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oking ahead. Ziribaggwa aspires to become a senior agricultural officer, with the goal of improving rming conditions, particularly in rural communities. Growing up in a farming environment exposed her the challenges farmers face, including unpredictable weather that requires irrigation support and the proper use of agrochemical inputs, which can threaten soil quality and human health.



Ziribaggwa: Makerere's finest

Once Esther Ruth Ziribaggwa stayed home for a year because her family could not afford school fees. On February 24, she stood at Freedom Square at Makerere University as the overall best Science student in her college

BY DAPHINE NAKABIRI

Esther Ruth Ziribaggwa's education almost ended in Senior One. Her father, the sole provider of her school fees, had fallen ill and undergone intestinal surgery. Unable to work, he could no longer support her education. For a year, she stayed home, watching her classmates move ahead without her. Years later, she would graduate as the top Science student at Makerere University.

During her primary education, Ziribaggwa consistently performed to the best of her ability. She sat her Primary Leaving Examinations at Seeta Boarding Primary School and excelled with nine aggregates. The achievement filled her with excitement and optimism.

"I was excited to begin secondary school, but circumstances changed when my father, who solely funded my education, fell ill and underwent intestinal surgery. He was unable to continue working, and as a result, I only completed the first term of Senior One before staying home with my sister for the rest of the year," she recounts.

At Mpoma Royal College, the school administration realised that the two sisters had been out of school for a full year and offered them a bursary, reducing the school fees from Shs800,000 to Shs380,000.

"I rejoined school in Senior Two. It was difficult to catch up after missing several topics and examinations, and I struggled with low self-esteem because many of my peers had moved ahead. However, I knew I could not afford to waste this second chance. With determination and guidance from my teachers, I completed my O-Level with 25 aggregates in eight subjects," she adds.

Her A-Level years were marked by similar challenges. Due to financial constraints, Ziribaggwa attended three different schools. She initially enrolled at Seat of Wisdom Boarding School in Kayunga but was forced to withdraw when her family could no longer afford the fees.

At the time, her father had undergone a second operation and remained unable to work, prompting her mother to assume responsibility for her education and transfer her to another school as a day student.

The long daily commute proved exhausting, leading to a final transfer to Godmark High School in Mukono District, where she completed her A-Level in 2019, scoring 15 points in Geography, Economics, Agriculture, and Subsidiary Mathematics.

4.77 HER CGPA

Upon completing secondary school, Ziribaggwa waited two years before joining university.

"At one point, I nearly gave up, thinking that even with my parents' support, I would not be able to sustain myself, particularly regarding personal needs. I even considered seeking employment wherever I could or starting my own business," she says.

During this period, she worked in a family member's catering business. However, the work was irregular, and the income was only sufficient to cover her personal needs, offering little financial stability.

Meanwhile, she had been admitted under the private sponsorship scheme to pursue a Bachelor of Statistics but was unable to raise the required tuition fees. The following year, the outbreak of Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown further complicated her plans.

However, an opportunity arose due to the absence of Senior Six leavers that year, Makerere University re-advertised admissions, inviting applications from candidates who had completed Senior Six within the specific period. With the cut-off points across programmes lowered, she applied with the assistance of a friend.

When the admission lists were released, she searched online and by God's grace, discovered that she had secured government sponsorship to pursue a Bachelor of Agricultural and Rural Innovation.

"In this era, as a young woman without prior higher education opportunities, navigating life is challenging. I was truly grateful to be able to join the university and shared the news with my parents and siblings, making them proud," she explains.

Joining university

After collecting her admission letter from the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Ziribaggwa began the course that would shape her future. However, she recalls that the first two weeks were more challenging than she had anticipated.

"I was commuting from my sister's residence in Seeta, which proved hectic. I often arrived late for early morning lectures and faced the same traffic in the evenings. Commuting also placed a significant financial burden on me for transport," she explains.

When her government allowance was released, Ziribaggwa decided to secure a hostel and found accommodation in Kikumi-Kikumi. The move provided stability, allowing her to focus on her studies and entrust the rest of her journey to God.

While studying, she employed several strategies to ensure academic ex

What others say

Rebecca Nyangoma, Class Representative, She was my neighbour at hostel and my classmate. Esther is brilliant as she did not spend excessive time reading. She consistently attended lectures, even while unwell. While she participated in only a few discussion groups, she would seek clarification from lecturers or friends. During exam periods, she devoted herself fully, spending long hours in the library, engaging in discussions, and arriving early for exams.



Mary Nyaketcho, Friend

I met Esther in her first year. We were hostel and I was pursuing a Bachelor's in Agribusiness Management. I introduced her to the Jesus is King Fellowship, which I led. She shared her struggles with me, and I encouraged her to trust God. Over time, she grew as a leader within the fellowship and remained passionate about both her academic growth and supporting the development of others.

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