

[Marvin Shim] Hi Mr. Francis, thank you for being with us today. The EcoEcho family, who will be performing in a couple days, is with us.

[Matthew Lee] Hi Mr. Francis, we just wanted to ask a couple questions to get to know you and your school.

[Kinubi-Francis] Of course.

[Matthew Lee] Does anyone want to ask the first question?

[Gracie Park] I can go first. I was wondering what some of the school's curriculum is for the future and what kind of subjects you want to provide in the school?

[Kinubi Francis] Perhaps I should start by introducing myself and my school. For those who don't know me, my name is Kinubi Francis. I am a teacher by profession and director of the Salama School for the Blind. This is a school which admits and educates blind children from the age of five to sixteen. I don't know what you call it in America or in Korea, but that is elementary if I'm not mistaken. And at age 16, boys and girls [take] their primary living examination, which then takes them to secondary school for six years, after which those who pass their Advanced Certificate Exams join college or universities. Those who don't pass, we integrate them back to their community where their parents live.

I started this school in 1999 so it has been in existence for 27 years or so. The curriculum, as Gracie asked me, is composed in terms of subjects. We teach them English. We teach them science, mathematics, and what we call social studies or general studies, which has history, geography, and religious education and others mixed there. So they have to know the world. In general studies, we teach them the different continents, we teach them the different foods and people and climate. We also have what we call activities of their living skills. In that one, we mainly teach them, being blind children who come from the villages and don't know what to do, how to bathe, how to wash their clothes, how to brush their teeth, how to clean the compound and where they sleep, and making their beds. The objective of introducing them to activities of living skills is to make them able to manage their own affairs independently without a lot of support.

Remember, and I want you to also imagine, that when a child becomes blind, he or she has lost one sense and the sense that child has lost is seeing. And seeing is a very important sense in the life of a human being. When you lose your sight, you almost become helpless and therefore, you have to be helped to become helpful or manage your own affairs so that you become independent. You should not depend on others. Don't depend on your parents. Don't depend on your teachers. Don't even depend on your friends. You should be able to do your own things yourself. That's why we introduce activities of their living skills in their curriculum.

We also introduce them to what we call orientation and mobility. We train them to move alone from point A to point B, to avoid obstacles like trees, parked vehicles, dishes, and so on and so

forth, and in doing so, we introduce them to the white cane. [Francis stands and unfolds his own white cane.] So the child, or any blind person, should be able to maneuver to move alone using this cane. You have to be trained to use it. You have to know how to scan the environment, identify the ditches, identify the trees, identify the vehicles, identify other people standing there, so that you are able to move alone. If you don't learn to move alone, you will fail to go to class. If you don't learn to move alone and grow up, you will fail to go to your workplace. If you become employed, you cannot move from your home to your office. You cannot move from your home to let's say to the shop to buy something. So you will just sit there at home and cry or be helpless, wanting everyone everything to be done for you. That's bad. Are you getting me? I hope my English is understood.

[Collective yeses]

[Kinubi Francis] It's useless for someone to always sit there and cry, O! Help me. No. You should be able to move alone. For example, now, I moved alone from Uganda, via Amsterdam to New York, to Boston, and I'm here [in Southern California], and I'm blind. If I had not trained in mobility, I would not be moving alone. All the time I would be wanting someone to help me. Sometimes, when I go or join people like you, you find someone that people become so sympathetic for. They want to carry you as if you are going to fall. No. And that's why we train them in orientation and mobility. It's one of the subjects in on the curriculum.

We also train children in music. Dancing and drumming. We have a full subject on our curriculum, and the blind children like it so much. So they play different instruments, they sing, they dance, and we go and organize concerts outside our campus. We go and in the songs, we teach them a lot of songs of creating awareness in the community. How should a blind person be handled? What causes blindness? How can parents avoid their children becoming blind? When a child becomes blind, what should you do to such a child? We compose many songs talking about that. And then we go into the community, we go into the villages, we organize concerts, and the children sing such songs to make people aware of all these. We don't want to talk about it only verbally, but we also have to communicate to the public through singing. Singing has a lot of meaning. Songs and dance and drama carry a lot of meaning. And people understand many things through music, dance, and drama. People may not understand a lot when you talk and talk. People might be bored. But if a song, if a child sings a song or anyone sings a song or dances or dramatizes, then they will understand what they are talking about. What is blindness? How can you prevent blindness? What are the causes of blindness and so on and so forth, and we pass this message through, music, dance, and drama.

