

“There's no skill that I feel was not taught here.”

A Conversation with Catherine Mwangi, graduate and staff member of Digital Divide Data

Ann Mikia

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Catherine Mwangi: My name is Catherine Mwangi. I grew up in the village. I'm a village girl.

Ann Mikia: Which village?

Catherine Mwangi: I was born in Nyandarua County, which is Kinangop constituency, that's where I was born, raised, and grew up. My primary education was still in Kinangop, secondary education was also still in Kinangop. After high school, which was in 2012, that's when I came to Nairobi.

Ann Mikia: Was that after finishing secondary school?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, after high school. That was 2012. When I was coming to Nairobi, I didn't have a base where I was going. I just wanted to do something so that I could also help my family. We are not that well off, and I wanted to just develop something for myself. A friend of mine was working here in Nairobi as a house girl. Then she told me, "Where I'm working, I have a friend also who is looking for someone. Would you be ready to take this job?"

For me, I felt, as much as I don't want to take the job, I don't have an alternative. I told her, "Yes, I'll come." We came to Nairobi. A teenager, that is, straight from high school. You don't even have an ID. That's when we came to Nairobi, and my first job I took was as a house girl, house manager, that is. I was getting 3,500 [about 27 dollars per month], which was also in 2012. I felt this was good money; I've never held such money in my hands. I was so happy. The first salary I sent to my mum, all of it. I felt like this is what I wanted, at least I can chip in, because at home they are not well off, and if I can do something to help, the better. That's how I got my first job in Nairobi.

The person I was working for was so friendly, because she also taught me so much. By the time I was working for her, I didn't have my results slip. The results were announced

when I was still working for her. We looked for my results online using her phone, and she told me, "You have passed so well," and I was like, "Thank you."

Ann Mikia: What did you score?

Catherine Mwangi: I scored a C+. I scored a C+ and she was like, "This is fine." She had a kid who was in school. I can't remember the grade, but she was in these elementary schools because she was four years old. Then she told me, "If you can take care of this child for me well, I will pay for your higher education." I find that this is strange. You're working for someone, and they want to pay for your higher education. It was in 2015, because in the process I was preparing to go to higher education, and then she got another baby. Unfortunately, I could not leave the house. I continued working for her.

Ann Mikia: No university admitted you?

Catherine Mwangi: No. The university didn't call me then.

Ann Mikia: Didn't you qualify?

Catherine Mwangi: I had a C+, so by then, I don't remember if there was a university calling because what I remember is, when we were done with high school, I was told that some students went back to apply for schools, to apply for universities. For me, I did not go back. I think now that's when I was not called by the government. I was just working for her, but she had paid for my computer studies. When the kid was going to school, we agreed, "You can go for a computer package, because there's not much you are doing in the house." She paid for my computer education, and she was still paying me. It is not like she's deducting from my salary. I felt like she used to encourage me so much.

Then in 2015, that's when her husband was vying for a member of parliament seat, back at home, that is, Kinangop constituency. Then he was now trying to uplift young people in the village. Then one night, he told me, "What did you score?" The husband, because the wife already knew. I told him, and he was like, "You scored a C+, and you are here?" I told him I didn't have a choice. By the way, the reason I took that job was so that I could also look if I can save up and go to university. I know it was a big deal, because if you are earning 3,500, how much can you save and join university? She told me that there is an organization called Digital Divide Data. You can apply for this position, and then we'll see how it goes. He knew Daniel [the person in charge of recruiting at DDD], and then now they were talking, talking, and he came with the application, and then I went through it. He guided me on how to apply. Then I applied. I was called for the interview, 2015, around April. I passed the interview, and in May 2015, I was employed as a temporary staff member. Temporary staff means that you are not permanent, because the project you are working on is a short-term project, not a big one. I was still happy, because that was now my first job, getting out of the house, and doing something different.

Ann Mikia: Were you still living with your employer?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, I was still living with them. When she delivered, she delivered twins, and then she employed someone. Then she told me, "You can still live here, so after work, you can now be helping." I said it's fine. I was still living with them.

Ann Mikia: Where was this? Which estate?

Catherine Mwangi: It was Ruiru Bypass, which is in Kiambu County. That's where we were living. At DDD, I was doing a data entry project. There is this project that is called Biography. It is about old handwriting, and then you transcribe. That's what we were doing. Then, the challenge that I faced was, I was supposed to work the night shift. At DDD, we have three shifts. There's morning shift, mid-morning, and night shift.

