Connecting the dots...

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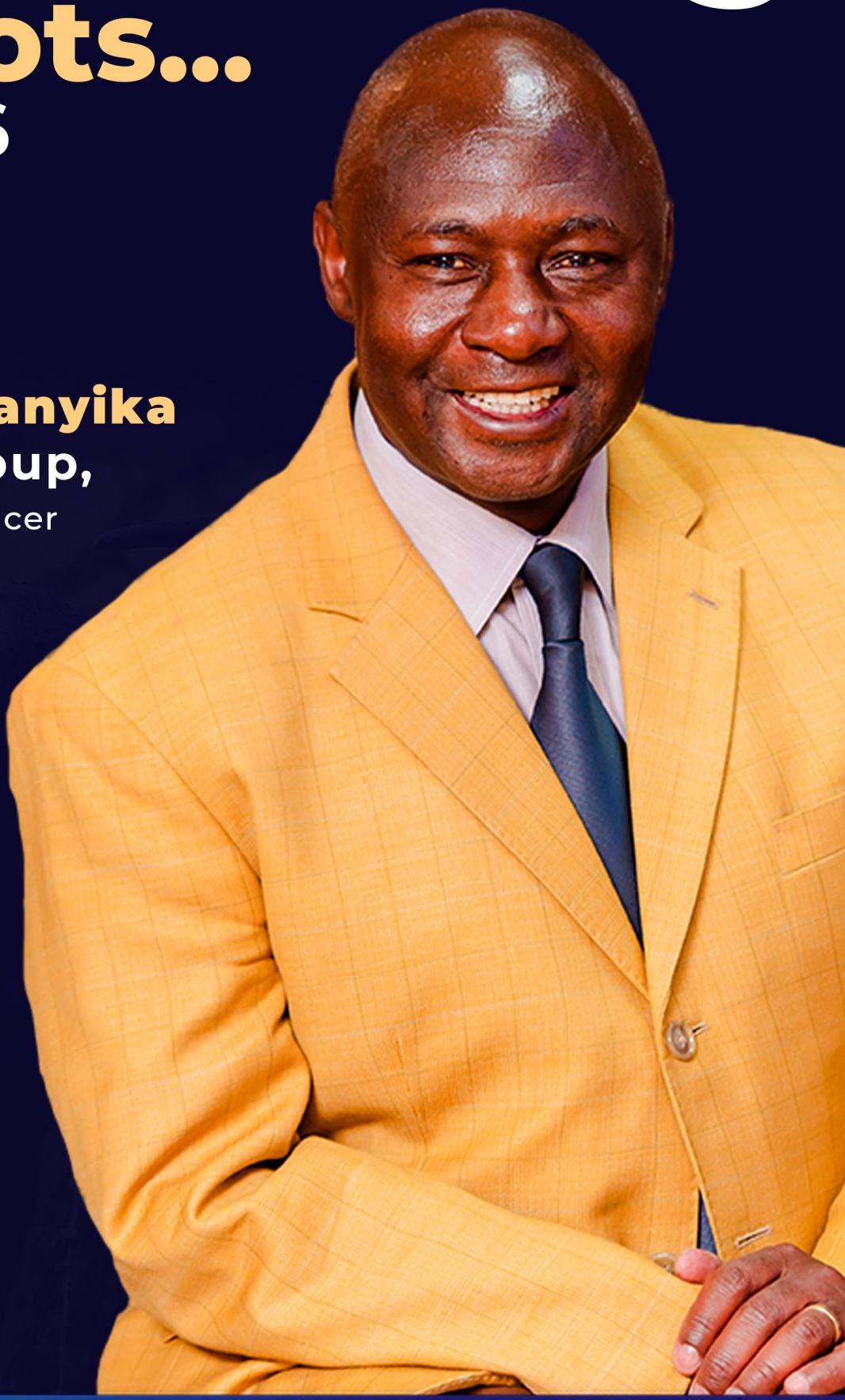

Philip Mataranyika
Nyaradzo Group,
Chief Executive Officer

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Nearer to the days of our nuptials, Mavis and I started scouting for alternative and affordable places to stay as we got ready to begin our life together as husband and wife, preferring to do it through word of mouth since we didn't have the financial muscle to place classified ads in the mainstream media. I would share our plans with my now late cousin, Media Chaitezvi (nee Mataranyika), (MHDSRIEP), who used to work for HM Barbours (Private) Limited – famed back then for being the first departmental store to operate in the then Salisbury. Until its abrupt closure in early June 2020, the up-market store that was named after an Irishman who founded it in 1917, had maintained its location at the corner of 1st Street and Jason Moyo Avenue, which back then was Stanley Avenue. Media's workplace was a block away from Mutual House where I worked as an Old Mutual admin clerk, at the corner of 2nd Street and Speke Avenue.

