

Life after work

Tumwijukye busy in retirement on his own terms. **P.18**

Summing up a life

Tribute to the first African Barclays Bank Uganda manager. **P. 19**

Wed The unpleasant weather did not stop the party from happening. **P.28**



SundayLife



Five years without my daughter

Missing person. Marije Slijkerman talks about how Sophia Koetsier, her daughter went on an excursion in Murchison Falls National Park but never returned. Five years on, she still believes Sophia is there, somewhere. **P.20**



Fun loving. Sophia, an outgoing young woman. She took a photo with children in Karamoja three days before she went missing. PHOTO/COURTESY.

Five years without my daughter

Puzzling. Sophia Koetsier, 21, a Dutch medical student, had just completed her eight-week internship at Lubaga Hospital, and went with her friends on a tour. It was not long before her mother, **Marije Slijkerman** received a message that the daughter had gone missing in Murchison Falls National Park on October 28, 2015. Marije talks about what it has been like and lessons from this experience.

Before we left, I really wanted to say a warm goodbye to everyone in the hospital. We gave our medical goggles and white coats to the midwives and surgeons who were very happy with them. After saying goodbye to everyone in the maternity ward we also stopped by the other wards. I am really sorry my stay here is over. All the people in the hospital are so sweet. I will truly miss them and hope to be back one day. Who knows, as a doctor of Tropical Medicine?"

This was written on October 22, 2015 by 21-year-old Sophia Koetsier, a Dutch medical student, on the last day of her eight-week internship at Lubaga hospital in Kampala. Six days later, she disappeared while travelling through Uganda prior to returning home.

Sophia is my daughter. Her unexplained and mysterious disappearance in Murchison Falls National Park on October 28, has devastated my life and that of her father and her two brothers. The insecurity about her fate, the fight between hope and despair, has dominated our lives ever since.

No child is as present as a missing child. The circumstances surrounding Sophia's disappearance are unclear. A proper inves-

tigation never took place at the time and police quickly jumped to the conclusion, without evidence, that it must have been a fatal accident. End of story. Convenient too. But for us it isn't that simple, certainly not for a mother who sensed from the beginning that something was wrong.

I had come to Uganda to visit Sophia, wanting to see her work in an African hospital and to see Africa. After receiving the terrifying message that she had gone missing, I went straight from Kampala to Murchison National Park. Local police took me to the so called crime scene where I saw a trail of puzzling items, spread out on the river bank. Among them one unlaced shoe, a pair of knickers in a tree, various torn pieces of textile, some tied to a branch, and more. No signs of blood or a struggle which makes an attack by an animal unlikely. The items were found 36 hours after Sophia was last seen, not far from the accommodation, which makes you wonder when those items were put there. This gave me a very eerie feeling; this could not be right.

Memories

We are now nearing that dreaded date that marks five years without Sophia. Five years sounds like an eternity, especially, when in constant pain and despair, not

knowing what happened to your child, or where she is. Yet it feels like yesterday that we took her to the airport in Amsterdam in August 2015, ready and excited about her new adventure.

Sophia, outgoing and sociable, took to Uganda and its people quickly as clearly described in the extensive weekly reports we received from her. In September, she wrote:

"Wow, almost one and a half weeks have passed without me writing anything. Not because nothing happened but rather because of an overload of new impressions and things that happen. I am starting to get used to Uganda more and more. The way of life, the habits. I am almost considering simply staying in Africa, cause geez, it's so relaxed here!" And she observes:

"The girls here are truly exceptional dancers. Jojo taught me her killer moves and I tried them out immediately. The reaction was: 'Huh, Sophia is dancing like an African girl?!' When I saw her last on October 21, a week before her disappearance, she said: 'If they'd ask me to stay on two more months, I'd immediately say yes!'"

Emotions

I often say that I travelled to Uganda once because I wanted to. I went as an eager traveller, but returned as a broken mother. Since then, I have come back 13 times, because I must. It is impossible to live with the continuous insecurity of not

knowing.

Nothing can be compared to having a loved one gone missing, especially when it is your child, your flesh and blood. It feels like an amputation, a hole in your body.

The passing of time does not make it easier, on the contrary, it seems to get worse. And I see Sophia everywhere. A young woman with a blond ponytail on a bicycle in Amsterdam and I think: 'Why is that not Sophia?'

Smiling mothers and daughters, walking arm in arm, feels like a dagger in my chest.

Reading books is impossible due to lack of concentration. I never wake up well rested in the morning, we all have sleeping problems.

One of my sons said to his brother: 'Mommy doesn't laugh anymore'. He is right. 'She doesn't sing anymore either, or know the meaning of 'joy' and 'pleasure'. Music is difficult, it is emotional. Especially piano music; Sophia plays. Her piano has been silent all this time.