Working night shift was a real challenge for me, and also reading that handwriting, because it is written materials that you are now transcribing. What made me do that is the support that I experienced.

Ann Mikia: What support?

Catherine Mwangi: From the organization.

Ann Mikia: From DDD?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, from DDD, from the managers, from the supervisors. If you are facing challenges and you speak out, or you speak up, they are willing to help. That's the biggest help that I got. Working night shift, within the first month

Ann Mikia: You would work the whole night?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. The whole night.

Ann Mikia: And go home in the morning?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, and go home in the morning. For me, working at night, and then also the biggest challenge I was facing, I was still helping with housework where I was living. When I get out of the office, maybe 6:00 AM, I go to the house and help one, two, three here and there. When the kids are asleep, that's when we get to sleep. You could not even get enough sleep. Also, given the fact that you are required to work the night shift again.

I talked to the manager, and I told him, "This is what I'm experiencing. If I'm not productive as much, I need refresher training, you see." He was so willing to offer that, and within three months, I had adapted. Now I don't want to sleep during the night, that is my working hours, and that's when I am productive at night.

By then, I understood the structure of DDD, that you have to be flexible and adaptable. Because in the morning shift, you don't have to fix your mind, "I'm only supposed to work the morning shift." That is also something that taught me so much. Given the shift that you are working on, you can be productive. By then, when I was starting for three

months, I worked on a data entry project, and then it came to an end. There was another one that was introduced.

Ann Mikia: How long did the training take, after being taken in by DDD?

Catherine Mwangi: The training that I underwent lasted two weeks..

Ann Mikia: Was this because you had taken a computer course?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. I was going for a computer course, but then I had a challenge because I did my computer in around 2014. I stayed for a long period without using a computer. Until DDD came. I knew I had seen this somewhere, but I don't know how to work on it. There is Excel. You remember you learned about Excel functions, but right now, you have the real work to work on it. You cannot remember a thing. That was also one challenge. Now, when I talked about support, the managers were so understanding that these are high schoolers or form four graduates, and now we need to help them.

Now, given the mission of DDD, is helping those people who cannot be able to help themselves. I was talking about a project, the data entry one. Then the first one I was working on was handwritten. Now this one is still data entry, but typed machine text. You see now the change of project, it is also making your mind to see from a broader perspective, and also to adapt. Because right now, if maybe I am used to something for three months, I'm good at it.

The project ended. "We have not gotten another project so that we can place you guys. You have to go home until we get more projects so that we can call you back." That's what happened. December 2015 was our last working day with the cohort that I was with.

Ann Mikia: How many were you?

Catherine Mwangi: We were around 15. The whole of 2016, I was doing casual jobs here and there, doing laundry for people. What else did I do? Hawking clothes.

Ann Mikia: Were you still living with that family that had first employed you?

Catherine Mwangi: No, I was not living with that family because as they progressed, they started getting more kids, and the family was growing. They couldn't continue keeping me, and others.

Ann Mikia: Taking in an extra mouth was challenging right.

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. It was around April 2016, that we agreed with my employer about starting to be independent.

Ann Mikia: Were you getting any pay from DDD?

Catherine Mwangi: By then?

Ann Mikia: Yes.

Catherine Mwangi: No.

Ann Mikia: During the training, they were not giving you anything?

Catherine Mwangi: During the training, I only trained for two weeks. When I signed the first contract around May 2015, I became employed. Within those two weeks of training, you're still on the pay slip. Then after starting, because I was paid that month, yes, so still unpaid. Then, when the project ended, we had to sit down with my employer where I was living. Then, she told me, "You must now start thinking about independence." She had taught me how to save. The reason I said she was so supportive is because of some of the things that she had taught me, because she was a banker. She is still a banker, actually. She told me, "I'll give you three months, and on your day of moving out, you carry anything that you need." She gave me sufurias [cooking pots], plates, cups, and seats. This helped when I started to live by myself; I had everything.

Ann Mikia: Oh, she gave you some basic items to go and start your life?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. Now she told me, "Now you can start life by yourself." I said, "Yes, I'm ready." By the way, I was so ready because I had saved. By the time I was getting out of the house, I was also getting exposed to living and adapting to life in town. That was around April 2016.

Ann Mikia: Where did you rent your first house?

