other people's house, which I found weird 'cause we were hungry. We never had food. So mom would be like, go in the, go there in the house, put the cooking oil in your lips to look that you've eaten.

I'm like- haha!

So I call that dignity. She is a woman of dignity. So I'll be hungry and I'm like mum...you have to survive right. So, yeah, so it's really, yeah. So I learned those qualities of leadership, uh, from her right. Not giving up. And she never believed you are poor. When you said, mom you're poor, you're going to fight. Yeah. Poverty for my mom was mindset.

You have your hand, you have your community. You have your family Why are you poor? Okay. So poverty for mom was a concept right. And I think that's something that I really took that has been really driving me and her leadership skills. Yeah. She was a very tough woman. You know, they say, they say that. Yeah.

Yeah. So those are kind of the lessons I learned from my mom.

0:07:29 REETA: I remember reading the book that, uh, Mum has some amazing quotes in, in your book and some amazing sayings, and she must have been, and she still is a woman of great faith, you know, uh, but she has a wonderful quote to say that "God's really busy."

God's very busy looking after big problems and that, uh, so you also have to help yourself to look after other problems, which is a phenomenal thing about self-reliance. Taking your own agency and applying your creativity. Now, there's also another woman who is important in your life, and that's your partner and your wife, Jessica.

And together, both of you have really grown SHOFCO, your organization. How has she also shaped your outlook? What have you learned from Jess?

0:08:18 KENNEDY: Wow, yes. This is very interesting. So I was what, 23 when I met Jess.

0:08:26 REETA: She came to be your intern.

0:08:28 KENNEDY: Yes. Now I'm 40 now. Yeah. So many years ago. So what happened was that I was a community organizer. I say what I took from my mother. So I organized community with SHOFCO, with a tiny youth group, in the community. And I used to have one email that I checked, once after a month because I have to walk from Kibera to the city. So one day I got an email from this lady who wanted to come to be with, work with SHOFCO. She heard about SHOFCO and I said, no, we don't want people coming to help us.

0:09:01 REETA: We're helping ourselves.

0:09:02 KENNEDY: Haha I also believed that. Yeah, but she keep on insisting. So I have to go back. Something else I learned is that you cannot just make decisions. I went back to our group. There's this person who keeps disturbing me. She has done theater in America.

You know, we used to do a lot of performing art. So the committee, leadership committee of SHOFCO by then we were 20, 20 something years old. 23, some of them were 19. It was amazing structure we had okay say, oh, she can come then to teach us and write our stories. So that's how Jessica was able to come to Kenya through study abroad programs,

And yeah, we start working together, but I also feel like, uh, I learned that we're all human. We might come from different backgrounds but if we really open our heart, if you really- we can learn a lot from each other. So without. Jessica has changed me as a person, you know, I'm somebody who had issues with trust.

0:10:10 REETA: Yes.

0:10:11 KENNEDY: We've been, uh, abused now and then, right, with the system, right? So we, and, uh, I used to, Jessica knows that. I didn't like anybody from elite. I know that's weird, right? I was like nobody cares about us in the poverty here. We live ourselves. We don't want anybody from outside, you know, but here there's this American lady here, right?

That was an eye opening and, she was able to listen a lot to understand us. She really listened. Okay. And I love that. She also told us how much she was learning from us and that made her survive with us. Because she, this is somebody who come from a very good university, coming to our community and saying that, I'm learning, I'm learning so much on leadership, how organizing, you know, that really made us feel so good.

And Jessica and I work together. I am more people, grassroots. She is really detail oriented, sometimes drives me crazy because, yeah, it's true, it's interesting because the way SHOFCO started, it was not that thinking of, we don't want to think about the details, because the details will remind you there is no donor, okay?

You don't know how to write proposals. How can you sustain your organization, right? So for me, it was like, this is a movement we're doing now, but Jessica's real concern was to make us think that way. So her coming into our life, into SHOFCO, really changed things a lot. We ended up marrying each other from friendship.

0:11:49 REETA: Yeah. It's a wonderful story. Amazing story, actually. A beautiful one. That's great. So what you're really talking about is how much all of us have to learn from each other, what we can teach each other, and what we can do together.

0:12:03 KENNEDY: And also to change our prejudices. You know, even me, I was the person like, ah, what's she coming to do here, right?

I had also to relax, you know, and learn. Yeah. So when you, when you start seeing each other as human beings, everything starts changing, right?

