

DAVID C. WESONGA
PROFILE



David Wesongah. Photography by Anthony Kamau NationMedia.com - Nairobi, Kenya

JO LEE TALKS TO ADESTE'S 2008 RECIPIENT DAVID WESONGAH NAIROBI'S PRINCE OF THE STREETS

By **Josephina Lea Mascioli-Mansell**

Throughout the building of my life's experience – its twists quickly taught me plenty. But the one thing I never did learn – was how to contain emotion when listening to words from the young who reach out in pain.

This was the case with the prestigious Gold Medal of Honor for ADESTE'S 2008 Recipient, Nairobi's 23-year-old David Wesongah, because he represents millions of the young and yet, but a fraction of those with the courage to fight the desperate odds and rise above to help many others!

Imagine, imagining – and then: fighting for!
“The truth is a powerful weapon”
said the author of
The Audacity of Hope.

Barack Obama

My friends – you are about to experience something extraordinary!
And it is for this reason that I present on behalf of ADESTE with pride,
David's incredible story.

David Wesongah was born on the 5th of September 1985 in the countryside town of Mumias in Kenya. A writer since early age and urged on by his tutors, David began contributing poetry to school journals becoming one of the finest young poets in the country. He was inducted into the Poetry Hall of Fame as a silver entrant in 2003 and mainstream media embraced his works when he became a regular on the state owned radio KBC's show Sunday Arts Night. Today, David is a Digital Journalist at Nation Media Group, in Nairobi, Kenya, the largest of its kind in East Africa.



JO LEE: David, what an honor to be sitting with the greatness of you, a young man who's risen above agonizing odds and whose young countrymen today look to for survival. JO LEE Magazine is truly privileged to have had its 19 Member International Voting Committee award you the prestigious 2008 ADESTE Gold Medal and I, David, believed in you from the moment my eyes began reading your nomination!

DAVID: Jo Lee, I am humbled and honored to be chosen from among my global peers and I dedicate this award to the streets that I call my home.

This is an achievement not just for me, as I take it, but for the people who have propelled me to these heights. The people who have believed in me to give me the motivation to go on!

J.L.: David, "my hero" is how Her Excellency Professor Judith Mbula Bahemuka, Kenya's High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Cuba, referred to you. "This is a sign that the youth of Kenya have talent and we have to discover it. David Wesongah got the award but I feel it was the whole of Kenya that was given this medal. May I on behalf of the government of the people of Kenya thank ADESTE for such a wonderful gift. Today is a day to celebrate and I'm having a glass of champagne."

D.W.: Her Excellency is kind. I believe the award comes at a time when Kenya needs it most, just having come from the brink of disaster following the disputed General Election.

Kenyan's lost lives in a manner that was

not worth the events that precipitated it. I believe The ADESTE Gold Medal of Honor comes to unify the country, for the people who perished in the chaos and for those who worked tirelessly to normalize the situation.

J.L.: Poignantly revealed, David. You know, Churchill Otieno, the distinguished editor of your department, and I, had some marvelous fun in arranging the surprise tele-announcement among 30 of your colleagues in a staged staff meeting. What a great gentleman! And what ingenuity!

D.W.: It was more than just a surprise, coming at a time I least expected. I mean, I knew I had a meeting but the teleconference? That was just ... it hit me most when realizing that Churchill, this fine gentleman, spent his time arranging with you, Jo Lee, and I thank him and you and everyone for their support.

J.L.: David, when we first met, you said something extremely powerful. You said:

"Jo Lee, on many, many evenings while living on and running the streets I organized the street poetry nights with multitudes of people who would gather and sit for hours under streetlights and recite poems, sing songs and build dreams with our friends!"

I wonder how many street people in countries, aside from Africa, would gather in such beauty. You had nothing at all and yet, David – you had everything!

Was this the beginning of your dream to rise above the streets so the world could

hear and come to the aid of your struggle to enhance the hope of those without?

D.W.: Jo Lee, every time someone asks me about my past, I chuckle, then when it starts coming off my chest, I feel tears welling up in my eyes. It is what I call 'unfamiliar territory, familiar terrain'. Jo Lee, it is my pleasure to be interviewed by you.

