

Cover Story

# At 82, she earned PhD and that's just one chapter of her story

Wanjira stands as proof that learning has no expiry date, and the most compelling journeys are those that wade through valleys of sacrifice to reach the peak

Wanjira Mbutia  
EastAfrican

For someone counting down to her 83rd birthday in a few days, Mary Wanjira Mbutia Bishota is sharp, athletic, and witty. She sparkles with the quiet confidence of someone who has lived several lives in one - teacher, Girl Guide, farmer, polyglot, businesswoman, lawyer and, as of November 17, a PhD holder in Public Law.

Her education from the Open University was not only a personal triumph but also a testament to a resilience that refused to be defined by age, or societal expectations.

Her journey begins in the green hills of Nyeri, Kenya, the first of a polygamous family that was united as a cohesive unit by a servant and an agriculturalist in her a deep devotion.

She recalls, explaining the mortarboard and the official graduation to the other side of the education works."

She joined the girls' Training Centre for Girl Guides based at the Nairobi.

a weighty decision. She would leave regular school and train as a teacher, thereby earning an income sooner to support her siblings' education. It was a sacrifice that would redirect, but never diminish, her dreams.

"I did not want to go for teaching initially because I wanted to be a nurse," she says. But her father persuaded her, citing the noble path of figures like Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Mwalimu Jeremiah Nyaga and Jomo Kenyatta.

She excelled at Kiambu Teachers' College and became a dedicated P2 teacher, first at a school attached to the college itself and later at Maria Goretti Primary School Mang'u, where she rose to the position of deputy headteacher after qualifying as a P1 teacher, after her Cambridge School Certificate - GCE Ordinary Level, in 1966.

Even while teaching, the itch for learning persisted. She earned the Cambridge School Certificate through the British Tutorial College correspondence courses.

Life then took a romantic turn during a visit to one of her cousins, a law lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam. There, she met a charismatic young lawyer, Deusdedit Mujwahuzi Kagisa Bishota, fresh from studies in Dublin and London, and a courtship ensued, leading to marriage and a move to Tanzania.

This move began a vibrant, peripatetic chapter. In Tanzania, she joined Mtendeni Primary School as a teacher though not for long. Her husband left for Harvard Law School University to further his studies and Wanjira, expecting their first child, Furaha Bishota, now a renowned fashion entrepreneur in Kenya, accompanied him. When her husband took a sabbatical at Harvard,



Wanjira Bishota at her graduation last year. Picture: Pool

chusetts, USA, to better balance work and family life. "I told my husband 'I think, I need time for my children and I don't think teaching will give me that,'" she says. She wanted a scenario where work time was work time and home time was home time. She did not want to bring marking and preparation work home.

After the collapse of the EAC in 1997, looking for greener pastures, the couple moved to West Africa for her husband to work at the African Development Bank in 1980. As a diplomat's spouse in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, formal employment was restricted, so Wanjira's entrepreneurial and academic spirit soared. She first mastered French, earning a Senior Teachers' Diploma Certificate in



Law scholar Dr Mary Bishota and her family at her graduation ceremony. Picture: Pool



Furaha Bishota, founder of the Coccolili brand, in Nairobi. Picture: The

## Her thesis

Dr Bishota's thesis analysed initiatives from different legal jurisdictions such as Tanzania, Australia, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Mauritius, the European Union Countries (Directives), South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya. All these jurisdictions have already put their consumer protection legislation in place except the United Republic of Tanzania. Hence, the argument for robust and specific legislation to build trust, confidence,

la, and a shortage of supervisors at the university meant feedback could take months and, at times, up to a year. They were overwhelmed with the numbers of students under their supervision.

"And you know what that meant? That you cannot continue without the greenlight of a supervisor." This meant that more time studying, far more than she would have wished, kept the spirit alive and supervisors at times where necessary, especially the Dean, her goodwill to see her supervisor, astonished by what she kept was simple. "You know, someone who can move the end of the decade to do."

In November 2020, Dr Bishota was awarded her oldest son's Citizen Certificate on the 2020.

"It was all the time nagging me. Let me prove that I can do it. I can read to those higher degrees I didn't leave school because I'm stupid!"

Her research focus was both personal and present. Her thesis title was: "Evaluation of the Legal and Regulatory Framework for Consumer Protection in East Africa: Tanzania's Digital Economy." She explains her justification with clarity of a seasoned businesswoman. "I looked at the business and realised we are no longer in the brick and mortar era. Business is now digital. My body is immune to digital security. Even with me, if I am doing business, I may turn out to be a scammer or a cheater."

She saw that as consumers moved online, consumers in various parts of the world were vulnerable to fraud and transactions scattered across