

# **Kofi Annan: A Profile**

**Presentation by Frederic Eckhard**

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## **1. Stepping Down**

I had worked with Kofi Annan for more than 10 years. I felt close to him. I felt he trusted me. I used to say that the relationship between a spokesperson and his boss should be like a good marriage, and I felt it was that way between us.

Yet we parted on uneasy terms. I had travelled with him throughout the Indian Ocean following the tsunami of December 2003, and I had never felt so tired. I was almost 61, a year past my retirement age, and my bones ached.

The pace was grueling.

Kofi seemed tired too.

2004 was what Kofi called his *annus horribilis*, borrowing a term from Queen Elizabeth II, referring to the year 1992 when two marriages in the royal family broke up, the Queen's daughter-in-law was photographed topless by the tabloids with a new boyfriend, and a devastating fire swept through Windsor Castle.

Kofi's *annus horribilis* was caused by the Oil-for-Food scandal, which grew white hot in 2004. The far right was accusing him of corruption, when in fact it was corporations and governments that were guilty of corrupt practices in Iraq.

Then, in the fall of that year, Kofi gave a BBC interview in which he said that the US-led invasion of Iraq was "illegal". His enemies came out swinging. Kofi seemed to be buckling under the pressure.

I was getting beaten up every day at the noon press briefing, and we had no fight-back strategy. In fact, the husband of a friend of Kofi's from his days in Geneva in the early 1960s, Jim Goodale, a former Vice-President of *The New York Times*, gave me an interview in 2006, in which he said:

"As we learned from the media-centric presidential campaigns of the 1990s, the only way to deal with a political attack was to return it in kind immediately. This was the genius of the Clinton presidential campaign and its manager James Carville.

"Since Kofi was now, in a sense, in a domestic political campaign, the only way to protect himself was to do the same thing. But how could he? Was it appropriate for someone who had Pope-like status to fire off instant responses attacking those who attacked him? And was it appropriate for a Secretary General to attack those who

attacked his son? And should he?

“Further, if he hired a domestic public relations crisis firm, that act would appear to be defensive and, more to the point, quite undignified for the Secretary-General of the United Nations to do.”

The far right was hammering away at him daily, and at me. I had no guidance, I was doing my best but it was not good enough. And then Sir Kieran Prendergast gave me inspiration. At a staff meeting, he said, “Mr. Secretary-General, I think we should all resign to give you a free hand to make a fresh start.”

So I drafted my letter of resignation. As far as I know, I was the only one to do so. But it was because I was feeling tired and not up to the task. I wanted out, but I also wanted to give Kofi a free hand to find a stronger spokesperson to lead the fight-back strategy.

Kofi sat on that letter for about two weeks. Finally, he called me into his office. “I would like you to stay until the end of June,” he said. And then he added, almost accusatorially, “Would that suit you?”

## **2. The Look**

As he said those words, his face showed no emotion, his voice was, as usual, soft and low, but there was a fearsome look in his eyes. I had seen it the first time I met him, in the mid-1980s, when, as an information officer for the UN, I traveled to Washington, D.C. regularly to monitor the Congressional funding process. Those were the Reagan years, and a new crop of conservative members were voting to withhold money from the UN. The US was about to lose its vote in the General Assembly for non-payment of dues.

I was the best-informed member of the UN Secretariat on the arcane budget process of the US Congress and I was still new to the UN. The UN Budget Director called me to his office to be briefed. I had never met him. It was Kofi. I was young, arrogant. I briefed him confidently, but I may not have shown him enough respect. And suddenly I got “The Look”. It shut me up. It humbled me.

Kofi’s kids knew “The Look”. His son Kojo described to me how Kofi was as a father. “To be fair,” he told me, “my Dad never gets angry. The way he is as Secretary-General is the way he is.”

Kojo uses American slang easily. “Even if he tells me off about something,” he went on, “he tells me off very calmly. He doesn’t scream or shout.”

He seemed to take delight in imitating his father. “He would just say, ‘Listen,’” Kojo said, pointing a long index finger, long like his father’s, in the air.

“He would put his finger up and say, ‘Listen’. It’s the same thing as my Mom breaking plates and smashing the whole place down. My Dad says, ‘Listen’, and that means it’s all going to happen now.” And I imagine that the “Listen” was accompanied by “The Look”.

When Mark Malloch Brown took over as Kofi's Chief-of-Staff and engineered a fight-back strategy on Oil-for-Food, he organized a press conference for Kofi. Inevitably, one journalist asked if Kofi was going to resign. I held my breath. Kofi gave the journalist "The Look" and replied, "Hell, no."

