

Sydney runner Eloise Wellings, 27, credits her selection in the 5000 metres and 10,000 metres for the 2010 Commonwealth Games to training with professional pacemaker Julius Achon, 34, a former child soldier turned dual Olympian. The pair have set up the Love Mercy Uganda Foundation, which sponsors 22 orphans from Achon's northern Ugandan village.

2 of us

Julius Achon & Eloise Wellings



Eloise: I was training for the Beijing Olympics in April 2008 when I suffered a stress fracture in my foot. I went to Nike House in Portland [Oregon] to receive rehabilitation. It's a very strange existence in the house: the windows are sealed, it's set at altitude [3000 metres] and there are cross-training machines everywhere. One morning, after training, I forgot to wipe my sweat off the floor in the kitchen and this big, tall African comes in and says, "Whose soup is this?"

I said, "That's my soup!" I thought he was angry. It didn't take long to work out he was joking.

Julius works as a pacemaker for Nike and we started running together the next day. Straight away, he was very open about his past. As well as growing up in a dirt-poor village in Uganda, he'd been kidnapped by rebel forces [the Lord's Resistance Army] and forced to fight as a child soldier. He'd experienced a lot of trauma, but he hadn't spoken to too many people about it. I don't know why he opened up to me, but I was completely moved by what he'd overcome to be an Olympian. The struggles he had been through made my situation – stressing about a stress fracture – seem soooo inconsequential.

What also humbled me was the fact he had adopted 11 orphans from his village and was sending money home to support them. I get emotional thinking about it: the lives of these kids changed forever because he didn't walk away. I have never met anyone with a softer heart.

In the end, I couldn't compete in Beijing because of

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my injury. When I was saying goodbye to Julius, he invited [my husband] Jon and me to his wedding in Uganda. It was held in January 2009 and we felt so privileged to be there and meet the orphans I'd heard so much about. Out of 500 guests we were the only white people; we were treated like celebrities. A few days later, I asked Julius what he thought about setting up a charity together. He was very emotional about the prospect. That was the start of the Love Mercy Uganda Foundation.

My husband and I paid for Julius to come to Australia and train me for the 10,000 metres. Julius is one of the best runners in the world and training with him pretty much secured my spot in the Commonwealth Games. It's not just what he teaches me about running; it's the little things he says. Before I ran, he whispered, "You are fearless." To go into a race with that as my mantra was amazing.

Over the next three years we will be spending a lot of time together: training in Australia, the US and Europe for the 2012 [London] Olympics. When we are together I do find I am very protective of him; he's 183 centimetres tall and so dark – even for an African – and occasionally people can be cruel. Nobody deserves to be treated differently, especially not him; he's been through too much.

Julius has a strong Ugandan accent and although he doesn't say much, what he says is always powerful. He does like to laugh, and that laughter has enabled a lot of healing, too. I think I've helped him heal by teaching him to look forward. I don't confide in him unless it's about my running career because I'm conscious not to complain about trivial things. Running was a way out of poverty for Julius. He has cherished that freedom and is still trying to break that cycle of poverty in his village. The hardships he has endured put things into perspective for me, a white girl from Cronulla [in Sydney's south]. I feel more of a responsibility to achieve in my athletic career because I'm not running for myself any more. I'm running for Uganda.

Julius: When I met Eloise, she thought I was a gangster. She didn't know straight away that I was kind and thoughtful. Eloise asks a lot of questions. One day when we were driving to a training session, I stopped the car to go to the bank to send some money home. When I told her the money was for the orphans in my village, she opened her wallet and gave me \$US100. I bought 100 kilograms of beans for my village that day. I was shocked by her generosity!

Four days later, after a really tough training session, I told Eloise my life story. I had not told anyone else in the world before that because I was ashamed. I thought people wouldn't understand I was kidnapped [at age 12] and forced to fight as a child soldier and that I had no choice: it was "join or die". I escaped after three months and found my family hiding in the jungle. At the back of my mind was the memory that my uncle [John Akii-Bua] won a gold medal [in the 400 metres hurdles] in the 1972 Olympics. I related athletic success to freedom, so I began running 20 miles [32 kilometres] a day. In 1995, I won a scholarship to the US. I then made it to the 1996 Olympics and to the 1500 metres semi-final in the 2000 Olympics.

I started to tell Eloise my story because she seemed interested ... but I also wanted to motivate her because she had an injury. I wanted to let her know that with hope anything is possible. To tell someone about my past was very difficult. My wife, Grace, still won't let me tell her my whole story; she gets too upset and begs me to stop. When I reached the point about losing my mum, [telling Eloise] became very difficult. My mum took three days to bleed to death after being shot [by the LRA]. Even though it was difficult to talk about, it lifted a weight off my shoulders.

It is a bit unusual to meet someone and become so tight so quickly. That's the thing about sport; it brings freedom and it brings unity. Our faith [in God] also unites us. When I'm with Eloise she helps me to forget my pain. My nightmares suddenly stopped. She's the first white person to be my friend and the first white person to come to my village. When she came to my wedding I felt a little bit shy to show her my village. But as soon as she arrived, I thought, "Aaah, my sister is here!" The friendship we have developed is like we were born from the same mother but separated at birth.

Eloise has done a lot to help my village; thanks to her we've been able to adopt another 11 orphans. Sometimes when I am training her, I say, "Eloise, just imagine you are being abducted, you are losing your family from poverty ... now run like you are blessed." Food is a priority in my village – 12 people died from famine last year – and Eloise now thinks of Uganda when she competes.

Eloise performs better when I'm around. I push her and she runs faster. She runs fast because she is training with a man. I am faster than her, yes. I'm very fast. When Eloise wins, it intensifies our friendship. It brings our two hearts together. It feels like I've won when she wins.

Eloise has learnt a lot from me, but I have learnt things from her, too. First of all, I know now that skin colour doesn't matter. She taught me we are the same under our skin. She taught me a human is a human – not by telling me, just by being my friend. As an athlete, I believe Eloise can be the best female runner in Australia's history. As a human, she is already the best. **GW**