Media took this as her personal assignment. As an aunt, she felt duty-bound to assist, making enquiries with anyone who cared to listen. True to form, she would call a few weeks later to advise that her workmate, Mr Sande, was more than happy to rent out to us, two rooms at their New Canaan home in Highfield. This was on account of the excellent, working relationship they had. I was elated for two reasons. First, Mavis and I were finally going to live under one roof after years of courtship that eventually led to our customary marriage, before we took another step, walking down the aisle. Secondly, it was back to my roots in the ghetto where I felt at home and comfortable, with a good number of friends and family still staying there.

Just to take a step back. Highfield occupies a special place in my heart, not least because it is my birthplace. I had lived intermittently in this, the second oldest high-density suburb in Harare from the time I was born on the 26th of March 1964 due to the nomadic nature of my father's profession. I was born at the Poly-Clinic in Old Highfield which happens to be home to some of the most influential black nationalists in the 1960s such as Joshua Nkomo and Robert Mugabe who would become Zimbabwe's first black Prime Minister at Independence in 1980. That Mavis and I started our married life there makes Highfield even more special. During my father's working career as a bus driver he would move around with his family, depending on who he was working for and where. As a result, I had stayed in and out of Highfield for several years, making friends and building relationships.

In the 1960s, my father worked for the Harare United Omnibus Company (HUOC), now the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (ZUPCO). When he worked in Harare, our place of residence was number 2195 Egypt, Highfield – a property owned by his only brother, Tongai Mataranyika, now late (MHDSRIEP), who was also a bus driver. When I was ushered into this world in March 1964, Egypt in Highfield became my second home, after our rural residence in Rukweza. My arrival was greeted with joy not just by my parents, but my elder brother, Johane, who now had a friend to keep him company. In 1966, we welcomed another of my brothers, Revai, who died in his infancy. Thomas came next in December of 1967 and my mother, who was still in mourning, would give him the name, Munyaradzi, meaning the one who comforts. Unfortunately, Thomas would be called for his heavenly rewards in November 1993, leaving the family without a comforter.

My father and his brother, Tongai, were extremely close. This was hardly surprising. To start with, they were the only boys in a family of five. The glue that bound them together became stronger after their father was called home, condemning them to life as orphans at tender ages. As brothers, they would raise their children without titles such as cousin. As a result, Media and I were raised as brother and sister. Media's father, Tongai Mataranyika, worked for a rural bus transporter, Matambanadzo Bus Service and our two families' experiences were more or less the same.

It was a common practice at the time that men would stay in the cities to eke out a living while their wives and children would put up in the village; tilling the land and sprucing up their homes in preparation for life after their husbands retirement from the hustle and bustle of the city. Occasionally, the wives would visit their husbands and this was usually during month-ends when their spouses would be cash-rich or after harvesting their crops around April, which in Zimbabwe, coincides with the school holidays. The visits were more frequent outside the cropping season when there was less work to be done in the villages.

When time came for Johane to start school, my parents must have made the decision to have us move to the village so he could start grade 1 at Rukweza primary school and at the end of 1968, the four of us, Mom, Johane the young Thomas Munyaradzi who was twelve months old and myself, would take the train one night, on our way to Nyazura and by commuter buses from the train station to the village.

Soon after we moved to the village, Father would change jobs, joining Mutare Omnibus Company MUOC so he could be closer to his family, staying first in Maonde whose apartments were smaller before finding a bigger and better place for the family, 34 Pazororo in Sakubva.

It was while we had our urban base in Sakubva, Mutare that our family welcomed two of my young brothers, Donald born in 1970 and the late Garikayi born in 1972, who would sadly be taken away from us in May 1997, (MHDS-RIEP). From the time Father moved from Harare to Mutare, the later became our destination on school holidays and we always looked forward to spending time with both parents.

Beginning to mid 1973, my brother Johane and I sensed that problems could be brewing between our parents as Father stopped coming to the village as often as he used to. We also didn't go to Mutare for the August holidays. In December 1973, soon after schools closed, Father would come to the village unannounced, to pick us three, Johane, the six year old Thomas and myself in a hired car. He told us that we were now going to stay with him and going to School in Mutare. On arrival we would be introduced to a woman, Bertha Mlambo, whom Father told us was his new wife and our step mother. Come January 1974, we would all start school at Sakubva Primary School. I was now doing Grade 4, Johane was enrolled into Grade 6, while Thomas would be enrolled to start Grade 1. With two wives, Father now had a new name, a polygamist.

