

PROMISING

Maxwell Allen Aribo, recently surprised everyone by scoring 20 out of 20 in his Senior Six exams. He remembers those years not as a time of struggle, but as a time when his mother did everything to keep them in school. "I want to become a medical professional. Maybe a surgeon one day. It is the way I believe I can become of great value to society," he says.



Maxwell Allen Aribo is hoping for a government scholarship to study medicine. PHOTO/PROMISE TWINAMUKYE.

How a single mother vended her way to raising five children

In 2009, Lenia suddenly became responsible for all her family's needs after the father of her children abandoned them.

BY PROMISE TWINAMUKYE

By 6.30am, Veronica Lenia is already up, with her raw grains (simsim, groundnuts, corn, and snacks like daddies) ready to start roasting. Hers is work that demands patience and energy because on some days, she stands over the fire until 10pm. On other days, especially when preparing soya, she works until 2am, catching only a few hours of sleep before beginning again.

"There are nights I sleep only four hours," she says.

For 15 years, this has been her life; fire, smoke, movement. The next subsequent days are for walking, selling the finished goods to shops, supermarkets, and people she meets on the road. From

Veronica Lenia, vendor and mother of five.



Mbuya, where she lives, through Kitintale, Mutungo, all through Luzira and sometimes further, then walking back to Mbuya, waiting for the next day when the cycle will repeat. She fries and roasts stuff two days a week, the rest is for hawking, her days off being on the days she stays home preparing the merchandise.

A business born from need

Lenia did not set out to become a businesswoman. Like many women, she found her way into trade through necessity, and a conversation with a friend that changed everything.

"I had a friend who was doing this business. You are a woman with children. Come and learn this. It will help you support your family," she recalls.

She started small, just 20 kilogrammes of simsim. She would roast, package, and carry it to sell. Slowly, she added groundnuts, soya, and maize.

When the friend eventually returned to the village, she left Lenia something more valuable than advice, her customers.

"That is how I started growing, walking Kampala," Lenia says.

Regrettable experience

After 15 years of hard work, you would expect an entrepreneur like Lenia to have established clients. But this, she says, is the experience she regrets most in her journey. At one point, she began supplying a supermarket chain with six branches, which felt like progress until they introduced a credit system.

"They would take goods on credit, you keep supplying until your capital runs out. Payments kept delaying and then stopped altogether. The next time I went to demand my money, I discovered they had left the country with my Shs8.5m," she says.

Years of work disappeared into unpaid stock.

Alone but not defeated

In 2009, Lenia suddenly became responsible for all her family's needs after the father of her children abandoned them.

"You have to look for everything. School fees, food, medical, everything. To survive, I would take a loan from a microfinance institution and split it in half, one part for school fees, the other for the business.

That half would cover the remaining two terms of the school year for each child. I would pay off the loan and then apply for another one the following year," she explains.

This system worked until last year, when she realised she could get through the entire year without taking out a loan. For Lenia, the hard work; working through the night and walking all day, has been worth it. She has managed to send all her children through school.

One of them, her fourth-born son, Maxwell Allen Aribo, recently surprised everyone by scoring 20 out of 20 in his Senior Six exams. He remembers those years not as a time of struggle, but as a time when his mother did everything to keep them in school.

"She always worked hard to keep me going. She would support me financially, buying the things I needed for school. And she would wake up early in the morning just to package her products so she could

go and sell them early," Aribo says.

For him, growing up in that environment shaped his drive.

"Growing up in poverty and recognising my disadvantages pushed me to work harder. It was hard work, coupled with prayer, that helped me keep my grades high," he adds.

For her, those 20 points meant that at least she did not have to worry about tuition fees for him. For Aribo, the result was just the beginning of a long-time dream.

Lenia had always known her children were capable. Her second-born daughter excelled early, earning a bursary in secondary school. But even that success came with complications. Someone who acted as a mediator between Lenia and the school continued to collect school fees from her without her knowledge, even though the school had granted her daughter a bursary for coming first in her very first term.

"I did not know until two terms later, after I had been paying money to our mediator, that I was not supposed to pay at all. I only found out when her father went to check on her at school," she recalls.

The following year, she did not pay. Lenia went back to supporting her daughter through A-Level.

Her first son is now volunteering at Mulago Cancer Institute. Her other son completed Senior Six but could not proceed to university due to financial constraints. He is hustling in Kampala, since the business cannot generate enough money for university tuition. The rest of the children received scholarships for university.

The next challenge

But between aspiration and achievement, Lenia is hopeful that Aribo may get a government sponsorship, which will help. But for now, worry still covers her face.

The same concern extends to her younger children, the second-last in Senior Three and the last-born in Senior One, who are currently in government schools.

"If they get support, they can do well. They just need a chance," she says.

A mother's dream

Lenia's dream is for her children to be okay in the future, even when she is not there. It is a dream built on years of sacrifice on sleepless nights, long walks, and hands hardened by work.

"That is why I struggle every day. Moving up and down," she adds.

But despite everything, Lenia does not measure her life by what she has lost. She measures it by what she has managed to build.

"I have educated my children. I can take them to the hospital. I clothe them and they have a roof over their heads," says Lenia.

But the work is precarious, and it has caused lasting damage. She now and then experiences chest pain, due to the large basket she carries on the head for long distances, and her knees are not as strong as they used to be, making it difficult to get up when she has sat down.

But she is still keeping on, advising single mothers like her to work hard and not give up.

"That is the only way. Because who is going to take care of your children if you do not?" she says.

And the next morning, before the sun rises fully, Lenia will carry her already packed snacks, the simsim mixed with groundnuts, the simsim balls, daddies, the hard corn and soy on her head and head through her usual routes. But due to the problem with her legs, she will sacrifice some of her profit to grab a boda boda, and head back home when stock is done. And the cycle will continue.