0:12:19 REETA: It does.

0:12:19 KENNEDY: Because all these things is what, I believed that nobody care about us. We are in the slum, we are in poverty, right? But really, you see, so, but somehow I never want to understand the other side of the story.

When I, when I started growing up and meeting some Kenyans who are doing well in life, they're telling me, but we were scared. How do we come to Kibera Kennedy? We wanted to come, right? So you see, so there's a lot of things that we assume. So all this is about just listening and understanding.

0:12:48 REETA: And understanding.

0:12:49 KENNEDY: That's what Jessica taught me.

0:12:50 REETA: That's, that's wonderful. I want to go back for just a moment to the beginnings actually of SHOFKO. You made a comment a moment ago that when you were a little boy, there was no one to buy you toys. And yet the beginning of SHOFKO was with a toy, was with a ball. A soccer ball.

0:13:06 KENNEDY: Yes.

0:13:07 REETA: Which wasn't a real soccer ball, but a homegrown, made soccer ball. Talk about that beginning. Why a soccer ball?

0:13:17 KENNEDY: Ah, this is interesting. So, my life is complicated and it's been a journey of optimistic and hope. So this is a young boy who was into drugs, useless, did not care about being killed or dying because poverty was so much painful.

0:13:36 REETA: You're talking about yourself.

0:13:37 KENNEDY: Yes. Okay. Yeah. And comes a time, comes, comes a time that everyone in our life, I'm sure comes a time whereby we all ask ourselves, how are we living our life? And I

feel lucky. I asked myself when I was 15 years old, right? This is, this is too much, right? And we are all escaping.

I was on drugs for escape. It was tough. It was escaping. Every time I was on my drugs, I was feeling like, whew, I don't feel anything until, you know, but the reality keeps hitting me. So when I started informing myself, because I believe that you will, and this is a challenge, you have leaders who want to be leaders and yet they have not transformed themselves. If you don't work on yourself, you can't support other people. Okay. You need to deal with your demons. So my demons a lot. So now as a 15-years-old, I stopped and then it was hard for me to leave these addictions. So what I did, I fell in love with books.

0:14:44 REETA: And how did you get the books?

0:14:45 KENNEDY: So I got this from our parish. There's a man from Ohio, gave me these books. Then I say, even though I don't have any money, I'll go to town and just buy books. It has to be a book that is inspiring. So I fell in love with Dr. King, right? So Dr. King, so really, uh, I talked to them, this is a crazy part of me too.

We didn't have mentors around, right? So for me. I read these books. I'm like, wow, what could Dr. King, if Dr. King was born in Kibera, what could he do? So I realized that Dr. King came from a small church in Alabama. I love that part. And then by that time, everybody, people of color really liked going to church and being together because they felt at home.

Kennedy, what about you in Kibera? What do we love? We love soccer, the football. That is our thing. That's how Dr. King started from a church and something became beyond the church. So my dream was, can we start what we love already? The youth love playing soccer or football or whatever, right? So that's how I started this football.

But listen guys, this is just a way for, because we love this, we do tournaments, but we have a bigger deal, bigger thing. The future is this ball will be something bigger. So that's how we started and then could talk about our issues. We could do our own therapy. I realized that because of life of hustling, every young person was busy searching, searching for job.

So nobody- and I also lost my friend from suicide and he was looking for me. I was also busy hustling. So we never met and then, Oh no, he's gone. So that was powerful. That was really devastating for me. And I'm like, okay, we're not just playing. We sit on the circle, we share. We are here for each other. That's how SHOFCO started.

And I know where I'm working, there's a space for a job, or where I'm doing this, you know. So we became a place where we get information. And you know that you are seen, you are seen.

And you are not alone. Whatever happened to our friend, will not happen to us. Because our friend has no one to talk to. So he took this life on himself, right?

So that's how SHOFCO started. And that's why you see that up to now, our great ingredients is community, community, community- listening and being there for each other, right?

0:17:19 REETA; And that sense of hope. And that's why SHOFCO is really about shining and hope.

0:17:20 KENNEDY; Yes. And I was looking for this, so we were in a struggle because some people wanted to call it Kibera stars, Kibera what.

But I don't know, I don't know if we can see the future without knowing. But I had a, I had a prediction and I remember this so funny. I said, why are all these organizations coming here in Kibera? We also one day have an office in New York.

0:17:45 REETA: Why not? Why not? And now you do.

