

Teaching youth to make artistic gems from scrap

By Stella Naigino

Juma Muwanguzi, 19, ran away from home because he was being harassed by relatives and he ended up on the streets of Kampala.

"Tony Wakozi from W.A.T Arts Africa asked me to leave the street and go back home. He told me that if I accepted, he would teach me hands-on-skills," Muwanguzi says.

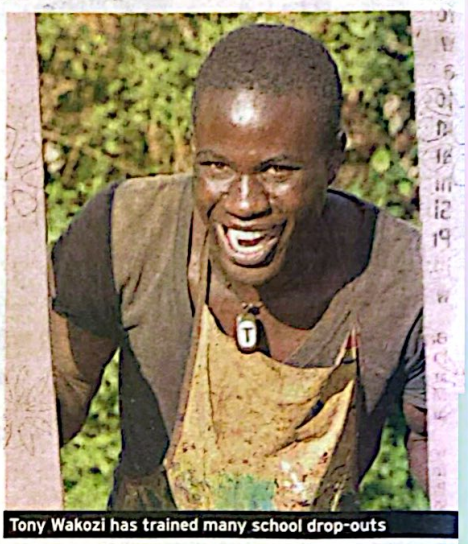
The offer was too good to be resisted, so Muwanguzi took it up. "When he asked my parents to allow him to train me, they followed him up to his place and asked the area LC1 chairman if Wakozi was a resident of Nansana and what he did," he says.

After proving that Wakozi was genuine, they allowed their son to train with him.

Muwanguzi was trained for three months and after that Wakozi employed him. Muwanguzi earns a monthly salary of sh350,000.

Like Muwanguzi, there are over 20 youth have benefitted from Wakozi's initiative of skilling youth in art.


A set of outdoor furniture that Wakozi made using animal skin. Photos by Stella Naigino


Tony Wakozi has trained many school drop-outs

About W.A.T Arts Africa

W.A.T Arts Africa was founded by Tony Wakozi, a self-taught artist. Wakozi's workshop is located in Nansana, Wakiso district. He equips school drop-outs and other youth with skills in commercial art from which they can earn a living.

The youth he trains are either employed in the workshop for a salary or left to find their own jobs.

How the training is done

Wakozi says his is not an academic programme and he does not follow a particular curriculum.

"Mine is crafting an art piece out of anything. There is no theory, it is purely practical. I give skills in adding value to wall clocks, mirrors, making furniture out of animal skin and crafting art pieces out of African fabric (*kitenge*)," Wakozi says.

"Many parents around Nansana send their children to work with me during holidays so that they can learn a practical skill."

Wakozi says training is done at the workshop by former trainees who opt to stay and work with him. Training is done free-of-charge for a period of three to four months.

Trainees are required to buy their own training materials.

Art pieces that come out of the materials are sold and the proceeds given to the trainees to motivate them to make more art pieces.

"At the end of the training, the trainees do not get any certificate, but we are rather proud that we have empowered someone with hands-on skills," Wakozi says. If a trainee fails to learn what is being taught, he is asked to quit.

How he started

Upon graduation from Nkumba University with a degree in electrical engineering in 2012, Wakozi, got a job as an electrical engineer with Samadura. He got the job with the Indian construction company in Karamoja in February 2013. He signed a two-year contract worth sh6m.

However, he was not satisfied with the pay because it could hardly meet his expenses. He decided he would save up and start his own business. By the time his contract with the company expired, he had saved sh1.2m.

Although his bosses wanted to renew his contract, he quit to start his own business.

Wakozi had never studied art and craft, but he had a passion for it. He took the initiative to go to different art workshops in Nansana to learn how the business run. In 2015, he made up his mind to pursue art as a business.

Choosing commercial art

Wakozi then visited his aunt, a fine art teacher at Nyenge Secondary School in Mukono and sold her the idea of making and selling art pieces. She was so excited by the idea that she pledged to support Wakozi.


A clock that Wakozi beautified using cardboard

His first idea was to recycle trashed items such as keys and watches into art pieces.

His aunt offered him space at her residence in Nansana, Wakiso, to erect an art workshop because he could not afford to rent premises for his business.

But before he started, Wakozi had made up his mind to stand out; to look different from his competitors.

"As such, in early 2015, I moved around Nansana and found that most artists worked with concrete. I chose to make art pieces from cardboard and wood," he narrates.

He interacts with people in the same business on recent technologies, which help him serve his clients better.

"In March 2015, I bought 10 hard boxes at sh4,000 each. I bought three wall clocks at sh6,000 each, glue and paint to start. I then added value to the wall clock by giving it an artistic touch using cardboards. When I put it on display at my workshop in Nansana, many people showed interest in it," he says.

He sold the clock at sh50,000 which encouraged him to continue. Today, his items go for sh30,000 to sh300,000.

"Today, I earn sh1m monthly from art pieces, which I display and sell at art exhibitions or at the workshop in Nansana," he says.

Training other youth

In March 2016, Wakozi who had wanted to grow his business but lacked the money to hire extra labour, noticed that there were so many youth on the streets.

He knew that if he trained them in how to make art pieces, he could retain them as his workers and pay them.

"I then decided to look out for youth I would equip with some hands-on skills especially in making art pieces free-of-charge and get them to work for me," he says.

"At this point, I had to come up with a workshop name, W.A.T Arts Africa from my name – Tony Wakozi and I registered with the Uganda Registration Bureau Services.

"I picked youth from different places such as Entebbe, Nansana, Bweyogerere who in turn brought in others."

He accommodated them at his aunt's place where he was staying and after training, he retained them as staff workers.

Marketing

Most of his marketing is done by the youth who have benefitted from the programme. With time, other parents started asking me to train their children too. Depending on the terms agreed upon, more youth started coming," Wakozi says.

Achievements

"I have employed myself and others. I have restored hope to youth who had given up in life," Wakozi says.

Challenges

The prices of the raw materia keep fluctuating which make work difficult. In the end Wakozi is forced to reduce th prices of the art pieces and make losses.

Who qualifies?

Wakozi says anyone who has passion for art gets trained. "It starts with passion, but can later transform into a job," he says.

The youth are normally aged between 12- 35. Before he takes them on, they are required to identify themselves.

Wakozi says he first considers vulnerable youth in the community, especially school drop-outs.

"They must bring a letter from their LC1 chairperson and (for minors) a parents' written consent is required," Wakozi says.