Catherine Mwangi: It was in Githurai. Because we were living at Ruiru Bypass, I relocated to Githurai. There was a friend of mine, a former schoolmate, who was living there. I used to go and visit her. I could think, "Living by yourself, there's privacy, there's independence, there are all those things." Then I was paying 4,500. We agreed because she was living in a house of 6,000, and she was planning to live in a smaller house and then pay less. We could combine forces and live together in the big house". That's what we did.

Ann Mikia: Were you still washing and hawking clothes?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. By then, I was washing clothes. Generally, washing clothes. That was what I was doing.

Ann Mikia: Doing laundry for neighbors.

Catherine Mwangi: For neighbors and my friends, too. But my friend was employed. Life was easier when we were two cost-sharing. That was 2016. I was also selling some bags online.

Ann Mikia: Did any skills that you had learned at DDD help?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. The biggest skill that helped me was networking. Because when I was here, I used to do so much. If maybe the HR said, "We have this event, we need an MC." I would volunteer to say, "I'll be the MC." I'm also an MC, a company MC. That is something now interacting with people, talking to people so much. I'll just reach out to people we have not spoken to for some time. I'll get to know, "How are you doing? What are you doing? What are you up to? By the way, I'm selling one, two, three. Would you be interested?"

At DDD, we have this program called Work Study, where guys are in school and you're working. There is this exam period in whichever school you are in. Some guys were going to take an exam at Kenyatta University, and then they needed people to fill in. Dan called me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm doing nothing." "Would you be willing to come for two weeks and relieve some people for a project?" I came for the two weeks that I was relieving students. I gave my everything. Now, in January 2017, I was not let go. I was told, "For you, we will retain you."

We were called 10 of us, and three of us were retained. That I assured myself was because I needed that job, and I needed to make a case for myself. I said, "This is the chance that you have given me. In just two weeks, I'm going to make an impression. You will either hire me or hire me." They ended up hiring me. That's how I came back now as a permanent employee. When I came back in 2017, I was still given two weeks' probation. I gave my best and I was confirmed as a permanent employee.

Ann Mikia: When you were dropped from DDD, you said you were 10.

Catherine Mwangi: 15. Around 15.

Ann Mikia: And only three of you came back?

Catherine Mwangi: No, 10 came back. When you are called back, you'll be called back again depending on your quality. There's something called target and quality. For the target, if maybe you are supposed to key in 500 records and you key in 600, 700, you start at an upper hand. If you key in 400, 300 if maybe the project is coming to a lockdown, you'll be the first person to be let go

Ann Mikia: What happens to those who drop out?

Catherine Mwangi: Oh, for those who are let go, we have placement partners, other companies. We try to work with them to see if they can be placed.

Ann Mikia: What work were you doing then at DDD?

Catherine Mwangi: I was doing digitization. There's another project, apart from data entry, digitization. What we used to do was take some images of a newspaper, and then you would crop them in a way that they were supposed to be.

The then impact manager told me, "By the way, now you have to start thinking of the course that you can do." I felt, "Now this is my chance to do journalism." [laughs] When I

was in high school, I had introduced this journalism club. Then I would recruit Form 1, those who are best speakers, Form 2, Form 3, Form 4, because I was still the head girl. I was the head girl of my previous school. I knew whom to choose for my journalism club. It had blossomed. It was doing excellently.

Ann Mikia: What were you doing with the journalism club?

Catherine Mwangi: We would report. Every Monday and Friday, we would have news. News, it is just like entertainment. We report on anything, fun things, hobbies. When my impact manager told me that, "You now start thinking about the course that you can do and the school that you want to attend." By then, it was Kenyatta University.

That is now 2016, '17. From 2013, it had been KU, only that they came to cut it up because of how expensive it is. I even went to MKU [Mount Kenya University]. We talked and they told me, "For mass communication, you have to be here. You cannot do it online."

Ann Mikia: Why not online?

Catherine Mwangi: Now with the model of DDD, you have to do it online, because of your work. You are in school from 8:00 to 5:00 or 8:00 to 4:00, whichever time that you are required to go to school, when will you be working, and you have to balance the two? I had to let go of journalism with a heavy heart. Then my mom told me, "Have you thought of teaching?" I didn't want to teach at all.

Ann Mikia: What does your mum do?

Catherine Mwangi: She's just a farmer. My mum did not go for higher education. I have a sister who is older than me. She did Early Childhood Development.

