Connecting the dots...

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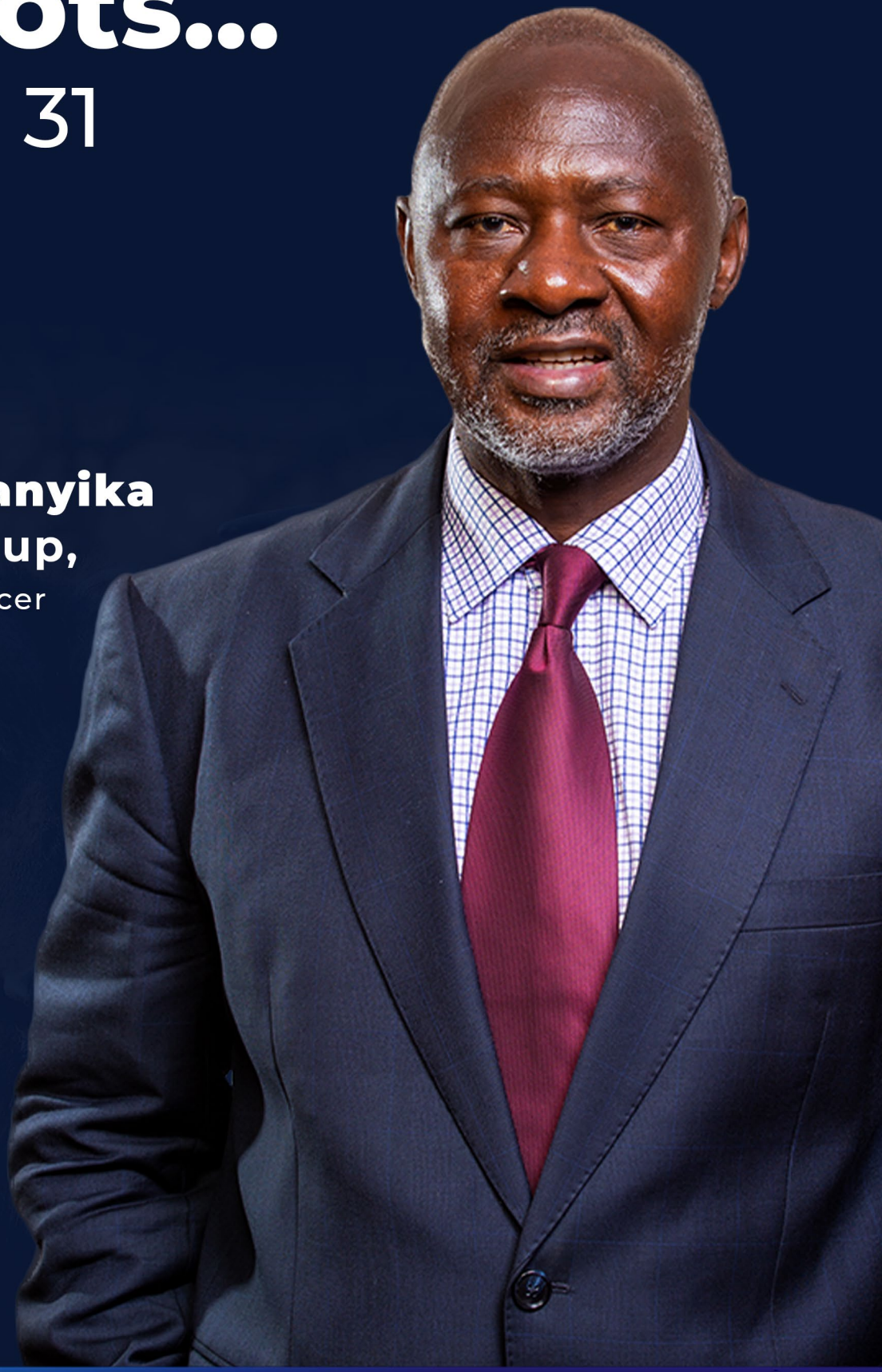

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When the gods smile at you...

Just before the curtains came down on the eventful year in which I had risen from obscurity to become the person to beat in the Form Three students' academic race, it would emerge that Rukweza Secondary School authorities still had a few more surprises up their sleeves.

Right before school closed for the end-of-year holidays, marking the end of the third term, our Geography teacher, Ms Mutseiwa, strutted purposefully into our classroom. She wore a different hat – that of our class mistress – to break the news that it was that time of the year when the school initiated processes to select prefects for the coming year.