I have always had dreams, but then, I've also had a dream. I never wanted to be on the streets. No one wants to be! But once you find yourself out there, you have to survive, and that is the case, and thus the dream. To rise above the normalcy expected of the streets. Beyond routine, I call it.

J.L.: David, what did you mean when you said to me:

"I must keep on fighting to ensure that this weakness, this lethal enemy inside doesn't get the better of me."

I know you've had one hell-of-a life BUT at 23, the hell of the past has helped you succeed today! You are a phenomenal mind, a great human being with a WILL to rise in the good world. You also have a very interesting job.

D.W.: The worst enemy anyone can ever have is actually themselves, Jo Lee, but few ever realize that. The worst enemy lies within your heart. He can lead you to do things unimaginable, and how you control this inner enemy is what actually determines your level of success and happiness. Forget about my detractors. It must be my soul, my heart.

opposite: David Wesongah is congratulated in Nairobi by Churchill Otieno, Nation Media Group's Editor, online editions, upon the announcement that David had become the global winner of the prestigious ADESTE Gold Medal. Photography by Anthony Kamau NationMedia.com - Nairobi, Kenya



J.L.: David, will you tell me about your life as a child?

D.W.: It's been 23 years of life. Not a fairy tale. Now, climbing the stairs to my office on the third floor of Nation Media Group, one thinks of a life not struggled, handed down on a silver platter, but if wishes were animals in a rodeo! From the happy family I was born into, to the streets that bred me and made me and unto the poetic world I got lost in, it has been struggle after struggle. But the realisation that I'm not struggling for my own self gives me the strength to keep going.

I started off quite well, as the last born in a loving family of six.

My obsession with books began at a very early stage and I was heavily influenced by Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes. Of course, I had a host of African writers in my mind by then. I did Ngugi wa Thiong'o in primary, at a time when it was a high school set book. I devoured Wole Soyinka and adored Chinua Achebe to bits, and I still reckon his most powerful piece of writing, 'The problem with Nigeria' applies to the Continent and the world at large. The opening lines, that, 'the problem with Nigeria, is simply and squarely a failure of leadership' are the most memorable I have ever come across on the issues we face as struggles.

I was weaned on crosswords and reading became a culture to me.

J.L.: You were very young, David. Why books?

D.W.: Because they were available. Oft were the times I sneaked into my brother's library to steal James Hardley Chase novels, the Happy Valley Twins series, yet I barely was twelve. I remember touching Sidney Sheldon and getting a telling off for that when I was in Class three, because it contained too

much explicit content. I was reading books designed for much older ages and this eventually got me into the Bible. I started from Genesis, the first chapter and weeks later, I was going through the last chapters of Revelation. But I was more interested in the Old Testament. I would spend hours seated on the bed going through Israelite Conquests and the Kings. Probably, this prepared me mentally for the later challenges.

J.L.: And you began with incredible readings - just entering grade four!

D.W.: Yes, I went on to grade four in 1995 and started an era where I was at my best ever academically. The school was finding it difficult for anyone to challenge me. But no one can take blame for not trying to.

J.L.: I'm thinking of your mum, David, who so cared about your intellectual future!

D.W.: Mum was dedicated to our education. Most mothers, especially here in Africa, usually leave it to dads to ensure that kids are educated. Men, at times, can be real societal failures and this in turn translates into a whole generation of lopsided offsprings.

J.L.: And then, the unthinkable happened!

D.W.: Yes. It was 1999. I was to sit for my high school entrance exams and that is when my world came apart totally. My parents separated and my siblings took sides. I can never blame my Mum for not trying to keep me, but the pressure of looking after my siblings and me was too much for her.

J.L.: You speak of 'the family land'. Did your Mum now have to work it on her own which reduced its income, David?

D.W.: Agriculture was our living and when Dad left, he left a massive loan which had to be settled since the parcel of land was attached to it. A loan he took to develop his own personal interests. Leaving us in a mess.

J.L.: What turmoil! Did you have anyone to turn to for support?

