

Growing up in a slum, where teenage pregnancies, abortions, prostitution and other social evils were the order of the day fuelled Esther Nakajjigo to roll up her sleeves and turn things around in her community. At just 20 years, Nakajjigo runs Princess Diana Teenage Centre in Makindye that offers sexual and reproductive health services to young people, writes **Ronnie Twinamasiko**

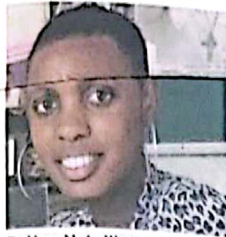
**Background**  
I grew up from teenage pregnancies, abortions, prostitution and other social evils. Some got pregnant and dropped out of school. A large number of them were poor so they were not able to pay for their education.

I witnessed the lives of my peers waste away. I think my heart to see this I went to a Primary school pupil at Kabalagala Parents School, but I don't recall that what they were doing was wrong. My parents were poor so they lived in a small dingy house in the slum of Kabalagala, a slum in the suburb, Makindye Division.

The evils in our community attracted a number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and sympathisers, among them a group of health workers from Kiruddu Health Care Centre (New Mulago Hospital) today.

They reached to us about the evils of teenage pregnancies and abortions, among other things. It is through their speeches that I was attracted to peer educating. In 2011, at the age of 14, I started going to Kiruddu Health Care Centre to train as a peer educator where I eventually became a volunteer. The programme lasted four weeks. Some were too young to be a peer educator and tried to stop me, but I persisted. I had a burning desire to change things in my community and no one was going to stop that.

Kiruddu was a meeting point for young girls navigating through the various challenges of growth. As peer educators, we were always available to provide sexual and reproductive health services. Largely, we were links between young people and doctors. We welcomed them at the hospital, talked to them.



Esther Nakajjigo

then later helped them get treatment.

The facility, however, closed in 2012 to pave way for the upgrade to a hospital. This transformation took about four years. All this while there was no place for teenage girls to run to when they wanted to deliver or get antenatal care and counselling.

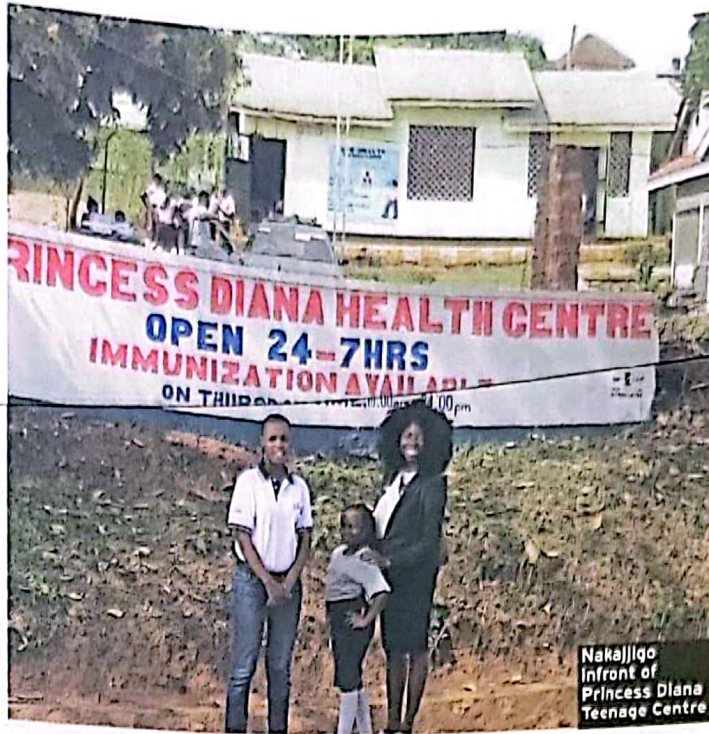
**Starting a health facility**

Following the closure of Kiruddu, girls started coming to my parents' home for assistance because there was no other facility to care for their problems.

I am not a nurse, but people addressed me as such because they had seen me volunteering at Kiruddu. I gave simple first aid together with other peer educators and counselling. Many residents do not care whether you have a degree in medicine or not as long as you can do something about their problems.

The number of young women who needed help kept swelling. I got about 10 girls every day at our home needing help. I was touched by the plight of these teenagers, something had to be done.

My mother, Christine Katerega, at the time owned some rentals along Salama Road in the neighbourhood of the health centre. I begged her to allow me



# At 20, Nakajjigo runs a community health centre

to set up a teenage care centre and she gave me the green light.