0:17:48 KENNEDY: From Kibera to New York office.

And we'll maintain our Kibera to the headquarter. So we can't call it Kibera something because it's going to be bigger than Kibera. So that's how I love the word hope, shining hope for communities. We are the hope. Okay? And then I believe that from my mother again, let's not worry too much of resources.

Let's worry about trust with the community. Let's worry about us being positive. And I believed, okay, if there is universe, if there is God, whatever is there, I will be like, hmm, they are doing something good. Something good must happen to them, right?

0:18:37 REETA: Wow. Your mom is wise.

Yeah. And what you're giving us a sense of is that there's hope, there's trust, there's love, they're seeing each other in this. So let's fast forward a little bit to the present. Today SHOFCO is well known, you're well known, yeah? You have more awards than I can remember, whether it's World Economic Forum, Time Magazine, Forbes, you're everywhere.

And SHOFCO is seen, and is admired, and people want to learn, and to think about what they can do elsewhere in their own community, and achieve, and serve, and still stay; Grounded. Connected. What's your plan, your dream now for SHOFCO?

0:19:17 REETA: So let's, let's go back a little bit. Okay. Awards and all those things that SHOFCO, we have won.

So that's something that I really try to keep up to now. And it's been helping me a lot to ground myself. And I think for me, it's the most important thing. So growing up in Kibera, there's magic. I saw a woman who was going to the children's homes and giving food. This woman had nothing. I saw people helping.

Someone, one day I stole, uh, I was, uh, uh, I stole a mango and I was being-

0:19:55 REETA: And you were a little kid at that time.

0:19:58 KENNEDY: Not now. Yeah. It was a little kid, I don't know, 10 or what, and I was beaten and somebody came to stop them and paid for my mango and did me a shopping. But I don't know that person. I asked, who are you?

He said, "Good Samaritan". He left. So yeah, these are the stories that people are doing things in the communities and their name will never appear on the newspapers. They will never get these awards. But for me, what was powerful was their actions are written in the people they are working with or supporting in their heart.

Wow. So whatever we are doing, people who receive it and say, that's the award. Yes. Eh, yes. That's the award. Okay. That is the real one. Somebody say like, wow, I didn't have, I finished my school. I couldn't go anywhere, but I went to a TVET training. I went to college because of so and so, because this institution, for me, it is written.

They will, even you have your own story where you talk about somebody many, many years ago is the award that's written in your heart that you walk with. So for me, that really keep me moving and I keep telling people like, focus on kindness, on doing good to whoever you can do good to. That's the award.

That's the most important one. You can have this big one and deep down you're in sadness. Yeah. So, and I've also tried to encourage young people that, uh, yes, we got awards, but, uh, SHOFCO will be there for a while. Okay. A long journey starts with a single step and don't focus on what the world wants to say about you, focus on the impact that you can have on the people. The rest, the rest will happen when you are sleeping.

0:21:57 REETA: Yeah, the rest will come, but focus on what's so important. Boy, the way you're talking about this, it sounds like there are thousands of acts of kindness that happen every day but anonymously, that happen anonymously, yeah.

0:22:10 KENNEDY: That for me is the most important Reeta. People who are helping the widows, people who are helping the youth, people who are helping the neighbors. Just be, hey, my neighbor, you left your door not closed, I closed it for you. There's this kindness that we, we

forgot. And that's how the world becomes better. And I also learned something interesting Reeta that when you do good, there's a chemical that comes back.

0:22:34 REETA: It makes you feel good.

0:23:34 KENNEDY: Yeah. It makes you feel good, right? Let's keep doing good then.

0:22:37 REETA: Why not? That's the feel-good drug that we need to love by doing good. But come back to SHOFKO. At the heart, is a school for girls and, uh, and connected to that school is health care for women.

It's, uh, computer literacy for young men in the community and young women in the community. Talk more about this whole organization is powered by young people. It's for young people by young people. And you've come to an amazing place where you are spreading beyond Kibera and across many, many different settlements, providing hope, but also enabling young leaders in those communities to learn, but to take charge and to look at what their communities need and to solve problems.

Talk more about where you're going with this movement.

0:23:34 KENNEDY: So this is very, uh, personal that I want to share with you quickly.

0:23:36 REETA: Mm hmm don't be quick. Take your time.

0:23:37 KENNEDY: Okay. My mother, no matter how much smart she was, she never got opportunity.

