

Bwesigye bent on educating disadvantaged children

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Reminding graduates of what they patiently paid for, professionally studied and painfully completed as courses as useless is not only demeaning but also devaluing institutions that designed and presented them for approval by government. nET PHOTO

In Summary

As a little girl, Elinorah Bwesigye was denied a chance to attend school by her mother who did not think girls needed to be educated. She has dedicated her life to making sure no child succumbs to the fate of being denied education.

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By Stephen Otage

Elinorah Bwesigye is an 85-year-old farmer from Ruganda Nakinengo Parish, in the hilly areas bordering Kanungu and Rukungiri districts. Even though she was not lucky enough to go to school, she is passionate about education and is working towards ensuring that as many children as she can support get a chance to go to school.

In the late 1930s, Bwesigye came close to going to school but fate wouldn't let this happen.

One day, a missionary teacher found Bwesigye loitering near a school and asked why she was not in class. She told the teacher her parents were too poor to afford school fees. She was given a scholarship to study at the school. The school even gave her a free school uniform, a book and pencil and she was told to report to school the following day.

Unfortunately, the excitement to enter a classroom for the first time the next day, was thwarted by her mother.

“She slapped me, tore the book to pieces and told me to get back to doing house chores. She believed that girls did not need to go to school,” Bwesigye says.

Even if she was denied a chance at education, Bwesigye made sure to educate all her children.

Spreading goodwill

Widowed in 1992, Bwesigye's only asset was the 70-acre chunk of land she inherited from her husband.

This is where she grazes goats, cattle, sheep, chicken, and grows maize, beans, coffee, bananas, ground nuts beans and cow peas which she sold and used the money to educate her eight children up to university and beyond.

She boasts of raising a doctor, consultant, a head teacher, a senior prisons officer, a

motivational speaker and a businessman.

In 2015, when Bwesigye celebrated her 80th birthday, she decided to offer land to construct a community nursery and primary school to cater for children of peasants in the village. She called it Jaja Education Centre.

The school which started with only one classroom now has four classrooms in total. Her dream is to have up to seven classroom blocks.

“My resolve to start this school was influenced by the saying, ‘a tree is as strong as its roots’. Because of my passion for education, I shared my vision with the community and they embraced it,” she says.

Crescent Kamagara, the Parish Chief Nakinengo Parish, says he remembers when she offered the land to start the school and offered to provide uniforms to the children as well as feed them, which helped children mainly from the poor families because the parish has 11 villages with four primary schools and a population of between 7,000 to 8,000 and the set up of the school helped especially the needy.

“This is the fourth school in the village. We have two government primary schools, one private primary school and one secondary school in the sub county. She is the one who pays the salaries of her teachers,” he said

With the help of the community and her daughter who is a headmistress of Kamwokya Primary school, Bwesigye identified unemployed educated members of the community whom she recruited.

She says the school initiative was re-enforced by the daily inquiries for employment opportunities at her farm by the graduates in the village yet there were many children of school-going age stuck at home.

When she shared her vision with the community members, they embraced the idea and

she offered the land to construct the school.

She also offered to buy school uniforms, feed and construct the classroom for the first cohort of pupils to enrol. The parents were tasked to raise money to pay the salaries of the teachers to which they agreed.

The parents agreed that they would pay Shs6,000 for every child, however, this was still not enough to cover teachers' salaries.

She, therefore, decided to cover the rest of the costs from earnings from her farm.

According to Dr Denis Bwesigye a resident of the village, after hearing several stories about the old woman, he decided to listen to her story and decided that it is a worthwhile project.

He has linked the school with public speaking and leadership solutions and Trainstream Ltd, two local companies, to support Jaja Education centre. The two companies encourage their clients to raise money to complete the construction of the remaining three classrooms.

Motivation

Asked exactly what motivated her to start the school, she says she regrets her mother's decision many years ago when she stopped her from going to school.

“It is because of education that Uganda is where it is today. Most of my peers shunned education because of ignorance. If girls knew the value of education, they would take it seriously,” she says, adding that government should treat education as a human right because of the dehumanising impact of illiteracy.

Rev Sarah Kyalimpa, the parish priest Ruganda Church of Uganda, says Bwesigye is known in the village for providing free education for children of farmers who would

otherwise never have been able to send their children to school.

“Sometimes the villagers consult her for treatment of malaria and other sicknesses because they think she is a doctor,” Kyalimpa says.

Uncertain future

Because of her age, Bwesigye wonders what will happen to the school when she passes on.