Ann Mikia: Teaching?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, teaching at the elementary school. For her, I felt it was because that is something she wanted. For me, I didn't want that. As much as I used to look after the kids, I didn't want to be a teacher. Now, the impact manager told me, "You can still do teaching. By then, you'll be communicating, but you'll not be communicating on screen. You'll be communicating live." I was like, "That's fine. Instead of my audience looking at me on screen, they are seeing me live. "Okay, that's fine. I can still do that." Then I went to KU.

Ann Mikia: Did you do the course online?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, I did the course online. What the model was at KU, there were some sessions we would attend physically. We call them tutorials. For weekends, you can attend, and then now they would extend the time. Sundays and Saturdays, if you're needed in school, you need to be in school. For exams, you have to be physically present. I felt if I want to teach, I would choose English and Literature because from high school, I used to teach my classmates literature and I loved reading books.

Ann Mikia: Which days were you working at DDD? Was it Monday to Friday?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, Monday to Friday, 7:30 AM to 3:50 PM. With the online course, how it works, there is a platform. You only need to log in, check the assignments that have been posted, read the notes, and then, when it is exam time, you need to be there physically. Then KU provided us with tablets, so it was very easy. You can carry your tablet anywhere as long as you have internet. That you can provide for yourself.

Ann Mikia: Did you say Kenyatta University gave you tablets to use for your studying?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes.

Ann Mikia: Did they allow you to keep it?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, you'd keep it. It was included in the school fees. That is another thing. I think it was included in the school fees. We were provided with tablets, and this made it easy for you to learn at your own pace. At DDD, we would use the computers with a big screen, and there was stable high-speed internet.

Ann Mikia: Given that so many students were doing their courses online, how would you do it here, and then everybody was doing it online, and you were doing different courses?

Catherine Mwangi: For that, every student had a different course. Then they had a Learning Management System portal for them. If maybe we are doing English and Literature, it will be very seamless for me to do that because I'm on the platform by myself. If maybe another person is doing it, let me give an example of another course, for instance, procurement, they have their platform of procurement.

Ann Mikia: So what happens if you are studying online? Do you receive notes and assignments?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. You can just read them during your own free time.

Ann Mikia: Oh, I thought you were attending classes virtually.

Catherine Mwangi: Oh, no, you study on your own. That's why I told you that. You see, for different disciplines, it is for us to agree with our teacher on when we can have those virtual sessions. Then, before COVID, we didn't have any virtual sessions with the teachers. They would post everything online. If maybe I'm not using my computer and I have already gone home after my shift is done, and maybe someone feels, "Let me do some assignment," they can come and sit at my machine because I'm not there.

Ann Mikia: Were there any skills that you didn't learn from DDD, but that you thought would have been useful in the line of your work?

Catherine Mwangi: In my line of work? Not really, because DDD for me offered everything. Even when I was going to school, they had even shaped me to be ready to take anything. Remember the challenge I had pointed out on shifts and all those things? When I was going to school, I knew if I was in school and I would also be shifted at work, and I could adapt. There's no skill that I feel was not taught here.

Ann Mikia: What work do you do here at DDD?

Catherine Mwangi: Here I'm a trainer. The title is trainer. What I train on is digital literacy and employability skills. My target audience is Form 4 graduates, 18 to 24 years. The reason we have the work study program is so that we recruit from marginalized areas, and then we train them on digital literacy and employability skills.

Digital literacy is anything to do with computers because we are a tech company, and if you are supposed to work here, you need to be computer literate. From computer skills, it is G Suite, Microsoft Office, and everything else that has to do with computer literacy. Then now for employability, something like professionalism, ethics in the work, communication skills, emulating, all those things. That is what I do.

Ann Mikia: Tell us about your greatest success as a DDD graduate.

Catherine Mwangi: My greatest success is achieving the bachelor of education degree, and also training the young kids. I call them kids because I see myself in them when I joined DDD. When I train, we take them from the grassroots level. When that person is graduating, they can do everything. For me, my greatest success I can say it is training those kids to be someone they can identify with. Then also, when we get them jobs here. I see them do great when it comes to project delivery, and they also go to school, that is, I can say I have achieved something.

Ann Mikia: Is there an alumni network for DDD graduates?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes. We do have an alumni network. For an alumni network, we try to give back to the kids who are joining.

Ann Mikia: How do you do that?