As was and still is the case at most schools, our headmaster – Mr Mahaja – had maintained a tradition whereby each classroom was assigned a teacher to oversee its general administration. Apart from guiding the organs of student self-governance in their allocated classes, the class masters or mistresses were also in charge of organising tutorial help, especially for those with poor grades, keeping class records and making important announcements, as delegated by the headmaster.

Ms Mutseiwa's brief announcement about the impending selection and confirmation of prefects would raise our adrenalin levels, sending the gossip mill into overdrive once more, amid frenzied speculation as to who amongst us students would make it into the prestigious student body that acts as the bridge between students and the school authorities.

Through the creation of the students' body, schools are able to fill two needs with one deed. On the one hand, it frees teachers from small, mundane tasks so they can concentrate on tackling other essential duties for the school, while on the other hand, making the students responsible and accountable.

The net effect is that the prefects' participation in the school administration contributes immensely to the efficient and orderly operation of the institution as it improves communication and leads to better understanding and cooperation among all concerned. Ultimately, it helps resolve many non-academic problems, which gives teachers more time to focus on the academic side of business.

In most schools, the modus operandi used in prefects' selection is all-encompassing, whereby the administration works in close collaboration with teachers, outgoing prefects and students. Other schools are more comfortable with a leaner approach that gives teachers the prerogative of cherry-picking prefects, with more liberal schools preferring to leave this to students and outgoing prefects.

Whichever option the school chooses to select prefects, there is a point where the approaches intersect. Once the prefects have been appointed, these are narrowed down to the selection of a head boy and head girl and their deputies, whose primary function is to coordinate the activities of the entire body of prefects and acting as the trusted eyes and ears of the authorities.

The head boy and or head girl may be elected either by a straight vote of the student body, a teachers' vote or a combination of the two, although in some cases, it is the headmaster or headmistress who exercises his or her discretion.

Putting together a solid students' body is not an overnight event. It would have taken the teachers, in particular, several months of assessing their students' abilities to lead by example. They would dot the i's and cross the t's by observing manners, behaviour, citizenship, adherence to school policies and procedures, trustworthiness and being respectful towards teachers, peers and the school environment, as well as its culture and traditions.

Once the school authorities were satisfied with those who would have made the grade into the student body, the nominees would have their work cut out. Their task would be to assist the school administration in the school's management and directing students' movements at critical times during the school day. Their duties also included ensuring fellow learners are punctual to school; punishing minor offenders; assisting in recovering or collecting lost items, assisting during the hosting of school functions, and serving as counsellors to other students. Prefects were mandated to supervise and maintain an overall atmosphere of friendliness, cooperation, discipline and peace and tranquility.

Striking a balance between schoolwork and these competing responsibilities can be a herculean challenge for most. Some prefects sometimes found themselves struggling to measure up to the role and expectations from different quarters such as fellow students and school authorities, often leading to personal challenges that could negatively impact their performance in class. Being a prefect, head boy, or head girl also comes with its own risks. When strikes occur, for whatever reason, prefects may be viewed with suspicion by other students, resulting in incidents whereby they are blamed or even be the target of harm in the event of a fracas.

They also have to contend with negative behaviours that are a culmination of family breakdowns that manifest themselves through mental health challenges, bullying and disruptions in class. Such disruptive behaviours pose a significant challenge to prefects who may also be victims of the same background or may not know how to counsel such students.

At Rukweza, the authorities went out of their way to democratise the selection of prefects. The tradition had been that students would be asked to nominate those they thought had what it takes to be made prefects. Teachers had the final say, mindful of the fact that self-interest could easily get in the way of clear thinking if students were left to do it on their own. The involvement of teachers came as no surprise! Rarely would students nominate those they do not like, for instance, the strict, rule-abiding teacher pleasers. Those who usually made it to their list were largely your typical nice guys and friendly girls who wouldn't harm a fly.

Once all the classes became aware of the selection process and made nominations, there was suspense right up to the day the student body was unveiled. A few of my friends thought I had a good chance of making it to the final list, with one of them even suggesting I could be chosen as head boy. His reasoning was that with Christopher Haadivamwe no longer being at school, there was a good chance I could be selected as head boy on account I was now the top student, which I dismissed as a figment of his imagination.

Even though he had abruptly left school, Christopher's shadow still loomed large, with his name popping up often in conversations. This was hardly surprising! Apart from his academic brilliance, Christopher had been a prefect from Form Two.

He had the temperament and demeanour of a natural leader, which would have placed him in a strong position to have been selected as the school head boy, had he not dropped out.

