

STEEPLECHASE STAR TAKES ON NEW CHALLENGE

By People Reporter

On a chilly morning late last year, former World 3,000m steeplechase record holder Wilson Boit Kipketer drove into the Riara Springs Academy off Mombasa Road quite unnoticed.

He was the guest at the launch of a Cultural exchange programme at the school by a US-based organization – Kiboko Projects.

It was bestowed upon Mark Scheflen and Jill Raufman – directors of the organization – to introduce Kipketer to the gathering. At the end of it all, it was quite obvious that the track star had indeed found a new calling.

To be precise, Kipketer acknowledged that perhaps working with young people could be something worth considering once he considers retiring from active track. The encounter at Riara Springs Academy had given him the satisfaction of what he has been longing to do.

“I have always thought of how to get involved with children and it seems this will be my calling” said Kipketer.

The occasion at the school was the beginning of a strong cultural bond between some of Kenya’s leading athletes and Kiboko Projects, whose association with Kenya goes back two years.

It was discerned that bringing on board stars like Kipketer would give the Kiboko’s agenda an added impact in its advocacy on issues like HIV/AIDS, female circumcision and the promotion of girl child rights through creative art.

The need to work with top athletes in the country has already taken Kiboko to Kenya Prisons where arrangements are being made to include some of its leading stars on the programme.

“There is no doubt that sportsmen can provide a good example to the society. We think that Kenya is not different,” said Scheflen.

Besides the excitement, Kipketer seemed to have undergone a thorough soul searching following the encounter with the students of Riara Springs. “I have been able to understand what role we can play in society,” he said.

Not that this new-found venture is likely to become his major undertaking at the moment. At 33, he still considers himself capable of staying on track for awhile and says, “I still have a few more years to go.”

The initiation by Kiboko seems to have given him the opportunity to look at life beyond athletics. He thinks he is one of those who can make a difference.

“We have to rise up and show young people the way forward through example. We need to be role models,” he said.

He observes that while communicating to children and other young members of the society on certain issues can be tricky, the methods that have been initiated by Kiboko could help to break the barrier.

He added that it was important for groups involved in such matters to devise ways of providing a forum that can be effective without compromising the morals of young people.

“Many issues like HIV/AIDS are quite tricky. Many children are likely to be shy away from discussing it openly but if it is introduced through art, a lot of children can be able to express their feelings,” he said.

This was the testimony of a man who says celebrities in the country must now give back to society what they have gained from it. After all not many Kenyan sports celebrities have added their voice to issues like HIV/AIDS, drugs and many others which afflict the society.

And what kind of indulgence is Kipketer going to have once he decides to call it quits?

“I want to try and give opportunity to young people in all areas. There is a lot we can do to give children with talent hope,” he said.



Wilson Kipketer admiring mask: He is a renowned athlete

With his plans for the future seemingly laid out, Kipketer points to the creation of opportunities in education for children from poor backgrounds as one of the areas where he will devote most of his time in future.

He says it is important for society to realize that “many children can not harness their talents due to scarcity of opportunities”.

“We have to look at slum areas in our urban centres. In the rural areas, there are many who can’t access opportunities because of poverty”, he said. “The best way to fight poverty is through education,” he added.

It is on the premise of trying to promote contact between young people that Kiboko has initiated an exchange programme which targets several schools in Kenya, the US, and Russia.

The American group will be organising an exhibition in the City of New York later this month, where work from Kenyan schools will be on display. Later it will move to Russia for a similar purpose in linking up the artistic creations of the students from the three countries.