### **3. Fighting back**

As I prepared to leave the UN in 2005, after 20 years of service, I was obsessed with one idea. Now I was a free agent, and it was my turn to fight back. I did not want Kofi to be remembered only for Oil-for-Food.

Edward Mortimer was Kofi's chief speechwriter. We were having lunch together, and I said to him, "Edward, is anyone writing down all the good things Kofi did?" He said, "No, I don't think so." I replied, "OK, let's make a list." And that list was the beginning of my book.

I interviewed over 100 people who had worked most closely with Kofi and asked each of them what they thought he had accomplished in their area. The testimonials are overwhelmingly positive. A few weeks ago, I briefed some UN and European Union interns on my book and one of them said afterwards, "It's like a love letter to Kofi." And so it is.

### **4. Who is this man?**

I started the book by asking myself, "Who is this man?" You know, Kofi is not an easy person to know. I began by reviewing what had already been written about him. There were two excellent books that had come out in 2006. One was by *The New York Times Magazine* writer, James Traub, and the other by a UN insider, Stanley Meisler, who had been UN Bureau Chief for *The Los Angeles Times*. And a few years before, there had been a penetrating profile in *The New Yorker* magazine by Philip Gourevitch.

And there was a quote in that *New Yorker* piece that struck me. Gourevitch wrote of Kofi: "He is at once intensely present and personable and curiously detached."

Kofi gave me a green light to interview whomever I wanted for the book. He had a big network of long-term friends. One of them was Julia Falvy.

When he was a student in Geneva in the 1960s, he encountered an attractive young woman in the UN Library. Her name was Julia; she was an American on a Junior Year Abroad. He invited her for coffee. "I thought he was handsome," she said to me, "and I accepted." We were speaking in her home in Geneva in 2006, where today she is a practicing psychotherapist.

Kofi's closest friend at the time was Roy Preiswerk, and he introduced Roy to Julia. They eventually married and Kofi became godfather to their son Frank. And in Geneva Julia said something to me that echoed the Gourevitch quote. She said, "Kofi has an extremely clear sense of limits and space. Getting past the point where you

start invading his space is very hard to do. He has a way of maintaining distance in all circumstances.”

So in writing this book, was I going to try to invade his personal space, and, if so, should I? I couldn't resist, I thought. I would start at the beginning.

Kofi's father was Henry Reginald Annan, a distinguished and influential Ghanaian known as “HR” to his friends. But who was his mother? Stanley Meisler, in his book, says that Kofi's mother's name was Victoria, while James Traub says that her name was Rose. In talking to family members, I learned that both were right.

Kofi's younger brother, Kobina, filled in the details for me. “Victoria,” he told me, “was Henry Reginald's ‘English-wedded wife.’” In other words, the head of the household, the backbone of the family, in the British tradition. But of his five children, only the second, Essie, was by Victoria. Kofi and his twin sister Efua were born to a Fante woman from the coast named Rose. And Kobina's mother was named Ama.

Yet all of these children lived as a tightly-knit family in this Victorian Ghanaian household. When I asked the eldest daughter Nana Essie whether any of the other mothers entered Victoria's home, she replied, “Oh no; no.”

Kofi was Henry Reginald's eldest son and he wanted the best for him. At the time, the best secondary school in Ghana was Mfantsipim, and the headmaster of Mfantsipim was Francis Bartels, a friend of HR's. Stanley Meisler is a clever journalist and he tracked down Francis Bartels living in Paris. Bartels had ended up working for UNESCO and had retired in the French capital. And Stan had a juicy quote from Bartels, who said that “Kofi made so much of so little.” I had to talk to him and Stan gave me his number.

I reached Bartels easily; he answered the phone when I called. His voice was steady; he had a soft British accent and spoke with the precision of a schoolmaster. He sounded 30 years younger than he was. I told him that my wife and I were living in Brittany and he replied that he and his wife had a secondary home in Normandy. He proposed that we meet there for lunch.

So the four of us met in a restaurant in Trouville. I started by asking him what he thought Kofi inherited from HR. “He inherited HR Annan's calm,” he said. “His father was a very collected person who could not easily be ruffled. I see that in his son.”

