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The rescued becomes the rescuer

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Eunice Kariuki arrived in Colorado last week for a whirlwind schedule of meetings with potential donors.

No, she is not running for president, and unlike Karl Rove and Bill Clinton, she was not invited to the Aspen Ideas Festival, although she would have been a fine addition.

Eunice is a single mother who came to the Denver Rescue Mission seven years ago homeless and hungry and left town three years later with a plan to change the world.

It appears to be working.

"I came to Denver to start a new life," she said, recalling the day she arrived from Pennsylvania, recently divorced and with a 15-month-old daughter. Her cousin had invited them to live with her until she found a job.

Three weeks later, her cousin was killed in a car wreck, and Eunice was on the street.

"I was really desperate," she said. "I don't know why I called the Rescue Mission. I'd never heard of them. I think it was because the word 'rescue' was in the name."

The mission found her an apartment, paid a month's rent and gathered furniture and food for her and the baby. With counseling and job assistance, within weeks Eunice was a legal secretary making \$40,000 a year.

That should have been the happy ending of her story, but she loved the mission and wanted to be a part of it.

"I asked if they would hire me," she said. But they don't employ clients for at least a year.

"I was persistent. I think they gave me a job to shut me up."

Her 10-year-old son soon joined her in Denver, and the family quickly set down roots.

They all were doing fine until Eunice's sister, who worked on African recovery programs at the U.N., began sending her information about conditions in their native country of Kenya. A photo of a vulture waiting as an African child dies of starvation haunted Eunice.

"Something inside me wouldn't stop getting angry," she said.

One day she was asked to deliver a package to Del Maxfield, then CEO of the mission, and impulsively she told him that she had a dream of opening an orphanage in Kenya.

"He told me, 'Everything begins with a dream,'" she said.

It was all she needed.

Maxfield suggested she write a business plan and come back to see him in two weeks.

She delivered it, estimating that she would need \$150,000 to start. Before she even realized what she had done, the formerly destitute woman was running an African relief agency.

She enlisted the smartest people she knew for her board of directors and registered the organization as a nonprofit. She learned fundraising from a book. Then she gave the orphanage a name: Tumaini.

It's Swahili for "hope."

"Everyone was rooting for me," said Eunice, "and finally, I had to set a date to leave for Kenya. I said I would go on June 30, 2003. But I was doing this very naively."

The weeks went by and fundraising was sluggish. When January 2003, came and went, she feared defeat.

Then an anonymous donor made a \$90,000 contribution.

Her plan was back on track.

On June 30, as the plane was leaving the runway in Denver, Eunice looked at her two American children in the seats beside her. Her daughter had no idea what was in store for her. Her son was crying. "I wondered, 'What am I doing?'" she said.

But there was no turning back.

In Kenya, she sought help from the late Rev. Angelo D'Agostino, a beloved Jesuit priest who had come from the U.S. to found an orphanage in Nairobi. He introduced her to lawyers, accountants, architects and a contractor.

Within a year, Tumaini was welcoming orphaned children.

Eunice no longer was homeless. Her salary was \$600 a month, and all the children called her "mom."

She was ecstatic.

Three years later, the structure designed to accommodate 40 children houses 47, and Eunice is dreaming again. She envisions a 50-acre plot with cabins to house up to 150 children. They would raise chickens, pigs and cows and grow their own food, maybe even producing a little extra to generate income to pay the teachers.

"We want it to be sustainable," she said as she hurried between meetings with fundraisers and supporters. "I think it's doable," she said.

Apparently for Eunice, anything is.

Diane Carman's column appears Sunday, Tuesday and Thursday. Reach her at 303-954-1489 or dcarman@denverpost.com.