

Care as advocacy: transforming sorcery fears through love and compassion

by Miranda Forsyth

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Two people standing looking out at the Papua New Guinea Highlands

Photo Credit: AI image generated using ChatGPT/Anton Lutz

After five months living in a safe house in Papua New Guinea’s Enga province, Hannah faced an impossible choice. She couldn’t stay there indefinitely. But having been brutally tortured following an accusation of witchcraft two years previously, it was still too dangerous for her to return home.

This was when Joshua stepped in. Actually, Joshua had stepped in previously, when he tracked her down after her ordeal and ensured she received care in the hospital. When she recovered, he organised her transfer to a safe house. When that became unsafe, he found her another refuge in a different province. For Joshua, it was all volunteer work. All at considerable personal risk.

But when Hannah needed to leave the second safe house, Joshua knew there were no other options. He invited her, at this stage a stranger, to live in his own home with his family. Accommodating another person means daily sacrifices, stretching resources, making do with less. Yet when Hannah arrived, he gave her a small plot of land for growing food and a piglet to raise.

He explained that this was an important part of her recovery process — a way of giving her back some of the things that were taken away from her through the torture. Importantly, this included the ability to make her own decisions about how to live her life. He noted, “Trauma healing is taking place and I’m very impressed.”

Benjamin Franklin once quipped that house guests are like fish and begin to smell after three days – suggesting they lose their appeal quickly. But when I visited Joshua and Hannah last week, surrounded by their well-tended food gardens, there was no sign of strain or resentment after more than two years of cohabitation. Joshua had even given refuge to another survivor during the previous year.

Throughout our time together, Joshua was eager to share with me his philosophy of what I am calling “care as advocacy” in the fight against sorcery accusation-related

violence. When he first told his community that he was bringing the survivors to live with him, they said, “You’re all going to die, we’re all going to die.” People were afraid of the “witches” and did not want to see or talk with the survivors, or share food with them. Certainly they would never invite them to their own homes.

But, slowly, these fears have been transformed.

Joshua and his family didn’t die, despite living openly with the survivors. They made a point of being public about sharing meals, taking the women to Sunday church services, showing physical affection. “We treated them as our friends and the community could see it. Our behaviour toward these survivors was what transformed the fear of sorcery into love for these women.” Today the survivors are treated as normal members of the community and are even invited to eat and stay over at other people’s houses.

So, what does the future look like for the survivors? Joshua holds out hope that they can return to their own homes in due course, but believes healing time is essential for successful reintegration.

“I’m just delaying and I hope that God will open some doors for them to go back, that God will help their relatives to open their hearts and minds to see the truth and they will admit and regret what they’ve done,” he says. “People need to be truly sorry and regretful for what they have done in order to change.”

It seems that this model of “care as advocacy” that Joshua is modelling is one that has considerable promise. Everywhere throughout PNG there are compassionate community members who welcome survivors into their homes, even at significant cost to themselves. Many, like Joshua, are motivated by Christian principles and by compassion for survivors. What a difference it would make if some small levels of support could be provided to such local heroes, to lessen the burden on them and their families. It is also important that we identify ways for these local hosts to share their experiences, transferring lessons in keeping everyone safe and overcoming stigma and fear.

The case of Joshua and Hannah suggests that the benefits would be considerable — not only for the survivors but even more so for their host community. This story offers hope: sometimes the most powerful advocacy isn’t protesting or petitioning — it’s simply opening your door and treating someone with dignity when the rest of the world has turned away.

In the meantime, survivors stay with Joshua and his family. As we are talking, Hannah says something in the Enga language, looking at me with happy, sparkling eyes. “What did she say?” I asked. “Oh,” Joshua replies with a grin, “She said that I

am her son, and this is OK by me.”

Author/s:

Miranda Forsyth

Miranda Forsyth is a professor at the [School of Regulation and Global Governance \(RegNet\)](#) at ANU and ARC Future Fellow.

Link:

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