At the end of 1974, Father would leave MUOC, rejoining HUOC immediately after and we had to move back to Harare, again to Egypt, Highfield, where we had use of two rooms at the back of the house as a family, while the family of my uncle Tongai Mataranyika used the four main house rooms at the front of it.

In January 1975, the three of us Johane, Thomas Munyaradzi and myself would start school at Tsungai Primary School in our respective grades, while my two younger brothers continued to stay with Mother.

At the end of 1976 we would be in a quandary when our step mother eloped with another man, leaving father to look after the three of us as a single parent. By the time Mainini Bertha left, she was mother to two boys, Fungai and Innocent, both of whom she took with her when she eloped. Father would lose his job with HUOC, shortly after, making him both jobless and wife less. We had to find a new home and livelihood. Luckily for us, Mother had a new lease of life as a single parent.

When large parts of Chitungwiza were designated urban settlements in the seventies, Seke and Zengeza would be created to complement the existing urban dwelling of St Mary's, replacing rural settlements such as Mayambara and KwaJonasi. Most of the area now Zengeza 4 was mostly a squatter settlement called Chirambahuyo. When the war of liberation was raging mostly in the rural areas, some families would be uprooted from their villages following the death of a key member or because local schools were closed. Parents wanting to continue sending their kids to school and had nowhere else to go came to Harare seeking refuge. Those who had no relatives in the city with whom to stay ended up putting up shacks near Chikwanha shopping centre creating a squatter settlement that became known as Chirambahuyo.

The government of the day had contracted two companies to build new houses in the two new urban settlements of Seke and Zengeza. John Sisk and Son would be contracted to build houses in Seke, while Pettigrew would be responsible for doing the same in Zengeza.

Through her enterprise, Mother had negotiated a contract to supply the John Sisk and Son builders with food during lunchtime, Monday to Friday on account, collecting payment from the contractors on Friday. In modern day parlance, that is called outside catering, my mother was ahead of her time.

Once mother got wind of the news, that Mainini Bertha had eloped, she would use that including the loss of a job by Father to negotiate custody of us children, resulting in us moving into her new home in Chitungwiza at the end of 1976, number 1693 Unit A Seke.

Always enterprising, persistent and hardworking, Mother would soon run around getting us places to continue with our education, at the start of the school term in January 1977. For my brother Johane and I, she got us grade 7 places at Farayi Primary school, while for Thomas Munyaradzi, Chinembiri Primary school which was new and not far from home is where she found the place. My brother Johane must have been affected by the separation and divorce of our parents that he had not done well for his grade 7 at Tsungai Primary School, necessitating him to repeat his grade 7 at Farayi Primary School.

Besides, using her enterprise to get the outside catering contract with John Sisk and Son, Mother had succeeded in getting us a place to stay, a full house for that matter, in Unit A Seke. As an adult working for Old Mutual and later, only after starting and building Nyaradzo, I would realise that it was mostly from her that I got most of the entrepreneurial flair that would drive me to succeed in sales and the persistence to soldier on even against the worst of odds.

While getting the two rooms to rent and going to stay in Highfield was more than nostalgic for me, it was like going back home, however, for my wife Mavis, who had been raised in the leafy suburb of Waterfalls, I thought, it would be a new experience.

A few years into independence Mavis' parents Didymus and Rudo Muchineuta, had bought a house on Mainway Avenue, now Masotsha Ndlovu in Waterfalls, raising their children, four of them, a boy Cornelius Tichaona, and three girls, Tendayi Jane, Patricia and Mavis herself in the suburbs.

After our nuptials, Mavis would move in with me to our new home in New Canaan, some two rooms, leaving behind the life of privilege and comfort in Waterfalls. One room we used as a bedroom, while the other we used as a kitchen and sitting room.

We shared outside toilets with the landlord, Mr Sande and his family as well as other tenants. Because the toilets were communally shared, all the women at the house, including Mavis took turns to clean them as well as the yard.

On days when it was her turn, Mavis would wake up early in the morning to do her chores without any complaint or sign of stress. This was despite the fact that for the greater part of her adult life up to that point, she had lived a life of relative comfort, with her own bedroom and sharing a toilet with one or two siblings. Now the same facility, she shared with a crowd.