He thought a bit, and then added. “The job HR did as a United Africa Company agent in Kumasi would also make him somebody who would be careful in whatever he did or said. The job itself was a very tricky one; you had the British managers on the one hand; you had the Ghanaians on the other—all this at a time when the struggle for independence was on. Your choices are not many, and you have to be careful. And I think I notice that care and attention to what he says in his son.”

I then asked him if Kofi got into Mfantsipim on his own merits. Bartels strongly denied that there had been any favoritism. “Kofi qualified on his own; this was not a

favor,” he emphasized. “We accepted 90 of about 3,000 applicants and Kofi finished among the top 90 in an entrance examination.”

Finally, I had to ask him about his comment to Meisler, and he laughed. “I’ve had so many surprises with young people,” he began, “including my own son. If you’d have asked me while he was in school whether he would get a degree, I would have said ‘maybe’. Today I am able to say that he satisfactorily completed his post-doctoral studies in Paris and has several publications to his name. I think we make a big mistake if we read more than necessary into young people’s performance in school.”

He then looked at me with a grin and a sparkle in his eye. “So yes, I did say that. If you’d have asked me at Mfantshipim whether Kofi Annan was going to be....” --he stopped to laugh—“the person he’s become, I would have said, ‘No way’.”

Bartels was disappointed that he couldn’t recall more detail about Kofi’s time at Mfantshipim, so when he returned to Paris he sent an e-mail to a man who had been a prefect during Kofi’s time there. Yes, I said “e-mail”. Bartels was perfectly at home in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When he turned 100, Kofi set up a foundation in Ghana in his name. He died two years ago at the age of 101.

Anyway, this former prefect, Andrew Arkutu, then called around to some of Kofi’s classmates and he sent me a report. These classmates, he said, remembered Kofi as independent-minded, with a strong interest in the politics and social issues of Ghana in the turbulent late 1950s.

In fact, his nickname, which endures to this day, was “Domo”, because of his right-of-center political views. In those days, “Domo” applied to any individual or party that was opposed to Kwame Nkrumah. “It’s a corruption of “Demo”, for democratic,” Arkutu explained, “which is what the opposition considered itself, and Kofi’s father was a leading opposition figure.” The students at Mfantshipim used to organize mock parliamentary elections, and Kofi became deputy leader of the opposition. “So, like his father,” Arkutu wrote, “he was a “Domo”, which also became his nickname.”

HR had started a political party that favored independence from Britain. But he wanted a smooth transition; he was a moderate. He and his colleagues had selected a dynamic US-educated young man as their leader. His name was Kwame Nkrumah. But Nkrumah turned out to be a firebrand and HR was not comfortable with him. So Nkrumah broke away, agitated for independence now, was imprisoned and eventually emerged as independent Ghana’s Prime Minister. And Kofi, like his father, disapproved of his tactics.

Much later, Kofi would be critical of the leadership failures not just of Nkrumah but of the many African leaders who failed their people. And he seemed to share part of that blame.

Kofi left Africa at the age of 21 to go to university in Minnesota, USA. For the first time in his life, he was surrounded by whites. America in the 1960s was still a racially divided society, which Kofi was curious about. When a barber refused him a haircut saying, “We don’t cut niggers’ hair,” Kofi looked at him in disbelief. “I’m not a nigger,” he said. “I’m a Ghanaian.” He got the haircut. I wonder if he gave the barb

Sir Kieran Prendergast was head of the Political Affairs Department under Kofi, and he had these observations about Kofi and race. “He was very easy in his own skin,” he said. “I never saw the slightest sign of racial awareness or racial tension or racial prejudice or sensitivity on his part, though he was very observant about the way that other people regarded him.”

In his first year as Secretary-General, I brought to Kofi’s attention an editorial that I considered racist. His eyes betrayed a flash of anger. Again, it was “The Look”. Then he said of the author, “That’s his problem, not mine.”

## **5. Mr. Mom**

In 1965, Kofi married Titi Alakija, from a prominent Lagos family, who was in Geneva studying French. Kofi’s friend Julia said that Titi loved to laugh as much as Kofi did. Julia showed me the wedding photo; her husband Roy Preiswerk, Kofi’s roommate in Geneva, was Best Man (second from the right).

They had two children, a daughter, Ama, and a son, Kojo. Kofi was moving up the UN ladder steadily, but usually these promotions involved changing location. Stan Meisler counted 12 moves in 15 years. This put a strain on Kofi and Titi’s relationship and they eventually divorced. Julia Preiswerk commented, “They kind of grew out of each other.”