However, she was worried because the rent from these rentals would be the source of school fees for my university education. How was I going to proceed with school thereafter? I was almost completing my A'level then. It is during this time that I opened the teenage centre with the assistance of Childcare and Rescue Programme, an NGO. They provided financial support, plus managing the facility while I was in school.

My school gave me time to check on the facility. It has always been my role to oversee things at the facility.

I invited healthworkers and my fellow peer educators to help at the facility. We all were doing it voluntarily. Many of these were people who shared my vision.

At this new establishment, residents came in large numbers for assistance. I did not have equipment though. For beddings, my colleagues and I used mats. We only offered first aid, condoms, counselling and for the complex matters, we referred them to bigger hospitals.

As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, I started to write proposals and knocking at office doors looking for

## Recognition

I have won multiple awards including Vision Group's Women Achievers Award In 2014; personality of the year in the World Savers awards; National Social Security Fund Torch accolade for the most outstanding project impacting vulnerable communities among others. In 2014, I was chosen ambassador for women and girls by the civil society of Uganda.

people to invest in our facility. In the same year we started business, 2015, we held a fundraiser dinner at the facility. We collected over sh6m and got donations. Paragon Hospital gave us beds.

We have a clinic and professional medical workers. We offer health education, distribute condoms, voluntary counselling and screening for HIV and other STIs plus their treatment.

**Work without pay**  
Our services are free to girls between the ages of 10-25. Persons above that age are

required to pay because I believe they can access some income. We get between 60 and 70 clients weekly.

It is these fees that enable me to pay workers, buy medicine and develop the facility. I register profits, but I have been re-investing them in improving the facility.

There are over 12 permanent workers at the facility. I spend about sh5.8m on salaries.

There are also over 22 volunteers; young people with a desire to lend helping hand to the community people.

I spend over sh300,000 on water bills and sh150,000 on electricity.

I personally do not earn from the facility. I have no salary, at least for now. However, I get allowances when I attend conferences where I am required to speak about the girls.

**The bigger picture**

I want to develop Princess Diana Teenage Centre into a women research hospital. My mother, who is a shareholder, gave me land and we are going to develop it.

We are also developing a healthcare app, where girls can receive messages about antenatal care and other things in tandem with what we do at

## IMPARTING SKILLS

Princess Diana Teenage Centre is more than just a health facility. At the facility, the team also teaches income generating skills to girls.

The reason many end up trading their bodies or falling for the lies men tell them is lack of money. We equip them with skills in modern bricklaying and fabrication.

Child Care programme which helps us train young people.

By teaching income-generating skills, we are encouraging a less vulnerable generation. When women are independent, they will not be swayed to indulge in evil.

My team and I also go to schools to lecture about safe living and financial literacy.

We currently have a Savings and Credit Co-operative Society (SACCOS) for school-going girls in Makindye. It is important for girls to start saving money when they are still young. The SACCOS has 382 members.

In 2015, I bought a used ambulance for the facility at sh5.2m after saving for 10 months which has eased our work.

I have a reality TV show which airs on Urban TV and Bukedde. It serves to broadcast real life experiences of the girls we meet during our country tours.

I am pursuing a bachelor's degree in marketing at Mutesa Royal University under scholarship by Kabaka, Ronald Muwenda Mutebi which I was awarded during the fundraiser we held.

My lecturers know about my work and are positive about it. When I miss a lecture or a test, they provide it to me later.

**Challenges**

Our biggest challenge is that we get more clients than we can accommodate. Even though we offer free services to the teenagers, even the older ones come begging for that kind of arrangement putting us in a compromising situation.

Right now, we do not have adequate funds to operate smoothly. Also, there are people who look down on me because I am still young, although this was worse in the beginning.

## What others say

**Laylla Namatovu, dean of students, Princess Diana High School Munyonyo**  
All of us as a family of Princess Diana High School, Munyonyo, are proud of Nakajjigo. She has been such an exceptional girl since she joined us in S5. We are honoured that her inspiration was nurtured right from here when she was exposed to literature we have about our patron, the late Princess Diana of Wales. This is the education that is relevant to address today's challenging humanitarian concerns.

**Gideon Ahumuza, youth leader, Munyonyo Church of Uganda**  
I have had an opportunity to see the magic hands of Nakajjigo touching lives in the community where I stay. Lives of girls who got pregnant early have undergone great transformation and many have received hope of returning to school, which had never crossed their minds before. She is such a blessed beautiful soul.