We started a school for girls. I don't think I told people this, but I was seeing my mom in those children. What will happen to my little moms here, who are being given opportunity, and these are going to be the leaders. So that really became really personal because I felt the way women were treated in my community was unfair. The way early child marriage, you know what I mean?

If you have boys, you want to invest in a boy more than a girl. In those times when I was there, right? And it was, yeah, it was really, it was common, just beat a woman, just beat a woman. And people are like, Oh, I remember neighbors going and saying, hey stop. We want to sleep. Men saying, "It's not bad to beat her, but we want to sleep tomorrow we are going for work" right?

So this really traumatized me. Like why people behave like this, but if you beat a man, people are like, "Are you crazy? Why are you beating your husband?" So part of my life, and that's why

I thank the universe that I went through this life because it makes me see things, with feelings, with connection, right?

So a school were centered around women. And then I don't forget the boys. I also love the boys so much, right? We have libraries. We have clean water for boy and girl, can drink. We have the socio-economic activities. But change, when you touched a woman's life in any community, you are touching the entire village.

When you touch the entire village, you are touching the entire country. So that was my concept. But from the Western way of thinking, women, women, women, they don't work for my community. No way. We have to move as a community. A school for girls, but also support; men and the boys. So nobody can attack the school.

Up to now, nobody ever put fire or destroyed that school because everyone feels part of it, okay and if you ask me, what is SHOFCO? For me, for me, SHOFCO is what is real way of doing things in Africa. SHOFCO is what people, our great grandfathers used to sit under the tree and find the solutions.

We just took it to the next level. There's nothing unique. Our great grandfathers used to listen. We used to solve problems. We used to care about dignity. Right? It's about trust. You can't work in my- If you don't trust me, I won't work with you. That is our, that is our foundations. SUN, Shofco Urban Network.

What is happening in Kibera is not the same in Mombasa. It's not the same in Kisumu. But, we have to work with the locals. They have to organize themselves. What do you need? For example, I love this story: So, when I go to a community in Kisumu, we're like, I don't know what to do here. They tell me, that TVET is bad.

You see? That, no, no, no, no. Don't take our kids there. But I say, what's the solution? There's one, that's the only good one. It's this one. Because you listen. But you come from leadership of top down you think you know everything. You say this, TVET, this TVET doesn't work. So I've been really loving, but people think it's negative.

I tell them no, this is African. This is a way of our tradition. This is how we used to lead. This is how we used to work. In our leadership, there was no leader. A leader used to be behind. Seriously, leaders, go back to your grandfathers, Kenyans and Africans knows this, they used to be there. They spoke last. They knew what's called service.

I love their stories. It is about service. Okay. And they have to get the list and they will take everything and summarize. And everyone will feel, there was no signing agreement, people were shaking hands.

0:27:48 REETA: And that was the award, and they were heard. Yeah, well this is fantastic. So when you advise other young leaders who come, whether they're in Kisumu or Mombasa or any other, or Mathare, when they come and say, Kennedy, we want to do something similar.

How can we learn? Where do we start? What do you tell them?

0:28:07 KENNEDY: So we have grown by working with these leaders. If you go to Mombasa, if you go to Kakamega, in other places. you see that SHOFCO, the difference, the S.U.N, right? I tell them, you have to start from somewhere. And I say to them, and I love this because this is a thing that is in the Quran, is in the Bible.

Whoever has nothing, whatever they have will be taken away. Whoever have something, they'll be added on. What do you have? I had a soccer ball. I have a ball. So then I start thinking, Oh, you know, so I want them to know they have something, build on what you have. Don't go search. You want to work in your community, you're a leader, whatever you're doing, what do you have?

You are a CEO of a company. What do you have? If you are running an institution, what do you have? People always forget that because for me is to build on what you have. You can't build from zero, right? If you want to find, yeah, so, and young people start to be like, Oh, wow. And between, honestly, they do it.

0:29:15 REETA: They do it.

0:29:16 KENNEDY: Because we have been, we have been, we're in the world whereby we see social media. We see the new SHOFCO now, right? And you're like, Oh my God, look at SHOFCO, wow. But you forget it started in the slums with nothing in the middle of Kibera slums. But what was there was hope and hope is built on what you have and then you dream for tomorrow.

0:29:48 REETA: That's powerful. Yes. That's powerful. I was going to ask you, how do you stay grounded as a, as a leader and how do you ensure that your organization stays grounded when people come saying, you're wonderful, you're fantastic. We want to give you another award. We want to do another show, we want you to write a book.

