days and that will be the end of | which might have caused Al- | have to realise that the rest of the year won't be like this while | -Al-Mahdi Ssenkabirwa

The General's daughter

When Ms Irene Nagitta Sekibaala hears Maj Gen Kasirye Ggwanga's name, his rank and reputation do not come first. Hers is the memory of the General without the uniform.

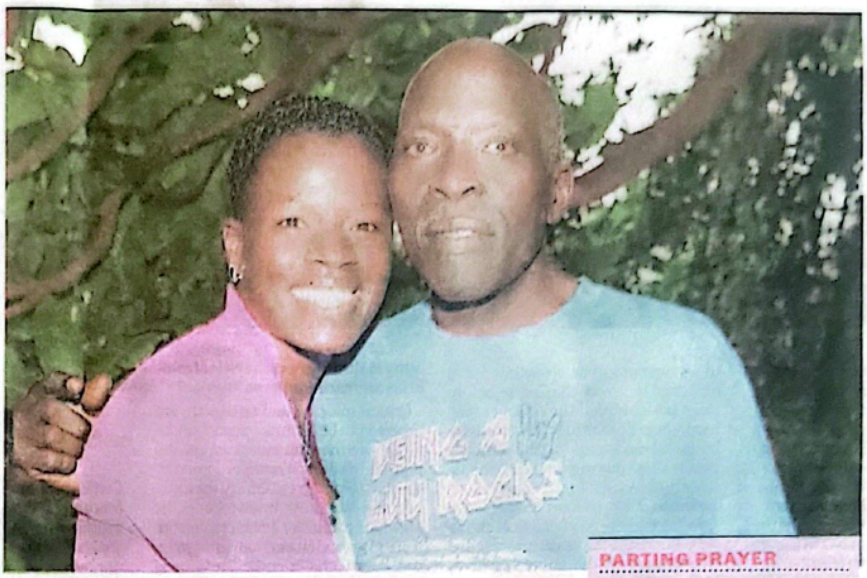
BY EDGAR R. BATTE

When people mention Kasirye Ggwanga, they often begin with the uniform. They speak of the outspoken officer in the Uganda Peoples' Defence Forces (UPDF). The fearless public figure, the man of strong opinions and stronger convictions. He was a soldier whose name travelled easily through war fronts, command posts, radio studios, and district offices, often accompanied by controversy, sometimes by admiration, always by noise.

But when his daughter, Ms Irene Nagitta Sekibaala, hears his name, none of that comes first. Away from rank and reputation, she speaks about fatherhood, discipline and grief in remembering her father. Hers is the memory of Maj Gen Kasirye Ggwanga, told without the uniform.

"When I think of my father," she says of Ggwanga, who died on June 9, 2020, "I think first of my best friend and my personal hero."

It is not a defensive statement, nor a sentimental one. It is simply where her memory begins. Long before rank, politics, and history hardened him into a public figure. To her, he was a father with constant, demanding, loving, and a man whose authority at home was quieter than the one the country knew, but no less firm.



Ms Irene Nagitta Sekibaala (left) and Maj Gen Kasirye Ggwanga, her father. PHOTO/COURTESY

Out-and-out hero

One of her earliest memories unfolds against the backdrop of the 1986 Bush War's uncertainty. Her father came and went like a shadow in those days, appearing without warning and disappearing just as suddenly.

But one evening, his return felt different. It did not arrive quietly. He was carried on the shoulders of men, surrounded by a swelling crowd that had walked from Mityana town to her grandfather's home in Busuubizi, Katakala, to see him.

Ms Nagitta stood beside her grandfather, the place where she felt safest, watching as the moment unfolded. She was too young to understand the political weight of what was happening, but old enough to feel that something important was taking place.

This was not an ordinary homecoming, but rather history brushing against childhood. When the men finally lowered him to the ground, he looked straight at her. He walked over, lifted her into his arms, and placed her on his shoulders.

"For the rest of that day," she recalls, "I did not leave him." Ms Nagitta moved between his shoulders and his lap as crowds gathered around him. She could not understand the words he spoke to them, but they could have been speeches shaped by struggle and conviction. Regardless, she understood what mattered most. This was her father. That feeling of safety, carried high above the ground, has outlived the war itself.

"When I think of him now," she says, "it is not the conflict or the crowds I remember first. It is that feeling."

For a man fresh from the Bush War, discipline came naturally. But the lessons he passed on at home were rarely delivered as lectures. They were lived.

One of Ms Nagitta's earliest lessons in dignity came through routine.

"Even in unusual circumstances," she says, "when my meals were often taken alone, and in the presence of soldiers, he taught me to use a fork and knife at a very early age."

