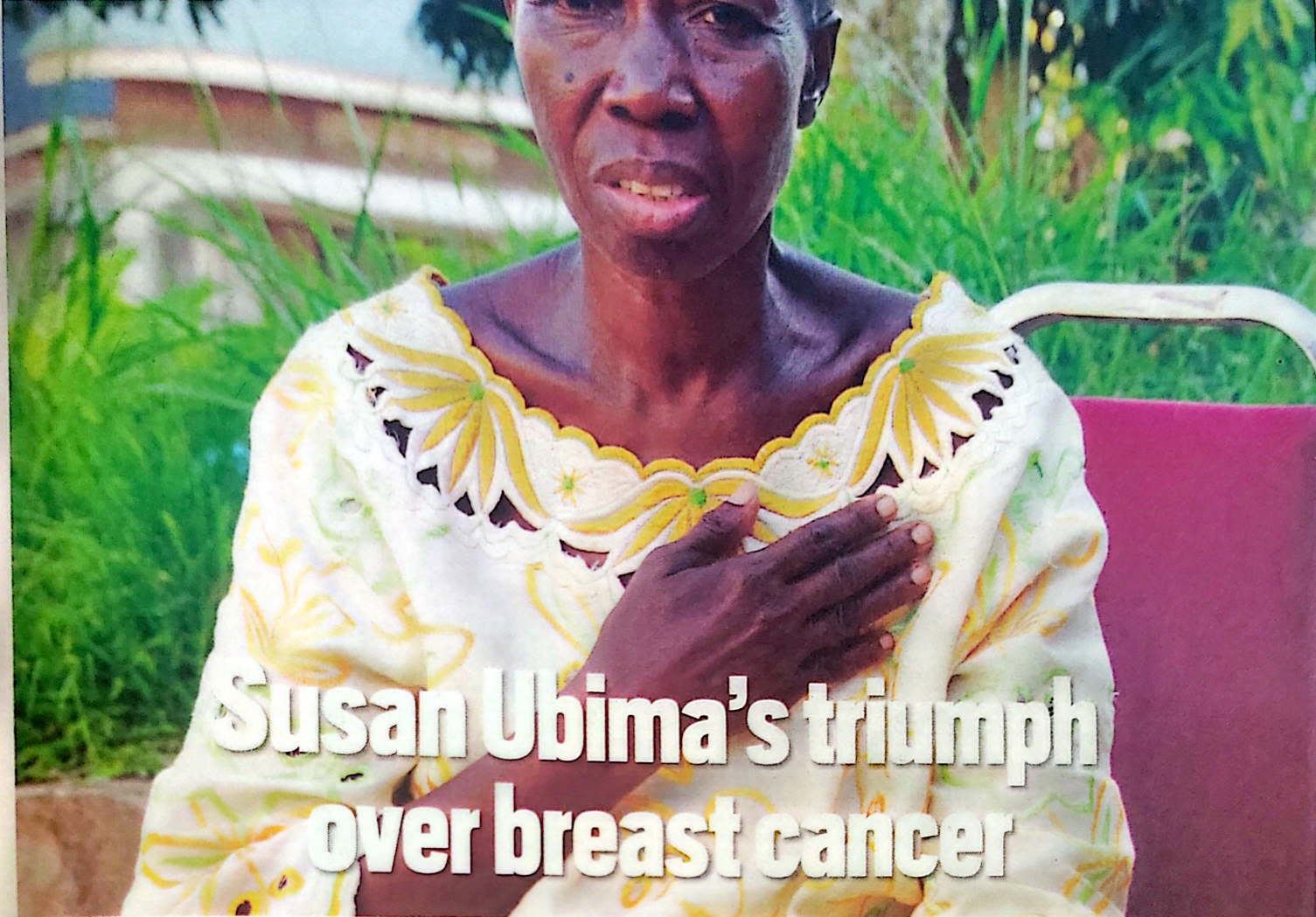




# Susan Ubima's triumph over breast cancer

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In 2009, Susan Ubima, who was 52 at the time, went for her first breast cancer screening. This followed several announcements on different media platforms urging women to go for clinical examinations. She, therefore, visited a medical facility in the city centre.