For lesser mortals, this would have been tantamount to going backwards and unacceptable, but not for Mavis. She would take all of that in her stride, earning the admiration of the mother of the house, Mrs Sande and others who got to know her background. If I had any doubt at that point about the choice I had made, it all dissipated. I became confident that I had made the right choice and came to love Mavis more and appreciated her as a well rounded character who deserved nothing but respect.

A few days after tying the knot, we had opted for Rhodes Camp in Nyanga as the destination for our honeymoon where we spent a week, enjoying each other's company as newly-weds. I had always been intrigued by the historical account of Cecil John Rhodes as told by my father and the books I read. Cecil's arrival in this part of the world had changed lives of the natives for the worst. He had come to Africa as a 17 year-old boy in 1870 to live with his elder brother, Herbert, who had settled in Natal where he was running a thriving farming business. There, he would come up with a grand and elaborate scheme to take-over what would become Zimbabwe as his own territory. Of course, this was resisted by the natives, many of whom lost their lives and limbs in the process, and also, their land. One of those who chose to put up a spirited fight against Cecil John Rhodes and his men was none other than my great-grand ancestor, Chingaira Makoni, who, together with others, fought the colonisers tooth and nail, eventually losing to their better equipped foes, who had rifles and other paraphernalia that made them superior in battle.

Growing up back then, Father had made it a point, to tell us stories of grand-ancestor Chingaira's heroic acts including the battles he had fought against the colonisers, defeating them in some before he was captured and had head decapitated. It was on account of this oral and written history that I had always longed to visit the amazing Eastern Highlands where I had read, Cecil John Rhodes would spend some of his time relaxing with friends.

We had selected Nyanga Rhodes camp for two reasons. First, because we didn't have much money to spend on our honeymoon, a national park would be ideal as such facilities are affordable. Second, Rhodes Hotel – one of two places where Cecil John Rhodes spent his time when in Rhodesia – was a stone's throw away from Rhodes Camp where we would stay for our honeymoon. The other of the two places where Cecil John Rhodes had affection for was Matopos in south-west Zimbabwe, where he would eventually be buried when he died suddenly on the 26th of March in 1902. Coincidentally the 26th of March is also the day I was born.

For these and other reasons, we both felt it would be nice to have a throwback into history in order to get a better understanding of what it is that could have driven Cecil John Rhodes and his acolytes to want to occupy the land of our forefathers to the point of decapitating the head of my great-grand-ancestor, shipping it to their motherland as a trophy. More importantly, we also wanted to enjoy the serenity and peace of the Eastern Highlands as far away from the madding crowd as we could.

After a week of holiday-making, we would be back to our rented accommodation and back to work but with fond memories. I must confess though that it was not only Mavis who had to adjust to the new life in Highfield. We both had to!

Having been used to life in Chisipite where I was hosted by the Chiganzes, I had gotten accustomed to the finer things of life. After independence in the 1980s to the 1990s, our public transport system, especially in the northern suburbs, worked like magic. While staying at Uncle Tim's house, I was used to catching a bus from Chisipite Shopping Centre on Enterprise Road – at the corner of Ridgeway North – on its way to town without raising a sweat. And because most people in the northern suburbs are motorists, the bus would have a number of empty seats, which was quite convenient. In town, we would board Chisipite-bound buses from the Rezende Street Bus Terminus, next to the Parkade on Julius Nyerere Way (between Jason Moyo Street and Nelson Mandela Avenue. After finishing work at 4:30pm, I would make it a point to catch the 5pm or 5:15pm bus in order to get home early, with the exception of the days we had church meetings. There always used to be scheduled buses after every 15 minutes during rush hours up to 7pm.

It was, however, quite another story in the high density suburbs where passengers would be crammed due to the interplay between demand and supply, which was being worsened by the population explosion as able-bodied men and women trooped into cities in search of better lives, after independence.

That we pushed and shoved to get into buses must have come as a surprise to Mavis who, in Waterfalls, where she lived with her family, the transport system was orderly. Buses commuting between central Harare and Waterfalls did so according to a defined schedule. In Highfield and other high density areas, there must have been a defined schedule also but it must have been that demand exceeded supply most of the time.

During our courtship, I had come to admire my would-be in-laws for their easy going nature and humility. Both would be our father and mother advisors at different times at Church. Theirs was a model family whose children were well groomed and brought up in the Christian faith.