D.W.: The only person who understood me was my elder brother, Jimmie. I loved him to bits! He is forever a part of me. I know he looks down at times, from wherever he is, and I never want to disappoint him. But he died at around the time I was finishing my exams. My world was falling apart and it was to get much worse when I became so stressed and missed five points to make the cut to a national school. My hopes of a scholarship collapsed with that.

J.L.: What did your brother die of, David?

D.W.: My brother died after he was betrayed by the people he loved. I know you will ask me which people. I say he was murdered, but not physically. They left him to die when he needed their help. I was too young then to do much. And all I could do was watch as his soul departed from his body.

J.L.: Who do you think could have helped him?

D.W.: I just don't know. His wife wasn't there. In fact, she came for the funeral on the burial day. Daddy didn't even waste his time to wait on him; he just put soil on his casket and went back to his life as though nothing had happened. But they know what they did! This, Jo Lee, is a long story and perhaps someday, when I gather the courage to, I shall tell it.

opposite: I came to see that the gospel according to others – was not necessarily the same according to me. And this is a rule I respect and live by.



Just before my first ever poetry recital at the Eastlandah Drum-Poetry Café.



TELEPHONE

250



NO POSTERS



J.L.: With so much tragedy going on around you, what did you do next?

D.W.: I joined a local high school and decided never to live in anyone's shadow again. That is when I learned about street credibility and went on quickly to establishing it. I had developed a massive, almost fanatical following in school. I was the only one who could stand up to a principal and tell him off without blinking an eye and have the whole school behind me in case they were thinking of punishing me.

J.L.: But why were you annoyed with the principal?

D.W.: I was angry. All I had been building had collapsed. I needed somewhere to vent out my frustrations, and I found that in the principal, the school.

The principal would try to counsel me for this and send me home. The two weeks at home, in reality, were suspension but the sweet words were to mellow down other students.

J.L.: Would the other students object to your suspensions?

D.W.: Oh yes. The principal was much afraid of what I'd call mass action. Student Unrest is one thing many schools will do anything to avoid, and that is the pressure that befell them. Once, after the principal expelled me, students rioted and demanded that I be brought back. He had no option but to recall me. Now he wanted to avoid further trouble and I exploited that advantage I had over him.

J.L.: How did you exploit this?

D.W.: One way was when students kept

insisting on my presence whenever they faced the disciplinary committee and, within no time, I was elected the school mayor. Eventually the post was scraped off, though, because I was more of an addictive influence, not good for the administration.

J.L.: Do you think the principal and teachers understood those on the streets or, were they exploiters?

D.W.: No one understood us. Not a single one of them understood the streets. They were what I'd call shameless exploiters of street labor. And that is why they were loathed down here. If the streets got empowered, where would they find guys to do all the dirty work? They didn't like that either.

J.L.: So then, what happened, David?

D.W.: My instability at home was being balanced by my firebrand nature at school. This earned me seven suspensions and two expulsions in my four years in high school. Not only was I the people's voice, I suddenly realized the injustice of an unfair world. I became a sort of Robin Hood, organizing lootings from the rich teachers and giving out the loot to the poor students. I thus would negotiate a run out with someone, do something in return and use the cash or goods they gave me to bail out my street friends who were in need. Most didn't have books or registration money and the fall back was ever me. I had to do something for them, lest I lose out too. I owned the streets and the respect came with it. So it was an eye-opener.

J.L.: Taking from the rich and giving to the poor has a romantic ring to it but it is not legal. How did you reconcile that?

D.W.: What is legal in the world we are

living in Jo Lee? I knew these people I harassed amassed illegal wealth, and most of it from the parents of these unfortunate kids, but yes, I had to reconcile.

You see, I knew which of the teachers had business interests and where. That was one avenue where I used to get things for my friends. I would tell one person to help out another poor fellow and if they refused, I called the shots. All I had to do was say I needed something from their business and the boys would get it for me. If I thought that was not too good, I would blackmail them with a few facts about their underground dealings to get what I wanted. I call these years the 'dread of doom era'. I was literally a street mobster! And I was dreaded.