Ama stayed with her Mom, and Titi put her in a boarding school in Wales. Kojo, stayed with Kofi, but at 7 he was too young for boarding school so they lived together in Geneva. Kofi became Mr. Mom, dashing from work each day at 4:00 p.m. to pick up Kojo at school. This experience gave Kofi new insight into the plight of women. “This was one of those times when you get to understand the difficult role of mothers, who often have to juggle jobs and children,” he told me. But he knew that while his experience was similar, it still wasn’t the same as for a woman.

Shashi Tharoor worked at UNHCR with Kofi at that time. He remembers a story Kofi told him about how once Kojo wanted him to come to an event for the parents at his school, and Kofi said that he just couldn’t; he had something important at the office. And Kojo replied, “But Dad, all the other mothers will be there.” Shashi observed, “Which in some ways is a lovely insight into the maternal touch of his parenting.” Kofi ended up going to that meeting; he told me, “I was the only father there.” ([click](#))

Ama and Kojo grew up closely attached to both their parents. Titi spoke warmly of Kofi to German interviewer Friederike Bauer, and she attended Kofi’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday party last April, where both Ama and Kojo gave touching tributes to their father. Kofi often got together with them when he traveled as Secretary-General. Both children married for the first time last year.

## **6. Nane**

Several of those who knew Kofi for a long time told me how he changed after he met Nane. They say that he became more calm, even serene. Nane and Kofi were both

single parents working for UNHCR in Geneva. Nane told me about the first time they met.

“It happened on a very specific occasion, at a very specific moment,” she said. “At a social event, I was on my way out. I turned around and our eyes met.”

She laughed. “Now that sounds corny, but it did happen that way without a word being uttered. It’s not strange, because Kofi has a kind of aura about him. He projects a fascinating combination of the joy of life together with this very strong inner core, which are both very magnetic qualities.”

Nane followed Kofi across the Atlantic when he once again got promoted and moved. It was a dramatic change for her to give up her economic independence, but she says it was like a gift when it happened. They were married at the Church Center across from the UN in 1984.

Although trained as a lawyer, Nane had always been fascinated by painting, and in New York she painted full time, often until late at night. On these occasions, she would grab some take-out food and rush back to Roosevelt Island, where she lived with Kofi. She told me the following story: “He was very tolerant. I remember him one evening arriving especially late. I had picked up Chinese take-out and in reheating it I managed to burn the rice—he accepted this without complaint.”

Shashi Tharoor said of Nane and Kofi, “I think theirs is an enviable marriage. He first of all made her his priority, and she made him hers. There seems to be a lot of mutual understanding and respect. She accepts a vision of her place in his life that is loyal, supportive. There was never the slightest hint of any competition between them, of any discordance, of any different objectives.”

Nane has a Bohemian side to her character, and so she had to change her lifestyle dramatically when Kofi became Secretary-General in 2007. Iqbal Riza, Kofi’s first Chief of Staff, said of her, “In her own very quiet, self-effacing way she gave him an anchor. There’s no question that his self-confidence rested on Nane.” He then added, “She emerged from her shell with great grace.”

When I traveled with them, I was always struck by how close they were.

## **7. The Ashanti in him**

Nane talked about a dual side to Kofi’s character, a joy of life on the outside and a strong inner core. Both came into play when he became Secretary-General.

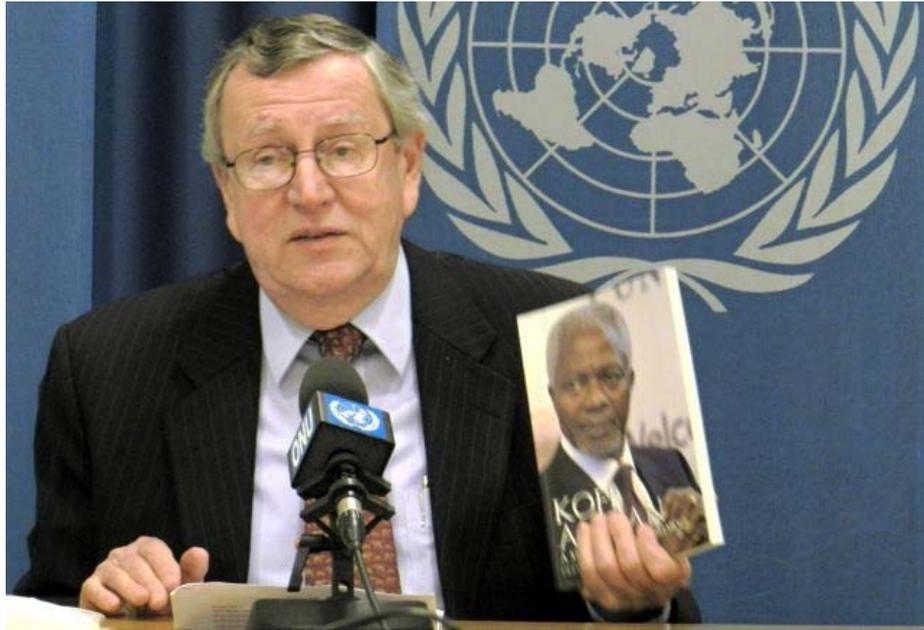
Kofi had a former Ghanaian ambassador on his staff in the SG’s office; his name was Patrick Hayford. And Patrick told me a story. Kofi’s father HR was half Asante and half Fante; his mother Rose was pure Fante. The Asante are warlike, Patrick said; the Fante are laid back. Kofi has Fante qualities on the surface—gentle, soft-spoken, relaxed—but Asante qualities underneath—strong, stubborn, fights for what he believes in.