The therapy

We are a traumatised family but the cause of our trauma is continuous, therefore, counselling cannot really help us. I did find a therapist who understands that as her brother went missing years ago. She knows from experience there can be no closure, it is an open wound

2015

The year in which Sophia went missing in Murchison Falls National Park.



Sophia and her mother Marije Slijkerma October 14, on their first meeting in Kampala. PHOTOS/ COURTESY



Sophia takes lessons at Lubaga Hospital on September 11, 2015.

ABOUT

The feeling

- Her unexplained and mysterious disappearance in Murchison Falls National Park on October 28, has devastated my life and that of her father and her two brothers.
- The insecurity about her fate, the fight between hope and despair, has dominated our lives ever since.

wound that cannot heal and there is nothing to process. There is nothing to hang on to but hope. Hope that the day will come when this will all be over and we can have our life back. Until then, we try our best to survive because parts of life do indeed go on.

Sophia could be somewhere

On my frequent trips to Uganda, trying to find Sophia, I have met many people. Wonderful people who are sincere and willing to help, some have become friends. I have also met people who have their own agendas and might see a desperate mother as an easy way to make money.

On one of my trips I met Christine, the midwife Sophia often mentioned and worked with. She told me about Sophia's eagerness to learn new skills and to be useful. How quick she was; 'You'd only have to show her something once and she could do it. Sophia is a doctor'. Despite not yet having finished her medical studies, Christine saw a born doctor.

She also said something I often think about: 'She's somewhere, I can feel it, she's somewhere', and repeated that several times. Christine is not the only one who thinks Sophia is somewhere. For us, as long as there is no evidence to the contrary, she is alive. And I stubbornly maintain my belief in miracles. They are rare but they do happen. Just last month, I read about a mother in Sri Lanka who lost track of her son in the tsunami of 2004. After 16 years of searching she found him.

Keeping up the fight to find Sophia is hard and exhausting. But I feel I have no choice, I cannot stop. The continuing support we receive from

friends and strangers alike, from financial to mental support and everything in between, is a great help. It is most touching and encouraging. In February 2016, with my husband, we set up www.findsophia.org to generate publicity and raise funds for further investigations.

The help available

All this time I have been trying to convince the Ugandan and Dutch authorities to seriously investigate. When you know next to nothing, how can you rule out anything, including a crime? Recent DNA-investigations support that scenario. The office of the Director of Public Prosecution agreed and ordered a fresh investigation into Sophia's disappearance, not ruling out anything. Meeting President Museveni earlier this year gave an important boost to that investigation. Finally, it felt like we were making progress but then a virus appeared, turned into a pandemic and affected everything, including travel and investigations. It could not have come at a worse time. Now that Entebbe Airport is open again, I hope to be able to make that 15th trip soon. I feel my being there does make a difference.

All we want is to find Sophia and uncover the truth. We will never give up hope of finding her alive but whatever the outcome may be, we need to know, as we need to find peace. So this very difficult journey, that will hopefully lead us to Sophia, must be made. When I met Madam Speaker [Rebecca Kadaga] in March, she told me: 'You must not relent'. She is absolutely right. I shall not relent and Sophia cannot be forgotten.



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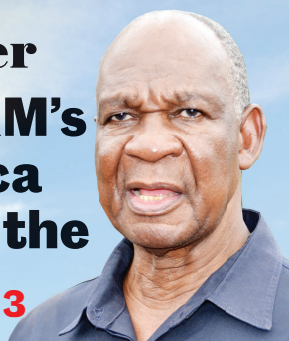
TRUTH EVERY DAY

SUNDAY MONITOR

Racing
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People & Power
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SundayLife:

A mother's pain
tracing missing
daughter for
five years and
counting **P.20**



Why Museveni ordered raid on ISO

Where is he? A former UCU student was allegedly abducted 19 months ago, and his family's petition to President Museveni led to the storming of ISO's safe houses by Special Forces Command and the Chieftaincy of Military Intelligence. **...P5**

Mr Peter Othieno dons a T-shirt of his missing son Abraham Sule during an interview with *Sunday Monitor* at his offices in Kampala on Wednesday. PHOTO / STEPHEN OTAGE



NEWS ...P.3

**Two brothers
wrestle Gen Ali
for MP seat**

Two biological brothers were nominated last week to challenge the First Deputy Prime Minister, Gen Moses Ali, for the Adjumani West MP seat.

NEWS ...P.4

**Govt to stock
sickle cell drugs
at public facilities**

Government has revealed that plans to have hydroxyurea drug in public health facilities for the sickle cell care are under way. The drug has previously been accessed through private pharmacies.

THE LIZARD

ONE WOULDN'T BE
ENOUGH!



TWO BROTHERS
WRESTLE GEN ALI FOR
MP SEAT

NEWS REFUGEES NOT WORRIED ABOUT CORONAVIRUS - REPORT **...P.3**