

We waited five years to adopt a Ugandan girl

Thomas Froese and his wife went through a tedious three-year court process to adopt a Ugandan girl. What effects does such a system have on children and those interested in adopting them?



Hannah (right) with her family

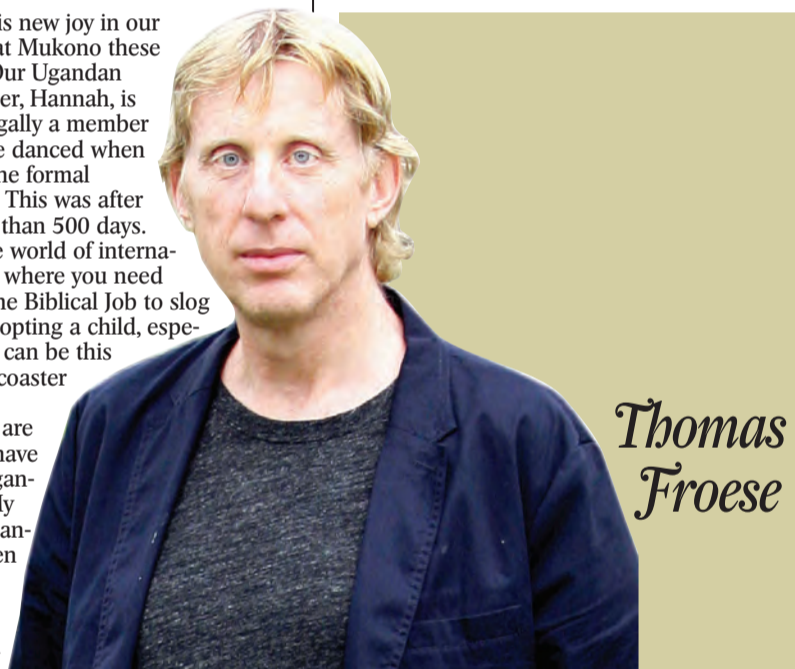
THERE is new joy in our home at Mukono these days. Our Ugandan daughter, Hannah, is now legally a member of our family. She danced when we showed her the formal adoption papers. This was after waiting for more than 500 days.

Welcome to the world of international adoptions, where you need the patience of the Biblical Job to slog through it all. Adopting a child, especially in Uganda, can be this much of a roller coaster ride.

In our case, we are Canadians who have been living in Uganda since 2005. My wife and I met Hannah in 2009, when she was three, at an orphanage in Jinja. When she was barely larger than a cat, she had been found abandoned at Mbarara Hospital. Her family? Unknown.

To adopt Hannah, we had to go through every hoop of Ugandan law. This included fostering her for three years. That's more than 1,000 days.

We showed our commitment and suitability and Hannah found herself loved. Her countenance brightened like the sun. She now had two siblings of similar age. She came to love her international school and new friends and her life, including cousins, grandparents and other loved ones from Canada. Hannah had an



Thomas Froese

identity. "Mommy, daddy, brother, sister," she said when asked what gift she wanted most during her first Christmas with us in Uganda.

A Ugandan social worker reported this to court after our three-year fostering ended. At that time, it should have been a straightforward approval. Instead, my family was given this strange and uncertain 500-day wait, from mid-2012 to just recently. This took its toll day after day.

We were asked to travel over and over to court in Jinja. Each time, Hannah would wear her best dress, but we would not get our

scheduled hearing. Often, the judge was presiding elsewhere, so we would return home empty-handed. "Am I not really in the family, then?" Hannah asked once.

One day, the court lost our file. Nothing could proceed. My wife and I stood in wonder when we saw the clerk's filing system: bulging and battered folders, piled floor to ceiling, half-falling, in an old room.

Days turned to weeks, then months. We pleaded to our lawyer for help. Another Ugandan said bribing the court would be the only way, that officials do not ask, they expect you to know. We did not do it. Our file was eventually found.