"A female doctor attended to me. After a

15-minute examination, she told me there was nothing abnormal and gave me a clean bill of health. "She advised me to repeat the same procedure often while at home," says Ubima.

## The discovery

One morning, after taking a bath, Ubima started self-examining her breasts as the doctor had advised. She followed her instructions to the latter.

During the process, she felt a tiny mass, the size of a millet grain, on the upper part of her left breast. "I got scared and wondered how the doctor at the health facility had missed it," she says. "I did not feel pain in any of the breasts neither was there any discharge coming from them. My breasts remained the same except for the tiny mass I had discovered," she says.

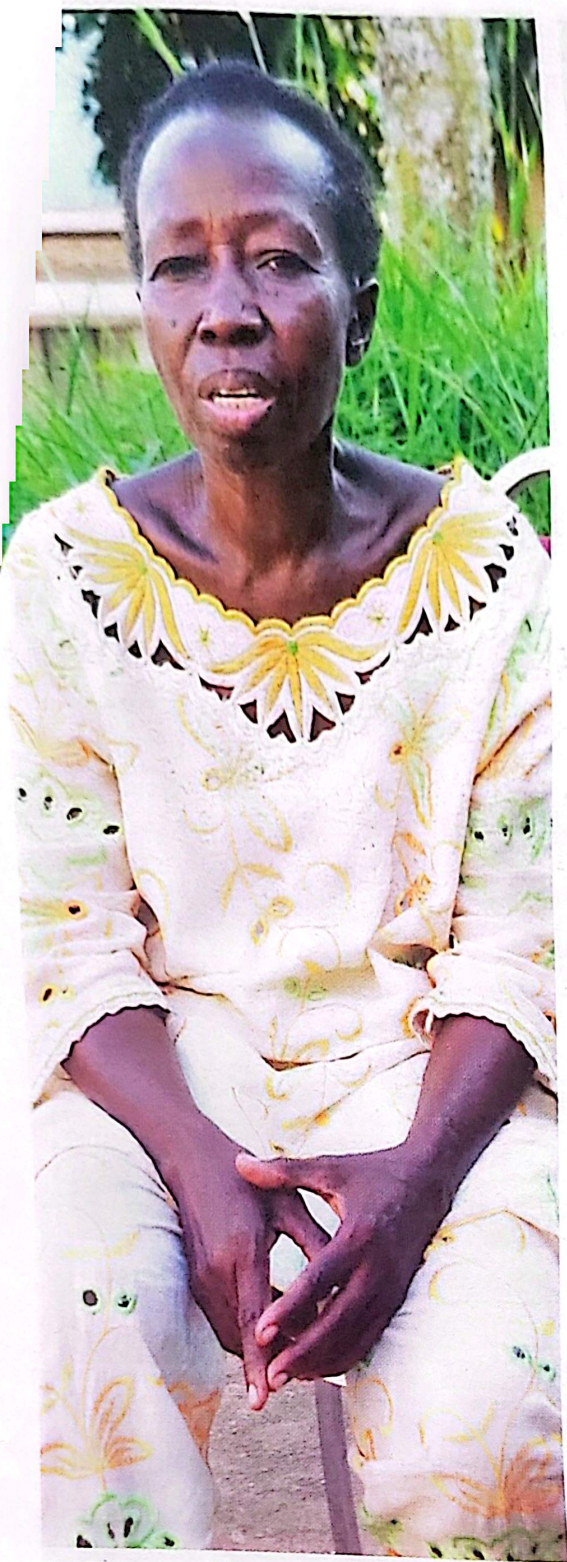
The detection perturbed Ubima who decided to go back to the health facility for an

other examination. "I was checked and again assured that there was nothing amiss," she says.

Despite the affirmation, Ubima went to the cancer institute in Mulago for another checkup in 2010. Here, a number of tests were conducted including a mammogram (an x-ray image taken of the breasts in order to detect any strange abnormalities).

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Susan Ubima tells her story. She says cancer that is diagnosed at an early stage, before spreading is more likely to be treated successfully. PHOTOS BY ESTHER OLUKA

# Persistence helped my diagnosis - Ubima

For many women, a breast cancer diagnosis will drive you over the age. Most even feel like giving up. For Susan Ubima, this was not a choice. She shares her story of fighting and surviving breast cancer with **Esther Oluka**.

