

The newsroom will miss Daniel Kalinaki's big head, kind heart and gifted hands

I grudgingly agreed to attend the management occasion organised to honour Mr Daniel Kalinaki at the end of March, as he signed out of the newsroom. I knew the day would come early in 2022 when I joined the editorial board committee of Monitor Publications Limited. Still, it was difficult. It helped, that there were many people, clearly crying quietly, wearing a brave face.

I met Daniel in 2013. At the time, I was contributing to *Daily Monitor* though not regularly. He was moving to Nairobi and I needed an interview. I reached out and to my surprise, he agreed. We met near Nation Media Headquarters in Nairobi over coffee. I arrived early, nervous.

He arrived shortly after. I was eager to begin. He gave me 30 minutes and we talked for three hours. It was the range of issues we discussed that got us to lose our sense of time - the media environment in the region, journalism, politics and the Ugandan economy.

We switched subject with an ease that made the interview enjoyable for both of us. My training was to see talent, and this one was very special. There were rumours he had been sent to Nairobi to pacify some not so happy people in Kampala. Yet, his being there, at NMG headquarters was more of the earned space. We never met again, until 2018, because I moved to South Africa shortly after. In no way could I have imagined then that we would one day work together.

At the board in 2022, our common ground was a belief that attracting, retaining and rewarding top talent for the newsroom was non-negotiable. He had hopes that I would be of help. It continued to elude us but it kept us talking. I kept asking questions, he offered his perspective and sometimes asked his own. Journalism continued to struggle through technological advance and environmen-

tal complications, ours was to figure out how to stay alive. We did our best with what we got.

I sought a delicate balance between spending most of the time at the editorial board discussing mistakes the team had made and finding new initiatives worthy of discussion. We were able to find some place of comfort. Not only did we spend more time discussing ideas to move us toward our north star, the team also hit refresh at the *Daily Monitor*. The board was happy with the performance, the public responded with greater love.

I remember one executive asked me why the editorial team was getting depleted yet the product was much better. I smiled. The thing is, we had experienced what Judy Estrin describes as the magic that happens, 'when small groups of the most talented people have a sense of purpose and shared values, and are provided with sufficient resources and are empowered to come up with something great'.

Although we did not have the resources, we trusted the team and understood their challenges. I did a lot of listening, learning to ask inquisitive questions without being judgemental. The results were visible. In the board, Daniel was sharing all kinds of ideas and initiatives. He was at his best. While the board was happy, I ensured they did not forget what was important or became complacent.

With every request to exit in the last four years, I found new reasons to make Daniel stay a little longer. I agreed to negotiate for a sabbatical if he stayed through the 2026 elections for instance. In the end, Daniel had run out of his runway for his passion project of journalism.

People like Daniel - with a big head, kind heart and gifted hands, will always have a special place somewhere higher and worthy. He did for jour-

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Emily Comfort Maratho
From where I stand

nalism in our context what few individuals or institutions will achieve in a lifetime. He also paid a high price.

The newsroom will miss Daniel's ability to nur-

ture and defend good talent, calmly fighting back, his passion for journalism, conviction for editorial freedom and empathy for creative talent.

He understood the management of creatives and never bulked them under one size fit all policies. The board will miss his quick mind and strategic approach to journalism and media business.

Daniel's curiosity, courage and confidence to experiment with new ideas, respecting views that are different from his, giving talent the space to create and never interested in being the story will be remembered. He always told me, 'the stories we tell are more important than we who tell the stories.'

He taught me a lot about the newsroom and how it works, and a whole world of journalism sometimes as if he was the teacher and I, the student. Yet, he treated me with the greatest respect.

I couldn't have found a better place to balance media research, policy and practice than at NMG, with Daniel on the other side and a team of incredibly talented journalists.

I enjoyed working with Daniel, always trusting that the person on the other side knows what to do and is professional.

I hope that Daniel will one day look back and say with gratitude, what the amazing Tina Turner said, that 'my legacy is that I stayed on course... from the beginning to the end, because I believed in something inside of me'. Because he believed in good journalism no matter what.

Emily Comfort Maratho, PhD.
Chairperson, Editorial Board Committee
NMG-U. emilycm@gmail.com

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