And yet the truth is staying grounded. How do you tell them to do that?

0:30:07 KENNEDY: There's a couple of things that are happening that, uh, again, that, uh, I took from our Ubuntu spirit, which you know what Ubuntu is, right? Is that, uh, you don't have to fight for leadership. Leadership is not about fighting.

Leadership is something you earn. I'm a leader! Oh, my friend, you're not a leader.

0:30:32 REETA: That's right

0:30:33 KENNEDY: Leadership is trust, Reeta. The way you move, the way you do your things. People have to be like- but what I've learned is that you have to be conscious. Be aware. I see myself as a founder. I see myself as someone who's be lucky to go to study abroad.

So I have to give so much. So, which means with my team, I have to make sure my team is pushed. My team also gets the light. But I have to, every time I get this award, I have to go back to my team and tell them, it's you, without you, it's true, I couldn't get this, you know? So just remember that, uh, I know its bad to say this, but it's good to remember that you are not that special Kennedy, right?

We are not that special because in all of that, we're not that special. But somehow there are people who have worked hard to make us where we are. If they stop what they're doing, we fall. So we have to remember them. Right. So for me, I put myself grounded by just reminding myself, it's easy. I won't lie you. I go and meet famous people: oh, wow! I go Kennedy, remember why you started; SHOFCO. Okay, I got it now. So let's go back. It's good to walk forward, but take a step back and think, why did we start? Why did you put your first step? Second step? It's very interesting. It will take you somewhere interesting because the more you go, you're achieving.

The more you achieve, you forgot where you started. Every time I remember, Kennedy, why did SHOFCO start? Was it for glamour? Was it for you to get awards? And then that takes you back. And then knowing that you are not building anything for yourself. This is for future generations, you are just passing by.

So how do you make sure you are creating the leaders will continue. So for me, I ground myself by remembering, "You were a street boy, you had nothing to eat, you were beaten for stealing mango. So you did not work hard to be this. So remember, and are you fulfilling what you started?" So that makes me humble.

And then of course, my mom and my wife, they don't allow me, my mom is like: Don't have a big head. And I said, Mom, what's the problem with a big head? If you have a big head, too heavy, you will fall.

0:33:06 REETA; Very practical. Very practical.

That's fantastic. Kennedy, you know, we were talking about how busy you are now, and how much there's so much work to be done, so much more to be accomplished, and of course you don't do it alone. How do you find those small quiet moments within yourself?

How do you find a way that works for you to have that balance, you know, in the busyness and yet the quiet, to see where you're going, to make sure that Kennedy is still grounded? How do you do that?

0:33:48 KENNEDY: So Reeta right now I have three children under the age of what, six, and it is a lot, a lot of joy. And you also realize that if you just keep work, work, work, you lose time with them.

So you have to do all these things together, you know, the holistic. And I think you and I when having coffee, we discussed that. And I agree. It is about, uh, finding peace, wherever you are, right? In my office, I have a small picture of my children, right? So I'll be in a Zoom, but I feel connected. Okay, so I'll be in a holiday, but I can still do some work.

So I think it's all about knowing that the work will always get heavy and heavy and heavy. The age does not wait for Kennedy. Right? Remember that? I remember that one time. So do you want to leave SHOFCO and then be like, oh, when I'm done with SHOFCO in the next years, whatever, then I will have peace of life.

So right now I am working and it's a step by step. It's not easy. And every day I think I'm getting better. And our work is, we're in the ocean. We're together in the ocean. And there is a wave. Okay. Can we just stand still in that boat or ship and let go with the work, but we still enjoy.

0:35:20 REETA: Incredible. I feel like I'm in a masterclass on leadership, on life, on, on how to think about balance and think about service and what it means to lead, which is leading from behind and letting others shine, and let their work speak for themselves. That's phenomenal.

0:35:36 KENNEDY: And there's something else that's interesting, leading from behind, is that people, and I feel bad for people, people don't get secret.

There's more you get than people think. You know why? Jealousy goes down.

0:35:49 REETA: Jealousy goes down.

0:35:51 KENNEDY: Where is jealousy? Oh, Kennedy, I'm cool, I'm cool. Okay? Kennedy, if you're humble, humility, okay? More people try to connect with you, even your team. Jealousy starts coming if you start thinking you are important. You attract that negativity.