J.L.: Is this how your 'street credibility' led your intelligence to take a hard look at what you were becoming?

D.W.: I had hopes and dreams but I kept questioning where they lay. Where? And where translated itself into what. What I would become eventually. They say every good boy does fine, or so, until every good boy starts refining life, and re-defining himself.

That was the case in my earlier primary years; I did well, apart from a slight interruption when I was sent to live with an abusive aunt. That is when I encountered the streets for the first time. Fighting for food with hounds in the streets made my view of the world slightly modified, and having to hold off the older kids from my territory.

Escaping from the streets was different. This was a case of trying to make a lasting legacy, impact it on what I thought was an overly unfair world.

J.L.: What do you think saved you from a life of crime?

D.W.: My writing – which was realized sometime in grade six when I became the first ever student to earn 30 marks out of an almost then impossible 30 in a composition writing exam. Because of my teachers, my poetry was embraced by the time I was turning 15. I wrote in my formative stages due to loneliness. I never had the privilege of having a girlfriend; I call it privilege because I could not afford one, and so left love to those who could afford it. I wrote about life, my life, my friends' lives, and of course the streets that I played ball on.

J.L.: Yes, playing ball is among the greatest ways of strengthening a mind!

David, you mentioned how Maya Angelou and Langston Hughes became a tremendous part of your literary life. Were there other major influences from the world of poetry that guided you in any way?

D.W.: Oh yes. I was heavily influenced by the works of E. E. Cummings. I had read Shakespeare, Milton, Keats and Elizabeth Bishop by this early age. I liked Pablo Neruda's works and good me, how can I forget Edgar Allan Poe and good old father of East African poetry, Taban Lo Liyong. But the one poet who made a huge impact on my literary style and life is Maya Angelou. The first ever poem I read by this lady was 'Still I Rise'. The first lines echoed what I was going through then:

'You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.'

I cried, and the more I read Maya, the more liberated I felt. The very same words came to haunt me, and were instrumental in my forming of Jade, an outfit aimed at bringing out true stories rarely reflected in mainstream media. But that's another story.

But the real thrill came when I first heard my poem on national radio and almost instantly became a local literary icon in my hometown. Initially I was the literary gangster, but later on, it stuck. I became the people's poet. I wrote not for myself, but for other people. What they were going through was what most interested me.

Then in 2003, my life would change in almost a long instant! I was inducted into the International Library of Poets Hall of Fame.

J.L.: And that long instant today, finds ADESTE on your shelf of joys!

David, so tell me. In yet another long instant when you decided to leave the streets: HOW did you find the courage to do so and WHERE did you go?

D.W.: I cannot say fully I left the streets; they shall forever be a part of me, because they built me. But I say, I decided to change the streets. Change myself, so as to change the streets.

It was scary and I thought about it. It's like deciding to come out of a comfort zone. It is never easy. A close friend of mine was killed, shot, and I remember thinking of his little siblings, the picture of them standing next to the grave tormented me no end. There was the emotional courage, he'd have survived had I done something earlier, and then my Mum, I remembered what she had to endure trying to shield me from a world she had no proper understanding of.

So, I turned back to my one love, writing, and I became a freelance journalist to make ends meet, and was soon doing it like a veteran. I was offered a position with Nation Media Group which encompasses other people's writing. It was humbling and a challenge I had to accept.

J.L.: Wow! And look at you now! You're handsomely ensconced in an awesome

office with shirt and tie and because of your incredible writings – you've come to be known as The People's Poet. I'm so proud of you, David!

D.W.: Ha! Forget about the shirt and tie. That is something that can never be taken away from me.

You know, Jo Lee, I still take to the stairs of the Media Group with the enthusiasm of a sixteen year old, the face exhibiting awe and wonder, quite much like disbelief that this is me now, when I was on the verge of breaking. Ma says I was too huge to be born, and that I was begotten. Whichever it was – it has been a struggle, life is more than a struggle, Jo Lee.

J.L.: But oh my, you've accomplished immeasurable feats through the struggle, David! Tell me about: your new baby! This phenomenal implementation of yours.