We'll go for shows, we'll go to the radio, we'll go to different functions. The children are called for entertainment here and there, and they pass, and they sing and dance, and then the message bought by the public. So that's another of the subjects that we do at our school. Music, dance, and drama. So I think that answers your question.

[Jay Nam] Hi, Mr. Francis. My name is Jay Nam. I heard that you mentioned that there are students upwards to the age of 16 that attend your school. So I wanted to know, how does the

school approach job readiness and careers for older students? What resources are available beyond the school itself?

[Kinubi Francis] Okay. That's very good. Just as I've said, through all those subjects, we train the child to be able to be employed. Many of them, after leaving our school, have become musicians. That's part of preparing them to explore job opportunities in music, dance, or drama. Since they are still young, according to Uganda and our constitution, a child becomes an adult at 18 years. They leave our school at 16, and go to secondary school, where they continue developing these subjects for job opportunities.

At secondary school, they are introduced to ICT—information and technology. They are trained on how to use computers even if they are blind, including software, phones, and other devices. By the time they finish secondary school, they are well trained on how to use technology. Jobs in Uganda are not easy for the blind, but they are also not easy for sighted people. Opportunities are limited. So students must compete and show their skills. You cannot expect a job just because you are blind; you must demonstrate ability.

[Matthew Lee] I wanted to ask about the activities of daily living you mentioned, like taking a shower or washing. Do you describe these tasks, or physically demonstrate them? How do students learn without using sight?

[Kinubi Francis] We teach students like any parent would a small child. From age five, we guide their hands, show them slowly, and let them practice. For example, washing clothes or brushing teeth. We may need matrons to help initially, but gradually the child learns. By the time they are older, they can do all tasks independently. I became blind at four years old, and this training helped me grow up, get married, have a family, and succeed in life. The key is showing ability, being independent, and not relying on others.

[Claire Hahn] You mentioned students love music. What type of music do they prefer—upbeat, soft, or varied?

[Kinubi Francis] We introduce them to all types of music. Students participate in church choirs of various faiths and learn instruments like piano, keyboard, and guitar. Music is both for entertainment and skill development, preparing them to join bands or pursue jobs.

[Esther Ahn] How do students learn to read music without sight?

[Kinubi Francis] In Uganda, we lack teachers trained in Braille music. We focus on practical teaching—students learn songs and instruments directly, by practice rather than reading music. It is not ideal, but it is the only method available due to lack of professional instructors.

[Nathan Lee] Do students participate in sports or games?

[Kinubi Francis] Yes. Physical education keeps them fit, builds confidence, and develops mobility. Students participate in athletics and adapted sports, competing in local, national, and

international competitions, including the Paralympics. They start from childhood with running, jumping, and throwing exercises, and gradually participate in competitions with guides.

[Jay Nam] What are the biggest challenges facing your school?

[Kinubi Francis] Every school has challenges. Our biggest was October 24, 2022, when attackers burned a girls' dormitory while children were sleeping, and 12 students died. The police have not identified the attackers.

We also face shortages of materials. Books for the blind, Perkins machines, and other tools are expensive. One Perkins machine costs four million Ugandan shillings, roughly \$1,000–\$1,500. Many children come from poor families, and disability is often associated with poverty. Parents cannot afford medical care, and children become disabled from preventable conditions. Providing materials and care for blind children is a constant challenge.

And what brings that is because the parents cannot afford when a child falls sick. The parents cannot afford taking that child to hospital. The hospitals are poorly equipped and not effective in developing countries like Uganda. There is no medicine in hospitals. There are no proper services. The doctors want bribes, and parents cannot afford this. So virtually, if a child falls sick and cannot afford doctors or to go to hospital, there are no medicines. Eventually, the child becomes disabled or becomes blind.

One of the problems is that we have to find out the root cause of disability. What is the root cause of blindness? It is poor medical services in African hospitals. And it has been worsened now by cutting down aid from countries that have been providing support to hospitals and schools. We have been receiving a lot of support from America, but that support has now completely disappeared. So things are going to be worse.

We still have friends who help. Let me narrow it down to you. We have friends in South Korea. There's a school called Som Center for the Blind. They sometimes send us Braille books, and they really helped us a lot in that area.