The more you are humble- I remember I was with somebody, I think I was with you somewhere in a conference. Oh my God, I can't believe you're Reeta! You see? If they heard Reeta, they would be like, eh? But when they see you like, oh what I can't believe. So that happened to me also with me. People come and say, I can't believe the guy who he was on The Times.

I'm like, you see, because that was jealousy already being built. Okay? But if you are really grounded, you attract less negative energy because you are, we are walking together.

0:36:47 REETA: Together. I love your book and I love, uh, the storytelling, and of course you have a chapter, then Jessica has a chapter, and you go, and along you go.

Talk about the process of writing, and what it took to reflect on your stories, and maybe it came easy, because you have all these amazing things which your mom taught you, but talk about that process, and what it, what it did for you.

0:37:14 KENNEDY: So, so, Rita, the book, I was 25 or 26. Whoa. So now I don't know what , I can just forget about that.

What was the book? The book for me was a story of hope to other people who are going through something life to learn from that. You never know the future. You don't give up in life and then use your life and don't say, as my mom say, don't be like, I'm going to be rich, I'm going to be educated, start doing something, start doing something you, we are in the chemistry of doing good kindness.

And we talk about that, right? So the book, two things from the book for me. One was that it was my therapy because whatever I went through in life, I blocked. It was too painful for some of them, right? So when I was writing the book, there was a moment I was crying. Yeah, there was a moment I cried a lot.

And then I thought about myself, I said, okay, you know what you're going to do? This book is not about telling people, this leadership, what? The book, for my perspective, it's a movie. I'm taking you to my life. So don't judge me. You walk with me. I say Reeta, come. Kennedy in Kibera. Kennedy going to fetch water. So you can see, even my, what I used to think of is there.

So the book was more like, walk with me. I show you my journey. Not that my journey is the best? No. Think about that again. My journey is not the best, but this is my journey. So you just sit down, and watch, and walk with Kennedy. That was the book. So I need to take people again to Kennedy with the grey hair now.

0:38:58 REETA: Yes, yes. Youthful as ever though. Youthful.

0:39:03 KENNEDY: And then writing a book is difficult. Whoever who want to write a book, my piece of advice: don't wait to get agent, to get people to help you. They can't help you enough. I was lucky in university. I wrote, took English classes for memoir. So I compiled things. So every day you wake up.

Every day you are free, a notebook and a pen, write something, write something. Then one day, who knows, take those pieces. But if you're waiting one day to start writing a book, my friends, I'm sorry for you.

Just start writing things slowly because things, new things are happening every day, right? So anything you feel is important for you, write it down. So I think for me that was very powerful. So then you just find out how to compile those moments into a book.

0:39;58 REETA: Yeah, but the moments take you, you're right. The moments take you to your life, accompany your life.

And they also probably, when you read them again, you see something new. You see something new. Yes. All the time. It's wonderful, wonderful. Kennedy, there's so many messages just from our conversation here, but if there's one thing you would love someone to hold on to, who's listening, who may watch this, what would it be?

Somebody who maybe they're struggling, maybe they're in a different part of their journey, maybe they're doubting their own leadership. Maybe they just want to begin to be in service. What's one thing you'd advise them to do?

0:40;43 KENNEDY: I think, Rita, this is, uh, interesting because people are all looking for solution from outside. No. I'm sorry. It doesn't work. Go deep inside yourself. Talk to yourself. Talk to your soul. It is in you, whatever you're going through, whatever you're thinking of, whatever you see as a struggle, it is in you, it is in you. What I ask them to do: take your moment, go deep. Because most of the time, Reeta, we know we have the answer.

We know we have the way, we have the solution, but we are scared. So I will look for this person. I will look for, for example, when I was, when I was on stress with drugs, right? I could go to a therapist or a friend or a priest, right? But we do that because we are not ready also. So when you, then when you took the next steps, you have to start from you first.

The rest will follow. Yes. Even to say that you are going through something, you want to make something already some, there's a seed because you can't think about it if you're just living, eh, so for you to identify that there's something in me, there's something I'm going through, there's something this, that's saying that there is a seed in you, inside.

Go back to it again. And if you go back deep, you will see the light.

0:42;13 REETA: Kennedy, one of the most powerful things you said was the spirit of Ubuntu. That it has been present from time memorial across this amazing continent of Africa. That is how communities came together, tried to solve problems. And sometimes we need to return to those values, to those principles.