D.W.: I started the Youth Hall of Fame last year with an aim of recognizing young people who struggle against much negativity to make a positive impact in society. Maybe this is why James Mwaniki, a journalist here in Nairobi, nominated me for ADESTE. What similarities we, ADESTE and I have, Jo Lee. I still can't believe James followed the leads that closely, close enough to believe in what I do.

Though still in its initial plans to be rolled out later this year, the Youth Hall of Fame will bring to the fore hitherto unknown stories of bravery, of successful cases against odds.

This is going to be a case of recognizing youth, not because they are outstandingly bright, but rather because they have made a positive impact on the society they live in against a backdrop of negative odds. As Her Excellency said: "Let's hope that the Kenya Youth Hall of Fame will reel with joyful spirit and convey all the youth of Africa as they come together to send the right vibes to the Universe."

We all know what we have to endure to make a positive impact, and once made, rarely are we acknowledged. And again – thank you to ADESTE! And thank you, Jo Lee, for agreeing to sit on my Advisory Board and to be here in Nairobi for the unveiling of the Kenya Youth Hall of Fame.

J.L.: I'd be nowhere else, David! It is one of my great honors!

David, out of the vast amount of truly remarkable nominees ADESTE had to consider from several corners of the world, our minds and our hearts kept flowing back to your profile and as you are now aware, David, YOU received the overwhelming majority of votes from our 19 Member International Voting Committee. What a tribute to you! And what excitement for me to present to you in Nairobi at the unveiling of your Youth Hall of Fame - The 2008 ADESTE Gold Medal of Honor for outstanding achievements 'from Man to Universe' in the category of: The Arts.

D.W.: It is humbling Jo, pretty much, in as much as I'd wish, I can't find a way of thanking you for all but as I mentioned earlier, I bet the best I can do is to give it back to the people who deserve it, the people who have made me, stood by me so far down there - where no one wants to associate with them. They won it, I didn't. Unto them, unto the streets...

J.L.: You have a deep sense of humility, David.

D.W.: Thanks, yes, but you see Jo Lee, I have a very different opinion of humility, a totally different world view from the ones people hold and a cherished value of belief in what I stand for. Some call me a radical because I refuse to go commercial with my writing. I believe if I am writing for someone, because that someone so heavily depends on me to get their story

out, then why sell? I must have come across this idea listening to too much Mutabaruka, the Jamaican poet, and the speeches of Malcolm X.

J.L.: David, your writings on deeply emotional works border on realism and look at the side of life you knew well – to inspire you: the streets. You've turned down an offer to publish your first short story, which was written for the streets, and now you are working on your phenomenal collection of poems and a biography: *Unfamiliar Territory, Familiar Terrain*.

I'm thinking of your sense 'of good' but you know David, there's nothing wrong in receiving monies for your works because through payment you can build and build within several arenas that will help vast amounts of people who otherwise, would never have been helped. It's 'what' you 'do' with the money that translates into right or wrong.

Is life from within becoming less of a struggle for you, David?

D.W.: From within, I cannot count on fewer struggles for that would make me devoid of a life to look forward to tomorrow. I shall tell you something that very few people know about me.

The only thing that I have to fight so hard to conquer is myself. Look at it this way: Imagine you are your own enemy, and you have to overcome yourself! You know yourself, so you already know which tricks to use to demolish yourself, and so, because it is a negative that comes first, by default, you have to fight it off. But it is you, how will you do that?

External obstacles have always given me multiple options on tackling an issue. My friends have been the stairs to where I am. So, question is, what is the biggest threat I have to fight off?

I am proud of who I am, of how far I have come, of the little I have achieved, but shall I let this pride get the better of me?

I walk tall, and talk loud, laugh last and loud and cry silently, but shall I walk in a way as to step on those who have made me, laugh in a way as to laugh at those who've propelled me higher while remaining down there? And cry so much as to drown with tears and sorrow those who've stood by me?

Those many words can be summarized in very short sentences. To win the war against the enemy within, you have to know when to stop, so as not to exceed your limits, you have to know when to start, so as never to be left behind. You have to know when to give in, instead of wasting your energy chasing a mirage, know when dueling a pig so as to stop on time and know when you have become you, so as not to listen to any advice thrown your way.