Catherine Mwangi: We identify those alumni who are in various sectors and are willing to give back, because not everyone is willing to do that. We also organize our mentorship programs. Right now, there are so many things people are doing online, like digital marketing and all those things. We identified someone who is in that field, and then we invited them here to do the same.

Ann Mikia: Do you invite such mentors to talk to the trainees?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, if your interest is in digital marketing we get such an expert to come and share how it works. Also, the network of alumni. We also have welfare. Welfare now for the alumni members. If you have something that needs the input of the members, we can be there for you.

Ann Mikia: Does DDD support the alumni in any way?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, DDD supports alumni. Last time we had a dinner together with them, and then those alumni who have something they are running, let's say a charity organization or something; they need support, DDD will be there for them.

Ann Mikia: How would you sum up the benefits of learning from DDD? How would you sum up the benefits?

Catherine Mwangi: The benefits are, DDD shapes someone into a real professional that you want to venture in. For me, it's now that I have been able to be a professional in the area that I never imagined I could be. I even look back on my house help days, and then right now, because when we were with my previous boss, we used to talk so much at night, during the day, when she was doing maternity leave. The life I used to see her live, I used to pray for.

I told you she's a banker, so you can imagine even with the dress code, everything. I could say, "One day, I want to be somewhere like here." Then she would also tell me, "You don't have to worry, just work hard. If you get an opportunity, utilize it." Now, when I look back and reflect, I always see the profession that I always prayed for came to be. The fact that DDD gave me that platform shaped me to be a professional.

Ann Mikia: How has DDD impacted your life and that of your family?

Catherine Mwangi: The first and the biggest impact is the financial one because right now I can't say that I'm where I want to be, but I am somehow ok financially. I am able to support my family. Maybe at the end of the month I will send something. Even in the middle of the month. I don't wait for them to call me and maybe ask for something. I always make sure there is something.

Even for my self-development, if maybe right now I want to do a different course, even without the help of DDD, I can do that because it created the impact, and laid the foundation in me. Even with the skills. It is not just you doing the work; what are you gaining even for yourself, skills-wise? We have something we call MLP (Managers' Learning Program). After a degree, learning does not stop. How is it impacting you now, the leaders of DDD? How you can be able to better yourself, as a person. Now leave Kate the trainer. Kate, as a person, how are you even dating people outside DDD?

Ann Mikia: If you could tell DDD three things that they can do differently to improve their program, what would they be? How can they improve their program?

Catherine Mwangi: Yes, there's always room for improvement. One thing I can say is maybe a source for more jobs. Source for more jobs or look for more clients because right now we have so many people on the bench, they are waiting for placement. If we can source more jobs, those people can get to be helped. Also, they can improve their lives financially.

Our target audience is from the slums, so maybe we can go to uplift this person. Right now, the opportunities or the platform are there, but the jobs are not yet there. As much as we train this person, they'll wait for some time to be placed. If there are jobs instantly, that person can be able to get the job immediately. That is one area where I feel an improvement can be made.

Another one, what I can feel really is, also, get more guys to school. The previous one, where we had 20. If maybe we can create room for like a 50, even better. The biggest challenge in Kenya is jobs and education. If you are able to cater for yourself, then you can have the upper hand. If we can increase the number of people who go to school, it'll help.

Ann Mikia: Finally, what would you want to say as a graduate and employee of DDD? What's your last message?

Catherine Mwangi: My last message to DDD, first of all, is gratitude because, like I said before that DDD gave me a foundation that I didn't know existed. Then, when I joined the organization, I saw a different life, a life that I never imagined could be there. When someone comes and tells you, "I'll take you to school," first you question that person. "What are your intentions?" Because we know that there's nothing for free. Then DDD came, "We'll give you jobs, we'll give you education." "You are too good to be true." There is so much gratitude to DDD.

Ann Mikia: Thank you so much for your time. We wish you well in your work with DDD.

Catherine Mwangi: Thank you so much also for giving me this opportunity to share my story. It is one that I get to tell with pride because it is worth sharing.

Ann Mikia brings over 25 years of expertise in health reporting, production, training, and mentoring in journalism. She is an accredited solutions journalism trainer with Solutions Journalism Network. She served as a judge at the Annual Journalism Excellence Awards (AJEA) by the Media Council of Kenya. She has published stories on platforms such as Science Africa, Daily Nation, and Mail & Guardian. She holds an MA in Communication Studies and a BA in Communication and Sociology from the University of Nairobi.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*