

Summer 2014

VICS: "Eh! Mrembo!"

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Recommended Citation

de Gooijer, J. (2014). VICS: "Eh! Mrembo!". *Spiritan Magazine*, 38 (3). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol38/iss3/11>

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“Eh! Mrembo!”

Joyce de Gooijer
Director of VICS

John taught me resilience. This young man with brittle bone disease lived through physical challenges I couldn't imagine. He needed help moving his wheelchair up steep slopes. He needed help moving out of his wheelchair and into bed. He also needed help going to the bathroom.

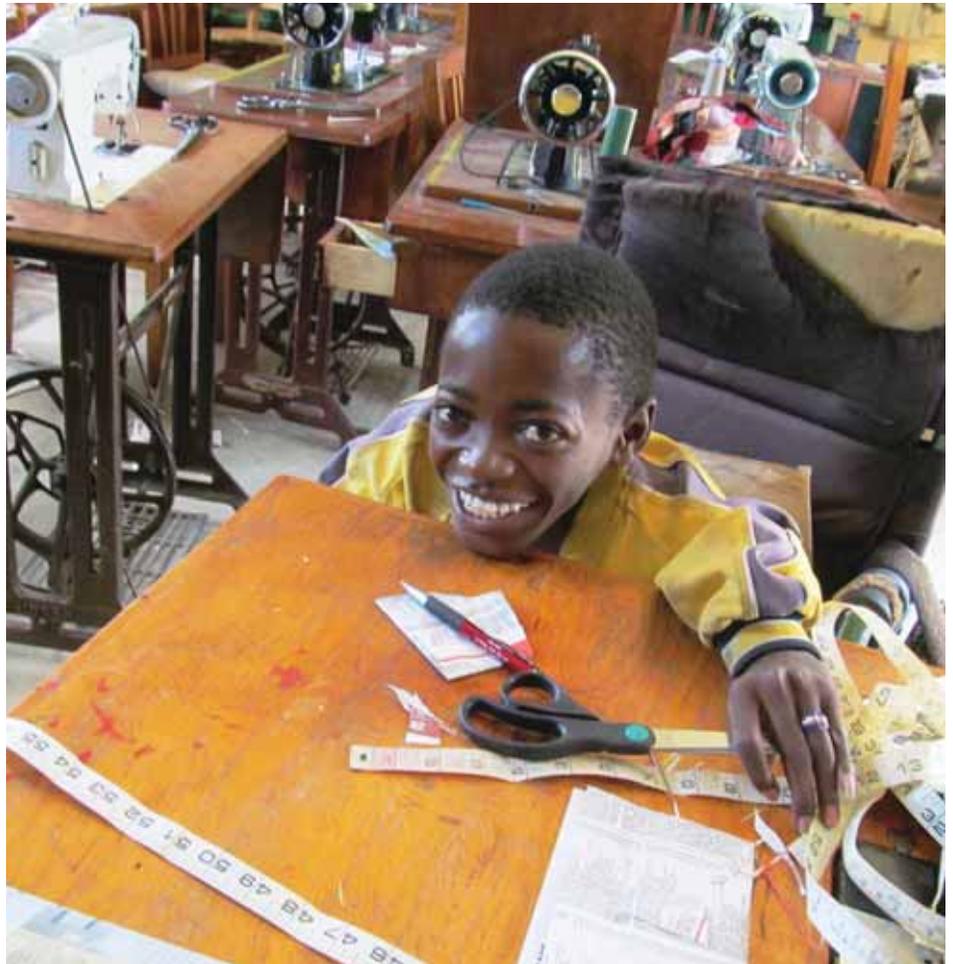
When John first arrived to the vocational school in Tanzania he was shy, sullen and withdrawn. And why wouldn't he be? The first 13 years of his life

John always came back trying. He became one of the best tailors in class.

lacked opportunities that would have developed his personal skills and sense of self worth.

My 'job' was to teach students to read and write in Kiswahili. At the start of every class I learned to ask John, "Je, wewe ni umwa leo? — Are you sick today?" A strange way to start a class, perhaps, but there was a chance that once again John was dealing with a broken bone. Some days he'd be OK and would work hard at learning to write. Other days, I would watch him try to hide tears slowly dripping down his cheek, his pain too great to bear.

But, he always came back trying. He became one of the best tailors in class. Amazing, considering the scissor size and how awkward it was to hold them.



He also had a wicked sense of humour. He loved to laugh and tease.

I watched John slowly come out of his shell. Some days we would sit at the school corner watching girls as they walked by. In my broken Kiswahili, I'd offer to choose a girl for him. He always said no, but the banter was priceless. Nearing the end of the 16-month course, I took John for a walk. He had little opportunity to leave the school compound, so away we went: me push-

ing John's wheelchair, front wheel in the air; he making airplane sounds and yelling, "EH! MREMBO!" ("Hey! Beautiful!") to young women we passed.

Paulo Coelho says, "If people really pay attention to their everyday lives, they will discover that magic moment." Pushing John that day was not only my magic moment but a compilation of magic moments, where John reminded me to laugh, enjoy simplicity and joyfully shout to the world, "EH! MREMBO!" ■