I shall give you this poem by Stephen Crane to illustrate what I mean.

I Saw a Man

I saw a man pursuing the horizon;
Round and round they sped.
I was disturbed at this;
I accosted the man.
"It is futile," I said,
"You can never --"
"You lie," he cried,
And ran on.

Stephen Crane

This was most definitely a man, not fighting external enemies, but fighting an internal war. Whether he ever got to get to the horizon, only his soul, his belief can tell all.

I believe that probably, most probably, had I been recognized at the time I needed it most, my life would have gone down via a different way.



J.L.: My, that is powerful! Powerful, David!

I'd like you to remember something. When you say "The only thing that I have to fight so hard to conquer is myself", 'this' becomes a choice! It's one thing to remember a portion of your life vividly painted BUT it, too, becomes YOUR CHOICE as to WHAT you choose to let your mind listen to, today. Every human on earth is tempted. No one is exempt. And it becomes the discipline of choice that leads us to our destiny.

Your Mum must be extremely overjoyed with your overwhelming determination! And I'm sure her heart pained, as yours, during your formative years. Being born into life in Nairobi can be a test of insurmountable strength. And perhaps, just perhaps through your works David, young girls too, will gain the wisdom needed to rise above onto a higher plateau of understanding life and themselves: so as not to endure, what years ago, was your dear, dear Mum's agony.

Now tell me, which, of all the poems you've ever written, is your favorite? I know what mine is and it can be seen in this issue in The Poet's Corner, For Whom Shall We Sing!

D.W.: My favorite poem, of all I've penned, I must disappoint you, is yet to see daylight.

I say this because it is the most emotional. It will be on my poem hunter page once I am done re-touching it. Taking its place, therefore, is what I call my poem, because it defines me. Titled 'the making of a portrait', and which is available on my page. I still do not quite comprehend why I had to write this in such glaring un-poetic language, but it still came off my chest, and I felt good afterwards.

Jo Lee, you are the first person to push me to these limits, and I must say, I am amazed at your strength, and persistence, and may I add, patience in trying to understand me. Very few people do anyway.

I'm very glad I've done the interview. And let me tell you why. You used a very strong sentence to advance your argument: that I represent the people of Kenya. Well, that touched me, and now I shall work hard towards representing with pride.

Thank you, Jo Lee. Truly, thank you.

It is always a pleasure knowing there is something you can do for someone, and the satisfaction comes from seeing it mature, come of age. As long as I can make a soul out there comfy, and watch the streets bloom, like roses in a garden, it shall forever be my pleasure to be associated with the garden, even if concrete.

The Making Of A Portrait.

I walked me heavily to the studio,
Under the full glare of the heavy laden sun,
Removed my shirt once in,
And took my most expensive paper,
A 3 lb 2 oz 5 pound pure white,
And I heard the silken voice inside me say,
'Draw me as you know me'.

Paint my face dark sepia, for the roots I shot from,
And wherein lies buried my roots – the umbilical,
Draw my eyes large, clean and ready,
But remember to make them watery white,
For the tears I shed, been shedding.

Make my nose long and rude,
For my unknown proud pure ancestry,
And my hair rough and kinky,
For the life I live – rough, cold, coiled and tough.

And please make those hands long and rugged,
For the length and depth of the daylong struggles.
Sketch weak wobbly legs on that young body,
For the failing strength at a tender age under thy worldly onus.

And remember
The ground on which I stand,
Make it fertile black but bare-resolutely barren.
For the misused richness of wherein lies my umbilical chord'.

There was a silence as the portrait came alive,
Sombre in mood shaping like a building storm,
Then,
'Remember to make the white background dark black,
For the uncertainty surrounding my future
And the mystery shrouded past.
But make the skies above me light blue,
For the limits of my ambitions'.

And outside, it begun to rain.

©wesongahC.David

www.poemhunter.com/wesongah-david



JASONHOWLETT.COM
NATURALLY INSPIRED DIGITAL IMAGING AND DESIGN