

A passion for education



Moses Kimeli Korir at Clark College's 2021 Commencement ceremony.

Ever since he was a 10-year-old boy growing up in Kenya, Moses Kimeli Korir dreamed of being a teacher. When he grew up, he traveled 9,000 miles to Vancouver, Washington to fulfill his dreams.

Twenty-two years later, Korir was a step closer as he attended Clark College's 2021 Commencement ceremony to receive his Associate of Applied Science degree in Early Childhood Education (ECE). And during the ceremony, he discovered that his journey had been given a huge forward boost: President Karin Edwards announced that he was that year's recipient of the Community College President's Award, providing full tuition for up to two years to complete his bachelor's degree at Washington State University Vancouver.

"Balancing parenthood, full-time employment, and college coursework is no small feat, but [Korir] has managed to do all

of this while maintaining a high academic standard,” said Dr. Edwards in her announcement. “He is a great example of our students’ resilience and determination.”

A musical awakening

Korir’s passion for teaching is intertwined with his passion for music—both of which he discovered at age 10.

That was when he saw a piano for the first time, while attending school in a city near Mount Elgon and the Kenyan-Ugandan border. He was intrigued. He wanted to touch it, but children weren’t allowed.

Shortly afterward, his family moved to a rural area. He did not see a piano again for a long time.

Finally, he discovered a neighbor who had a piano.

Korir said, “I asked permission to play it, and I taught myself to play.”

He already had decided he wanted to be a teacher, but his connection with the piano was another “aha” moment.



Early Childhood Education professor Sarah Theberge congratulates Moses Kimeli Korir at Clark College’s 2021 Commencement.

He explained, "When I began learning the piano, that's when I decided I wanted to become a piano teacher. I wanted to help children learn something new."

He bought his first keyboard at age 11. He worked and saved his money to buy his first piano when he was 17. He practiced the piano diligently.

After high school, Korir trained to be an elementary school teacher. He taught for a year. Next, he taught piano with an international organization in Kenya for two more years.

Then he realized the next part of his teaching dream: relocating to the U.S. to earn a teaching degree and teach in an American school. In 2019, Korir came to Clark College through its International Programs and began pursuing a degree in Early Childhood Education.

The right place

Korir said, "I found myself at Clark College. It's the right place. The ECE path at Clark College is the best. If someone has a passion to be a teacher, it really gives you the background and knowledge to be successful."

At Clark College, Korir was able to get hands-on experience in his field by working part-time in the college's Child & Family Studies program, which provides on-campus child care to students, employees, and the community. He enjoyed working with children, and eventually gained enough work experience to gain a position as a full-time teacher in a Head Start preschool classroom for Educational Opportunities for Children and Families (EOCF). He was delighted to find a job that allowed him to continue working with children and more than doubled his work hours, providing enough money to pay his tuition and provide for his wife and two young children.

The new job meant less time for studying, but Korir made it

work. He did his homework at night when his own young children were asleep.

Despite the challenges, Korir says his Early Childhood Education classes at Clark have helped him excel in his preschool classroom.

“All my ECE classes are going deep on how to help children,” he said. “All are applicable in the field. I’m using them every day. Not only at work, but also at home with my own children.”

“He is a student who is hungry for knowledge and who beautifully weaves knowledge from his culture into Western practices, while thinking critically about how these things intersect,” said ECE professor Michelle Mallory. “He brings us all along on that journey.”

A calm presence in classroom



Moses Kimeli Korir brings a broad cultural perspective to his work teaching children.

Wynette Francis, Korir’s supervisor at EOCF, said, “Moses has a calming presence, a steadiness in the classroom. He’s willing to learn and grow. He exudes kindness and respect.”

Dana Taub, center director of EOCF's program at Ellsworth Elementary, said, "Moses engages with the children. We have a child on the spectrum, and he's very good with her."

Noting that the Ellsworth Head Start is an all-day program, she added, "Keeping kids engaged all day, you have to be on top of your game."

Korir said his education at Clark College taught him how to help children cope with their emotions—an important skill, given the challenging situations he can encounter in the classroom.

"For instance, if a child hits another child or hits me, the teacher, I've learned how to calm them down," he said. "I talk with the child and acknowledging the situation. Acknowledge their feelings. Most of the time, it works."

And teaching brings rewards along with the challenges. "I am enjoying my connection with the children in Head Start," Korir said. "They make me smile."

Keeping the dream going

Receiving the President's Award will enable Korir to pursue his plans to transfer to WSU Vancouver and earn a Bachelor of Arts degree in Human Development.

The Community College President's Award in honor of Val Ogden is given each year to a student who has completed their studies at Clark College and is transferring to Washington State University Vancouver. They receive full tuition and fees for two years while they finish their bachelor's degree at WSU Vancouver. The award is traditionally announced during that year's Commencement ceremony. This year, due to COVID-19, the ceremony was held outdoors on the college's soccer field, with only graduates and faculty attending.

Korir's educational goals stretch beyond his bachelor's

degree. He plans to earn his master's degree in education and eventually become an instructor at a college or university.

“Education is important to me because it’s an equalizer,” Korir says. “It brings everyone on board whether you’re from a poor background or a rich background.”

And he hasn’t forgotten his piano dream—he hopes one day to open a music production studio to help others share the gift of music. He’ll be sure to let curious children who visit touch the piano keys as much as they want.



Moses Kimeli Korir, *second from left*, poses for a photo with International Programs Associate Director Jody Shulnak, fellow International Student Venant Manirafasha, and International Admissions Manager Csendi Hopp at the 2021 Commencement ceremony.