In another incident, we were stopped from boarding our flight at Entebbe. There is child trafficking to consider, and, Hannah, after all, did not have a full adoption order. Yes, she had the required travel visa and we had met the legal requirements, but an officer at the airport refused to let Hannah fly.

Now what? Would my wife and other children fly to Canada, while I stayed in Uganda with Hannah? Such were the unnerving thoughts. However, a better-informed supervisor gave us clearance at the gate. At the last minute.

We continued our commitment to Hannah and to Uganda – my wife is a physician who directs a programme to help Ugandan women survive childbirth. Even so, our wait of 100 days turned to 200, then 300, 400 and then 500 and more.

And while Hannah remained with us, so did the gnawing truth that the State could knock on our door at any time and say: "Thanks for helping, but this girl is not yours, not fully, not yet, and we reserve the right to take her."

"Will I always be in this family?" Hannah

asked another time. That is not the way to live.

Not that my family is so naïve to think the Ugandan courts, neglected and forgotten as they are, are that concerned with troubles of one expatriate family. There have been cases of MPs thrown out of Parliament having to wait longer than 500 days, along with other weighty cases languishing in legal backrooms.

On the other hand, Uganda, according to UNICEF, has more than two million orphans. Who, if not Ugandans, should care about them? What message is Uganda sending to the world, when expatriates who can help, are given such a rough ride?

Canadians, in fact, rarely adopt Ugandan children because of onerous policies, such as the three-year residential period. This shuts many out. That Uganda has never signed the Hague Convention international standards on adoption also does not help its cause.

And while international adoptions in some African nations are increasing, the larger worldwide trend is down. The need is as great as ever, but there are tighter regulations and higher costs, which can now be up to \$35,000 (sh85m).

The US, the most popular home for global adoptions, took on about 23,000 children in 2004. By 2011, that plummeted to 9,320. With longer waiting periods, children now join families when they are much older.

Not surprisingly, more families abroad adopt domestically. Richer countries also have needy children. But developing nations like Uganda still have much bigger challenges. In Hannah's case, she now has opportunities for citizenship and education and a future she, otherwise, would not have imagined.

Hannah now has opportunities for a future she otherwise, would not have imagined

Her story had a remarkable twist from the start. My wife and I had been praying for a girl we could adopt, then name Hannah. Months later, at that Jinja orphanage, this little girl walked bravely to us. We asked her for her name. "It's Hannah," she said.

Five years later, what we are now celebrating, is the fact that it was on Hannah's birthday when the court finally approved her adoption order. Our lawyer phoned. The order had been given. Yes, on Hannah's eighth birthday. Like that first meeting in Jinja, what are the odds?

It's a second extraordinary bookend in the story of one Ugandan girl. But what about Africa's other vulnerable children? There are, as the Ugandans would express it, too many. What are their stories and their odds? How long will they be left waiting for reasons that are often so inexcusable?

The writer is a Canadian author and journalist based in Mukono

ON THIS WEEK

1929

PENICILLIN INVENTED

Sir Alexander Fleming made the discovery on February 14, 1929, after leaving a plate of staphylococcus bacteria uncovered. He noticed that a mold that had fallen on the culture had killed many of the bacteria. Penicillin antibiotics were among the first drugs to be effective against many serious diseases, such as syphilis and infections caused by staphylococci.



2007

ROMNEY CAMPAIGN

The former Massachusetts governor, returned to his native state of Michigan to kick off his bid for the 2008 Republican presidential nomination. His presidential bid came 40 years after his father made an unsuccessful run for the G.O.P. nomination in 1968. Romney followed his announcement with a four-day, six-state tour.

1938

JAPAN INVADES CHINA

An attempt to conquer China was made on February 15, 1938 by the Japanese, when 60,000 soldiers entered northern China by planes and tanks. They attempted to complete the same type of conquest that was led by Kubia Kahn, the Mongol emperor. The Japanese had threatened to bottle up 400,000 Chinese people on China's central front.