It was not about table manners. It was about order, self-respect, regardless of environment and carrying oneself with dignity even when circumstances were chaotic. "He believed excellence should be demonstrated, not declared." That belief seeped into everything.

Disciplinarian

From the moment she became a woman—when he bought her boxes of cotton wool she did not yet understand how to use—to the day he handed her over in marriage, he remained present in ways many would assume belonged only to a mother.

"In time," she says, "I came to understand that he was both my father and my mother." At home, he was strict. She had a curfew and kept it. Discipline and structure mattered.

When she was younger, he did not hesitate to enforce the cane, as was common in that time and context. But even discipline, in his hands, evolved.

"There was a defining moment," she says. "When I became a woman, he told me firmly that he would no longer cane me because I was now a woman."

It was not just the end of punishment but recognition and a shift from correction to dignity.

His protectiveness, however, never softened. If there was an issue at school or elsewhere that required his presence, he stood up without hesitation. She remembers a chance encounter along Jinja Road, where he met her headmistress waiting for a taxi. The conversation touched on her behaviour

By the time the headmistress invited Ms Nagitta for a formal meeting the following term, her father had already spoken to her, coached and prepared her.

At home, Ggwanga was thoughtful, pensive, and unexpectedly funny. He read widely, watched documentaries, and enjoyed a good action movie. He loved country music, often letting it play softly in the background as he read.

Their home was rarely empty. Friends gathered often, along with their families. Birthdays were celebrated loudly.

PARTING PRAYER

One morning, Ggwanga called and told her to go and see him in Busujju....That day, he placed his hands on her head and prayed over her. "*Mukama omwana wange musanyuse kubanga bwaasanyuka nange nsanyuka* [Dear God, please make my child happy, because when she is happy, my heart is at peace too]."

Stories were shared late into the night. He loved hosting, and he took particular pride in roasting meat for everyone.

"He also loved to cook," she recalls, with a smile. "And he did it exceptionally well." Roasting was his specialty. He taught her how to cook Semutundu (fish) and how to roast liver so tenderly. As he cooked, he would call everyone over to taste, laughing as they crowded around him. He often joked that the portions only seemed small because the food was so good. Those moments, she says, reflected who he truly was at home—generous, attentive, happiest when bringing people together. "I always knew I had an advocate."

As a sickly child, Ms Nagitta was frequently in and out of hospital. When the situation demanded it, her father attended to her personally, sometimes working from his office while nursing her. He expressed love openly. He told her he loved her, often and without hesitation. And when discipline came, it was always accompanied by explanation.

He also extended that love beyond the home. Ggwanga cared for the children of friends who had died during the war, doing everything possible to give them a decent life. Ms Nagitta says her dad, who "loved with action," called her in the wee hours of the night just to talk about what hurt him, what disappointed him and what made him happy. When he wanted to talk, he would simply pick her up and say, "Get into the car."

They would drive, sometimes without a destination, and talk. Growing up with a highly visible and outspoken father was not glamorous for her. It was something she guarded herself against.

"I deliberately distanced myself from his public persona," she says. "I did not read the newspapers in which he appeared. I did not listen to his radio programmes." She wanted to preserve the father she knew, not the one filtered through headlines and public debate.

Several people did not even know she was his daughter unless someone else mentioned it or he happened to visit her at work.

Last moments

One morning, Ggwanga called and told her to go and see him in Busujju. She hesitated. Work demanded her time. Logistics were difficult. But something told her to go. That day, he placed his hands on her head and prayed over her. "Mukama omwana wange musanyuse kubanga bwaasanyuka nange nsanyuka [Dear God, please make my child happy, because when she is happy, my heart is at peace too]."

She says she replays that blessing in her mind often, afraid of ever forgetting it. The last time she saw him alive, he arrived with bags of food from the market—more than one person could ever finish.

He talked about friends who had gone before him, about being tired and about disappointments he had never voiced before. As he prepared to leave, the General asked if his daughter wanted money. He had Shs100,000 in his pocket. He gave her Shs90,000 and kept Shs10,000.

"I love you, my Irene," he said. A week later, he entered the hospital and never came out. Grieving him taught her that love must be lived fully, in the present. That nothing should be left unsaid.

When Ms Nagitta misses her father most, she plays country music. Sometimes Afrigo. She dances alone in her living room, borrowing his old dance moves. She honours him by protecting trees, a love of nature she took from him "full force", and by standing up for others, surprising herself with her own fearlessness.

"The woman I am today," she says, "is part of his living legacy." If younger generations remember anything about her father, she hopes it is this: that he was not just a General but a man who never forgot where he came from, what he stood for, or who he was fighting for. He was a man who lived loudly in public, but loved quietly at home. She pauses, then adds softly, almost to herself: "He did me well. He did us all well." And in that sentence, the uniform fades. The father remains.

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