



## Gemma Sisia

Founding Director, The School of St Jude

[schoolofstjude.org](http://schoolofstjude.org)

### 'Fighting Poverty Through Education'

Gemma Sisia spent her early years on a wool sheep property near Guyra in northern New South Wales, Australia. She is the only daughter among the eight children of Sue and Basil Rice. Gemma's mother still lives on the family property at Guyra, and a number of her brothers live in the area.

After completing her secondary studies at St Vincent's College in Sydney, Gemma completed a Science Degree (majoring in Genetics and Biochemistry) at The University of Melbourne, followed by an Honours Program (where she was awarded First Class) in the Northern Territory. Gemma concluded her tertiary studies with a Diploma of Education through the University of New England in Armidale.

At 22 years old, with a passion and zeal inherited from her ancestor, Edmund Rice (founder of the Christian Brothers movement), Gemma devoted her time to helping the poor in Africa. She travelled to Uganda, East Africa to volunteer for three years as a teacher. This experience fostered a fervent belief that a free, high-quality education should be the right of all children, and that education is the strongest weapon in fighting poverty, corruption and political instability. On returning to Australia, Gemma began fundraising to help underprivileged children in Uganda complete their schooling. Overwhelmed with support and donations, Gemma raised enough to open an official fund to invest in the education of East Africa's poorest children.

While working in Uganda, Gemma travelled to neighbouring Tanzania and met Richard Sisia, a safari driver, who later became her husband. Richard's father Daniel Sisia, a village chairman, gifted the newlyweds a small plot of land that became home to The School of St Jude's first campus.

In 2002, The School of St Jude opened with one teacher and a handful of sponsored students. Through hard work and determination, the school has expanded to almost 2000 students across three campuses that include boarding facilities. St Jude's also provides employment to more than 300 local Tanzanian staff, including academic leadership and their teams, ensuring a sustainable and self-determining future for St Jude's.

In 2015, St Jude's celebrated its first ever Form 6 (year 12) graduating class, which placed in the top 10% in Tanzania. These graduates are now undertaking the school's inaugural Community Service Program, where graduates have a chance to give thanks for the opportunities they received at St Jude's by volunteering at severely under-resourced government schools and at St Jude's.

Today, Gemma and Richard also run a safari company and are busy raising four children: Nathaniel (born October 2001), Jacob (born April 2003), Isabella (born April 2008) and Louisa (born July 2012). In 2000, Gemma was awarded a Sapphire Paul Harris Fellow by Rotary International.

Gemma's autobiography, *St Jude's*, was published by Pan Macmillian Australia in 2007 and remained on the Best Sellers List for over two months. Also in 2007, Gemma's achievements were honoured by an Order of Australia medal. Gemma's story has been featured twice in the ABC TV program *Australian Story*; in 2005 and 2009. In 2012 Gemma was named one of *The Australian Financial Review* and *Westpac's* 100 Women of Influence. She was also a finalist in New South Wales for *Australian of the Year*.

Gemma is proud to have one of the school's first ever graduates, Dorice Livingstone-Abel by her side on her 2016 annual Australian tour. Together, they will share how access to a free, high-quality education is changing the lives of 1900 of the poorest and brightest students in one of the world's poorest countries.