“When I was ambassador to South Africa,” he told me, “Kofi went on this famous

mission to Baghdad. And the *BBC* called me and asked, why is this man going on this very risky mission at this time? And my answer was, ‘Kofi looks very gentle, very quiet, very soft, but there is an inner strength, and in times of testing that inner strength comes out.’ And then he laughed. “That, perhaps, is part of the Asante in him.”

I realize now that the mild-mannered, easy-going man whom we all found it so easy to like would never have made a great Secretary-General without the Asante in him.

## 8. The book



*Presenting the English-language book in Geneva, April 2013*

I wrote the first version of the book at the request of a Geneva publisher. And like a good spokesperson, I let 100 people tell their stories about Kofi. It was translated and came out in French in 2009. I began looking for an English language publisher and had great difficulty. Who wants to publish a love letter to Kofi? Kofi himself stepped in to help. He put me in touch with his friend David Finn in New York. David heads the multinational public relations firm Ruder & Finn, but he also has a publishing house on the side.

David has lunch once a month with others in publishing in New York, and he showed my manuscript to a distinguished editor from the publishing house Knopf by the name of Ashbel Green. And Mr. Green did him the courtesy of reading it. He subsequently sent me an e-mail with one line of advice: “I don’t hear enough of your voice.” So I sat down and rewrote it from scratch, putting in a long introduction about my life in the UN and how I met Kofi and adding personal observations and anecdotes. I asked Sir Brian Urquhart to write a Preface about the role of the spokesperson and also an essay at the end about frequent comparisons between Kofi and Dag Hammarskjöld, which Sir Brian feels are unhelpful.

And I added a chapter on Kenya. Kofi had begun setting up a foundation in Geneva

after his retirement and in late 2007 he asked me to come down for a few months and help him set up a communication office for it.

I had no sooner arrived, when he was whisked off to Kenya to mediate between the Government and the opposition after rioting broke out following disputed elections. He called me from Nairobi and said, “I think you better come down here.” I spent five weeks with him during an extraordinary mediation effort. In the end, he succeeded and the two sides agreed to work together on government reform, election reform and much else. The smile on Kofi’s face in this photo tells it all.

Even with this rewrite, I couldn’t find a trade publisher, so David Finn said that his non-profit publishing house would be delighted to put it out, and he did so in January.

## **9. Turning 75**

Kofi turned 75 in April of this year. Nane told me he travels more now than when he was Secretary-General. He is Chancellor of the University of Ghana and is affiliated with the University of Singapore and Columbia University in New York. He sits on more than a dozen boards.

His foundation in Geneva has a heavy focus on Africa—promoting responsible leadership, fighting drug trafficking and, above all, promoting research into a Green revolution for Africa, which seems to be his primary interest.

Nane threw him a birthday party in Switzerland, where they live part of the year. (The other part is spent in Accra, Ghana, where they also have a home.) And the theme of the party was, “Farmer Kofi.” I took this rather poor photo of Nane, who suddenly presented herself in the guise of the Farmer’s Wife and presented Kofi with a pair of garden gloves as a birthday gift.

Kofi’s joy of life was showing, playing drums as Bob Geldorf sang impromptu. This photo was taken by Italian journalist Anna Cataldi, who posted it on her Facebook page the next day.

Happy Birthday, Kofi.