Mavis' parents had been professionals, Didymus Muchineuta, her father worked at the Bible Society of Zimbabwe by the time we got married. He had been a teacher and headmaster before joining the Bible Society as Deputy Secretary General, Deputising the late Mr Gaylord Kambarami, (MHDSRIEP). My mother in law Mrs Rudo Muchineuta was a teacher at Jairos Jiri. They would be amongst those few blacks that broke new ground, buying houses in medium to low-density suburbs such as Waterfalls, Hatfield, Houghton Park and Lochinvar in Harare which previously were for whites only before the advent of majority rule.

At the same time, in Mutare, blacks were also moving into areas such as Morningside and Murambi Gardens. It was the same story in Bulawayo, Masvingo and elsewhere where blacks were also moving into areas hitherto inhabited by whites.

I had met Mavis at the United Methodist Church, first becoming friends, before I fell in love. It helped that we would meet regularly as members of the United Methodist Youth Fellowship, (UMYF). After pursuing her for over a year, I would win her heart on the 28th of November 1988, paving the way for our courtship and eventual marriage.

The time we moved to Highfield after getting married, was the time when criminals were beginning to get organised particularly in places like Highfield, with the birth of the Zimbabwe African Thieves Organisation, infamously known as ZATO, whose main targets were public places such as bus termini in Fio, as Highfield is affectionately known. Fortunately, Mavis would not be moved by it. If anything, she grew confident living in the ghetto enjoying every moment of her new matrimonial bliss .

It helped that as part of our wedding gifts, my in-laws had been thoughtful enough to gift us with kitchenware, which included a four plate stove, some kitchen chairs and table, which came in handy when we moved to our two rooms in Highfield. Apart from the gifts that we were pampered with on our wedding day, I was also fortunate to have accumulated a few belongings from my employment with Old Mutual including a bedroom suite, which ensured that we didn't have to sleep on the floor as newly-weds.

My in-laws' generosity and love was at play when it came time to moving the wedding gifts and the few belongings that we had. My father-in-law would offer us use of his Datsun 1500. Dubbed "the durawall" by Mavis and her siblings, because of the design of its canopy, the Datsun 1500 was all we needed to move our belongings from Chisipite to Highfield. The term durawall, meaning completely locked up, was adopted from one of the earliest companies that used to construct pre-cast walls, and it remains common reference to house boundary walls.

That Mavis would leave the life of comfort and luxury in leafy Waterfalls to move in with a no name boy from the ghetto was humbling for me back then and a source of pride for me now.

Back then, most girls from well heeled families and from affluent suburbs were dissuaded from getting married to boys below their social class for fear they would not be able to cope with the pressures of the social shift and the thought that some of those boys were going into relationships with them for other reasons other than love. The unwritten rule was that the girls should marry within or above their social class. That my in-laws accepted me for who I was and with respect even when I was marrying above my social class helped lay the groundwork for a wonderful relationship between us which exists to this day.

It was mainly from the treatment they gave me that I learnt to treat all people the same, regardless of their social standing in life.

I remember the days when Mavis introduced me to her family and the warm reception they gave me which exceeded my expectations. I therefore knew from the beginning that they had my back. And when we eventually got customarily married a few months before our wedding, my in-laws had been more than reasonable by not demanding a bride price (lobola) that I couldn't afford, paving the way for our wedding.

The Sandes, whose two rooms we rented treated us as their own children. They considered me their son and Mavis they took as their daughter-in-law, with no hint that we were tenants and I am eternally grateful to them. While their two daughters were married and lived elsewhere with their families, they too treated us as family, coming to visit their parents often. They considered me a brother treating Mavis as their sister-in-law. I would learn of the deaths of the Sandes father and mother as well as their daughters at different times with sadness. MTDSRIEP.

With Mavis by my side, I was encouraged and emboldened to take more risks and became more ambitious. On the 1st of March 1992, exactly a year after we got married and moved in together as husband and wife, I would switch jobs within Old Mutual from being an admin clerk with a guaranteed pay cheque at the end of every month to joining the field force as a sales representative where the pay cheque if any was determined by the amount of work one put in.

Luckily, the gamble paid off and our income got better, giving the chance to start dreaming and wanting to own our own house. With our income getting better with each passing month, we would accumulate enough savings to enable us to buy our own house in Kambuzuma Section 2 – otherwise known as House Number 108, after about a year-and-half staying with the Sandes in New Canaan, Highfield.

House Number 108 thus heralded our first title as official house owners, and with that, new beginnings, new goals and ultimately, new horizons.