By impregnating two schoolgirls, Christopher had left school in a huff at the beginning of the third term, throwing the race for head boy wide open. The gap he left behind became a constant reminder to all of us, boys and girls, of what the ramifications could be should we lose focus and chase after the wrong things.

It had been almost a whole term since Christopher had left school and was now just a shadow in the distance. For the few months we had been at school together, I had developed a lot of respect for him, becoming study mates, albeit for a short while.

I also had some common friends with him, some of whom lived in his neighbourhood, and it had been their business to poke their nose around trying to find out what he was now doing alone at home or with his expectant teenage "wives" whom he had impregnated in the fleeting moments of fun.

Christopher was not alone in this situation. It had dawned on those in similar predicaments that teen parenthood was not for the fainthearted. It comes with the burden of taking care of an infant, which is both time-consuming and comes with heavy expenses to cater for the infant's clothing, food, in addition to healthcare costs, all of which they were least prepared for.

Apart from disrupting one's social life, often dropping out of school as Christopher had done, teen parenthood also triggers family conflict as society generally frowns upon it. That families abhor it, is usually a harbinger for mental health challenges due to the pressures, resulting in depression, which is hardly recognisable, especially in rural areas. It must have affected Christopher in the same way as we shall see later on.

For most of those in Christopher's situation, it also dawned on them that it wasn't fun after all, as they suddenly saddled their parents with additional mouths to feed. In Christopher's case, there would soon be two more who would need special attention, plus the teenage girls, now wives, who looked up to him.

Although I didn't get to know more about Christopher's personal life situation, that of most African families then was pretty much the same. They came from families who were subsistence farmers, relying on selling farm produce to send their children to school.

In cases where they didn't have enough to sell because of a bad farming season, they sold their domestic animals, especially cattle, to cover their children's school fees, in some cases, leaving them without draught power for the following season. In most cases, poor families would have a number of school-going children whose fees were a drain on the thin family resources and in some, it was widowed mothers who had to grapple with everyday living expenses of their children and those of the extended family.

In other circumstances, it was widowed grandmothers struggling to feed their grandchildren whose parents had died from the HIV/Aids pandemic, or were seriously sick from it. In the 1980s, Aids was beginning to flex its muscle, taking lives, especially of the productive ones, with the first cases having been identified in Zimbabwe in the early 1980s. Today the country is experiencing a generalised HIV epidemic, with an HIV prevalence in the adult population of about twenty-five percent.

The more I thought of Christopher and other issues, the more I saw myself as walking a tightrope. From his clothing, determination to succeed, and general appearance, I could tell Christopher's situation was not very different from mine, although I didn't get to find out more; I had my own problems to worry about.

A few of my classmates had been made prefects at the beginning of the year on account of their track record in the previous years, seeing they were at the school from Form One. That list included Trueness Matamisa, who stood a good chance of landing the position of head girl. I had no history with the school to talk about, having been out of formal schooling, until the beginning of that year. I, therefore, did not think I stood a chance to be among the prefects, let alone to be considered for the position of Head Boy.

I was content in my position as president of the Youth Fellowship, having been voted into the role shortly after I started to fellowship at the Rukweza United Methodist Church.

The youth leadership position had kept me on the straight and narrow. I had not breached any of the school rules and regulations as I always carried myself as a true ambassador of the church and school.

Should I be successful in having my name nominated from the floor, I thought my chances would end at the point of selection by teachers, in preference of those who had been there from Form One.

We didn't have to wait long to find out the names of those who had been nominated by students as by the end of the day, they were being talked about openly. At that point, I got to know that I had made it on the students list.

Once the student nominations were in, it was time for the teachers to deliberate among themselves, choosing those they thought met the criteria as they saw fit and leaving out from the original list those they did not believe made the grade.

The names of the successful students would be announced the following Monday morning at assembly and, lo and behold, my name was called out as one of those who had made it on the list of prefects for the year 1985! We were, however, told that the names of the Head Boy and Head Girl, together with those of their deputies, would be announced on the day we closed school, which was a Thursday.

I didn't pay much attention to that part of the announcement as I thought I had already made history by making it on the list of prefects, something I did not imagine would happen in the first place, so I celebrated my selection as a prefect. Come Thursday morning, at final assembly, marking the end of the third term and Form three, my name was called out as the new Head Boy of Rukweza Secondary School for 1985.

I was humbled and excited in equal measure! Humbled for the faith the teachers and headmaster had reposed in me despite having only been at the school for just under a year. Excited because I had been given an opportunity to learn to become a leader, the lessons of which would come in handy later on as we built Nyaradzo.