In accepting the invitation, I told Kofi that I needed advice on fundraising for Burkina Faso. He and Nane graciously invited us out to dinner for some private time together.

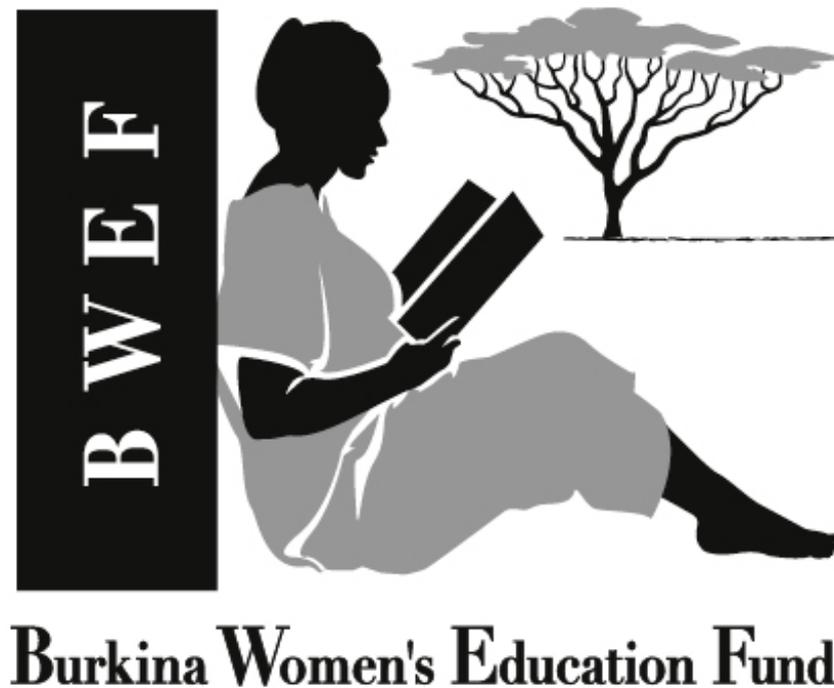
## **10. Burkina Faso**

Kofi may have had an inkling that I was going to retire ahead of him when my wife and I bought our retirement home in northwest France in 2003. The woman who sold us her house, Gilberte, had a humanitarian organization that supported disadvantaged girls in Burkina Faso to get their baccalaureate degrees—that is, to finish secondary school.

After we moved there in 2005, I found that she was struggling, and I asked my UN friends for help. They gave generously. I began traveling to Burkina Faso once a year

with Gilberte and her husband and soon I was hooked.

ASo I said to Gilberte, OK, let's now support the girls to university. "I'm too old for that," she replied. (She's 80.) "You do that on your own."



So I started the *Burkina Women's Education Fund*. I take the girls supported by Gilberte once they've passed their Bac exam and ask them if they want to go to university, and they all say "yes".

We started by supporting two girls, then five, this year 13 and in the fall probably 18 girls.

Why Burkina Faso? First, it's just by chance. It's where Gilberte started her NGO in the year 2000. But the underlying rationale is that this is one of the poorest countries on earth, and the female literacy rate is among the lowest. But the Government has progressive policies on women's education and the people are energetic, optimistic and hard-working.

Burkina Faso means "Land of the Upright Men". We would like it to be the "Land of the Upright People."

Let me introduce you to just one of our beneficiaries. She is Jacqueline. She lives with her mother; he father died last year.



*Jacqueline and her Mom*

Her father had three wives and about 15 children. He farmed to feed his family. Last year there was drought in Burkina Faso, so I brought them a 100-kilo sack of maize. “You’ve saved our lives,” he told me.



*Jacqueline’s Dad, who passed away last year.*

Jacqueline is studying geology. That’s a good choice, because there is a mining boom in Burkina Faso now and there’s a good chance she will be able to find work. Her annual tuition at the University of Koudougou is about 25£. We also give her lunch money; we also gave her money to buy a bicycle to get to and from class.

Actually, we gave her enough money for a new bicycle, and instead she bought a used one. With the money left over, she paid a carpenter to make her a small table to study at. And this year we gave her a solar lamp to study by. Her house has no electricity.



*Her used bicycle*

The house has three rooms and one bed, reserved for her grandfather when he is staying with them. When he's not there, Jacqueline can sleep there.



*Granddad's bed*

So that is Jacqueline, and there are a dozen more like her whom we are helping this year.

Allow me to sum up my message to you then in two sentences. Buy the book. Help the girls.



Thank you. And Jacqueline thanks you.

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