Of course, there are challenges with food. Salama is a boarding school, so we have to feed the children and provide all their basic needs—books, medicine, soap, and other essentials. The children cannot afford to pay school fees, so we have to rely on friends and well-wishers for support. Many children come with no clothes, and as the director, I have to do a lot of fundraising to get them clothes, food, toilet paper, and other necessities. You cannot turn a child away because their family is poor. As an administrator, you have to find ways for that child to study despite all the challenges.

We also face challenges putting up structures that help our children. In 2022, I circulated a proposal to build a music hall so the children could enjoy and practice music in a proper environment. Currently, we have to play music outdoors in the field or compound, which is not

ideal. We asked for support to construct a music hall where instruments can be kept safely and children can train comfortably.

When children leave our school, they face new challenges: lack of employment, being misunderstood by the community, and uncooperative parents. Many parents say, “I cannot manage a blind child. What can a blind child do in life?” Some abandon their children. But through our training and sensitization workshops, we help families accept and support their children, and eventually the children become useful members of society.

We also need instruments for music. We started slowly, with one guitar. Some people donated a keyboard. We used to play African drums. Gradually, we acquired more instruments. We had a volunteer lady from America who taught violin. After she left, we had someone continue violin and cello training. We still need more resources and volunteers. We encourage young people, like you, to come and help train the children in music. The Bible says the harvest is ready, but the workers are few. We need your hands. Not everything can be done by me or the current teachers, some of whom are getting older.

[Jayden] What has been your favorite part of teaching at Salama?

[Kinubi Francis] When I started the school in 1999, I almost worked alone. Eventually, other teachers joined. I focused on administration but also trained in general studies—history, humanities, and English. I was not very good in mathematics. I have always liked music. I am not very good at playing instruments, but I am good at singing. Singing has always been my favorite.

[Eric] How does fundraising work for instruments and other needs?

[Kinubi Francis] Fundraising in Uganda is not easy. You have to pray to succeed. Mainly, I write proposals. You can find me in my office late at night, writing proposals. Proposals are not easy—you never know if you will succeed. We also hold concerts and shows to explain our needs to potential donors. Visitors come to the school, and those who are kind enough provide what we need—food, medicine, and supplies. It is challenging, but these are the main approaches we use.

[Jayden] What was your dream as a child?

[Kinubi Francis] I am no longer a child, but as an adult and administrator, my dream is for Salama School for the Blind to succeed. I started the school with a dream to make blind children useful, inspired by my own journey. I became blind at four and faced a rough road through school and life. My mother, whom I greatly appreciate, helped me become useful. My father was not as helpful, but my mother supported me throughout.

I wanted to help other blind children become useful, as I had. Since starting the school in 1999, Salama has admitted and educated over 1,500 blind children. Many are now lawyers, teachers,

pastors, or working in banks. Many are parents raising useful families. Seeing their progress makes me happy; my dream is partly achieved.

[Derek] How has music impacted your life as a blind person?

[Kinubi Francis] Music is essential to my life. It entertains me, relieves stress, and comforts me. It is medicine for the mind and heart. I also enjoy seeing the children learn music. When they sing, dance, and practice, I feel happy. Music must be promoted—it is part of life, and it can also provide job opportunities. Many people have become successful through music.

[Vincent] What is an average day like for your students?

[Kinubi Francis] Not all 1,500 students are at Salama at once. Currently, we have 85 children on campus. Each year, 7–13 students graduate. Those who have passed through our school are out in the world, working, studying, or teaching. Some interact with me as colleagues, and it makes me happy to see them succeed.

[Andy] What inspired you to start the school?

[Kinubi Francis] I wanted to help blind children who could not attend school. I saw many blind children in villages being turned away from ordinary schools. I wanted to provide a solution so they could learn and live useful lives.

[Elaine] What do you see when you're blind?

[Kinubi Francis] There are different types of blindness. Some see nothing at all, like me—completely in the dark (B1 category). Others (B2) have partial sight and may need help moving around or reading enlarged letters. Some (B3) appear sighted but have low vision and need glasses. Some of these may become blind at night, a condition called photophobia. The ones who are fully blind often bump into objects and use a white cane. These are the main categories of blindness. Many blind people are present in society, though not all are easily recognized as blind.