So when you think about, you know, you're in Kibera, you're in Kenya, you're all over the place, actually, you're all over this world. What would people, or what should leaders, big leaders, small leaders, all of us, call upon when we think about what this continent can do for herself and what we can share with others?

In terms of changing our conditions, improving our lives, improving the lives of others. How do we go back to think about what, what is here for us as leaders?

0:43:12 KENNEDY: So, so Reeta, we are, we are, I'm really, what really gives me happy when I think about my, our home, the African continent is to be alive in this moment, because I read books, I love history and Africa has been portrayed negatively.

But Reeta, the Africa of today, wow, wow. Just to see- I traveled, there'll be no economic discussion, even in New York, London, that will not mention Africa. Young population, smart, who are saying they're coming in with a new way of thinking. Look at the startups that are coming in Africa and look at how people view Africa now.

It's really changing. Okay. Why? The youth, the youth of, ah, the youth of Africa. I look at Senegal, right? I'm like, wow, what's happening? I look at Kenya when the youth feel that this is their country. Right? So in the years to come, I think Africa is a super power already with the resources, knowledge and what is already happening, right?

The innovation that's going on in Africa. So I think that with our, with the hope of these young leaders coming in, as you can see everywhere, yes, right. We are heading somewhere. We are heading somewhere. And I love it. You know why? Because again, we also realize that we can't go with the old way of thinking.

0:44:58 REETA: That's right. Say more about that. Say more about that.

0:45:01 KENNEDY: It's no longer about charity. It's no longer about starving Africans. It's now business. Okay? It's no longer about dictatorship. It's no longer about few people colonizing in Africa. It's now Africa for all of us, the youth. Everyone feel part of it, you know?

So I see the way things are done in Africa before is shifting. Time is changing. And this generation, they have taken over social media. They have taken over technology, you know, so the way they communicate, you know, so I see that we're going to see a lot of things happening in the continent, you know, and I want to thank our youth, honestly, this generation of young people, they're the ones driving it.

And even the labor, the work, yeah. So I have a prediction.

0:45:56 REETA: Tell us, tell us what is the prediction.

0:45;58 KENNEDY: Very soon it will be hard to get to Africa.

0:46;06 REETA: It'll be hard.

0:46;07 KENNEDY: Yes. Right now, they say it's hard to go to, I don't know, America. Believe me, I think in our lifetime-

0:46;12 REETA: It'll be hard to come here. It'll be a lot better to come here.

0:46;15 KENNEDY: Because what's happening in Africa is magical. There is a wind of change. There are things happening that Africa is a place to be.

0:46;25 REETA: That's right. That's right. That's wonderful. That's a wonderful image. And in that same spirit, where is SHOFCO going? Where is SHOFCO going?

0:46;35 KENNEDY: Yeah, so SHOFCO now is all about the youth you know? We are really working to really partner with the government to ensure also we have these voices of the youth, of the people to be on the table. That's what we're working on. So right now, in the Vihiga County, Nairobi County, we work with the county government to ensure they listen to the people, okay?

I know they want it, but they don't know how. So our job is to bring these voices to them, right? To make sure which TVET doesn't work. Why? Okay? Work on the policies. Right. And uh, and I see we are going to have leaders in the country who are more aware, who are more engaging, who talk to the government in a way that, uh, they feel listened right?

And they, and the, and, and the Africa youth, again, as I work with SHOFCO around the country, they want to be listened. They have a lot to do for the country, but they want to be listened to. And we are working on that too.

0:47;35 REETA: That's fantastic. Yes. Being at the table. Your voice is heard. But most importantly, action. Action that follows. Yeah. That is terrific. Thank you. Thank you. Kennedy, for your leadership, for your inspiration, for your energy, your good humor. You know, the wise things that you share with us from your mom. Thank you.

From street child to multiple Time 100 Award winner, from community leader to global advocate for change, from personal struggles to family success, from Kibera to the world stage, Kennedy Odede's life reads like a remarkable narrative of rising from the most challenging beginnings to becoming a beacon of hope and change for millions.

His journey is not just a personal triumph, but a powerful testament to the impact of community, local solutions, and resilience in the face of adversity. Indeed, Kennedy Odede is truly transcending boundaries. Thank you for joining us on Transcending Boundaries. I hope this conversation sparked a new idea or inspired you to reflect on your own leadership journey and the values that guide you.

If you enjoyed today's episode, please subscribe, leave us a review, and share our show with others. Until next time, keep leading with purpose and with courage.