...FROM COVER

“During the examination, the mammogram technologist saw the mass on my left breast, hence confirming my earlier conclusion,” she says.

What followed was a biopsy. Samples of the mass were carefully extracted using a needle in order to conduct a further examination. “The results from the sample later showed that the mass was not cancerous but rather a harmless cyst,” she says.

## The turnaround

However, a few weeks later, Ubima was horrified after noticing three small swellings suddenly starting to grow around her left breast nipple. “They looked like three tiny peas and as the days progressed, they continued growing in size,” she says.

“I was uncomfortable. I felt like I was carrying unwanted material on my body and I wanted them removed,” she says. “Wearing clothes, especially bras, also became challenge. Sometimes I had to pad my right bra in order to balance the appearance of the breasts,” she adds.

The tumours were later confirmed to be cancerous and Ubima was advised to have them removed.

## The cost

About Shs3m was needed for the operation, an amount Ubima could not gather as soon as possible. At the time, she was a farmer and most of her earnings were used to take care of her family.

The solution came in the form of a groundnut grinding machine that Ubima mortgaged with a creditor. “I requested the person to take and keep the equipment as security in exchange for Shs3m, which I would pay back at an agreed date,” she says. With the money in hand, a friend advised her to seek the services of Dr Ben Khingi of Friends Medi-

cal Centre in Namuwongo whom she visited in August 2015. “He thoroughly examined my breast and advised me to have a mastectomy (breast removal). The surgery was performed and I was told that some samples would be taken to the United States for further tests,” she narrates.

After a few days, Ubima was discharged but she was advised to visit the cancer institute for further treatment and follow-up tests. In December 2015, she started chemotherapy and fortunately at no additional cost.

## WHAT DOCTOR SAYS

Dr. Ben Khingi, a health practitioner with expertise in surgery says: “After the mastectomy was done, we took some samples of Ubima’s removed breast tissue for further analysis. The tests confirmed that she had stage three breast cancer that had spread to the lymph nodes. I referred her back to the Cancer Institute to receive the appropriate treatment.”

Khingi says breast cancer is more common in women than men because of the continuous growth of tissue. Any breast mass including lumps should be evaluated regardless of one’s age.

Surgery is one part of cancer treatment. In circumstances where the tumour has spread, the necessary medication for a patient is recommended including chemotherapy (use of drugs to kill cancer cells), hormonal therapy (changes the hormone levels in the body and either stops or slows down cancer cells) and radio therapy given when a residue tissue of cancer needs to be killed. The radiations are directed exactly to the residue tissue of cancer that needs to be killed.

## The chemotherapy

The chemotherapy, which involves receiving intravenous injections of drugs intended to treat cancer went on until June 2016. Ubima would go for the treatment on a monthly basis where at times she would receive about three doses at once. “The side effects of the treatment were severe. I lost my hair and fingernails and used to vomit nonstop,” she says.

## Life after chemotherapy

After successful chemotherapy, Ubima was examined and it was discovered there were no more traces of cancer in her breast.

“When the doctor gave me the results, it felt like a heavy load had been lifted off my shoulders. I felt a sudden peace that I had not felt in a very long time,” she says.

Today, Ubima lives a healthy and happy life and is grateful to God who, she says, saved her life. “From what the doctor told me, I am certain that I am completely healed. I never worry that the cancer will resurface. I focus on getting better every day by taking my medication and adhering to a healthy diet and lifestyle,” she says, adding: “I believe God put me through this experience for a reason. Maybe He wanted me to go through it so that I am able to help others.”

## Helping hand

To other women battling breast cancer, Ubima says rather than give up, continue fighting and taking treatment. And to other young women who have never been diagnosed with the disease, Ubima advises them to do frequent breast examinations either at home or at a reputable health facility. “Seek a second opinion whenever you have doubts,” she advises.

Ubima is a member of Uganda Women’s Cancer Support Organisation, a group comprising breast cancer survivors. Just like other members, she is involved in educating other women on the importance of early diagnosis and treatment as well as providing psychological support to those battling cancer.