International Women's DAY

Theme: Rights. Justice. Action. **For ALL Women and Girls**

Opia's journey from orphan to healer

BY MARKO TAIBOT

On a quiet afternoon, patients trek into Peace Hospice Adjumani, some leaning on relatives while others support themselves with walking sticks. Inside, the atmosphere is calm, almost reverent.

At the centre of it all is Vicky Opia, a woman many simply call "Doctor," although her title is less important than the hope represents. Her story is one of loss and longing, determination and grace.

It is the story of a girl who lost her father at a young age. To take herself through primary school, she sold cow hooves (molokonyi) to survive in Kampala City. Opia was then taken in by her uncle who was a pharmacist at Mulago Hospital.

"He paid my school fees and I later joined Our Lady of Good Counsel Gayaza, a prestigious girls' schools. But just as I approached A-Level, another blow came. My uncle passed on," she recalls.

Opia tried to continue with her education by working as a housemaid but the pay was too little. She dropped out of school in Senior Four. Yet she refused to surrender to despair.

Planting seeds of change

Opia enrolled at Arua School of Comprehensive Nursing on government sponsorship.

"At the time, we did not struggle so much with tuition. The government paid for everything. After completing the course, I was hired as a nurse at Adjumani Hospital, where I worked for four years," she says.

Opia then proceeded to Lacor School of Nursing and Midwifery to upgrade her skills. By the time she returned to Adjumani, nursing was more than a profession to her. It was a calling.

"My father and uncle died from HIV. My uncle had Kaposi sarcoma. That memory was in me, even today. I treasured working on the ward where there are many chronic conditions, including HIV and diabetes," she says.

In 2009, Opia initiated the diabetic and hypertension clinic at Adjumani Hospital. She also started the hospital's HIV clinic. However, the fact that patients with chronic illnesses were discharged with no follow-up



disturbed her.

"They go home with overwhelming pain and as a result, start cursing the day they were born. They attribute their illnesses to something they did in their past. So, with some colleagues, who included Dr Dominic Drametu, the District Health Officer (DHO) of Adjumani, and Solomon Mawadri, a senior community development officer, I convened a meeting," she explains.

From that discussion emerged Peace Hospice Adjumani. The team conducts home visits, provides palliative care, talks to adolescents about reproductive health, and has introduced sustainable livelihood programmes.

In the meantime, Opia decided to go back to school. First, she pursued Administrative Law at Uganda Christian University. Then, she obtained a degree in Palliative Care at Makerere University before enrolling for a Master's in Public Health at Gulu University.

"Today, my tasks are broad. I do not only talk about health. Every week, I go to the radio to sensitise people against gender-based violence (GBV)," she says.

In 2022, Opia initiated the Madi Sub-Region Cancer Run after noticing a surge in late-stage cancer cases.

"Every day, I would receive two or three new cases. The majority come at stage three or four. The Run attracted over 1,000 participants and raised funds to support 15 patients needing biopsies in Gulu and Kampala," she says.

The numbers

Since 2009, Peace Hospice Adjumani has enrolled about 7,879 patients. Currently, about 456 patients are actively under care, drawn from Adjumani, Moyo, Obongi, and parts of Amuru district.

"Some patients went back to the Creator. Some survived. Some never returned for follow-up. Palliative care is not about death and dying; we use a holistic approach which encompasses physical, psychological, social, and spiritual care," she clarifies.

On the frontline of COVID-19

When COVID-19 struck Adjumani in 2020, panic spread quickly. The first case was identified in the reception center of Nyumanzi Refugee Settlement.

"The community wanted to lynch the patient. I contacted the then DHO of Obongi District and requested for a police escort and protective gear. I wanted to rescue that patient. During that time, my team and I were quarantined with the patients," she narrates.

Concerned about her colleagues' mental health, she wrote funding proposals.

"We got support for six months—fuel for bikes, nutrition, and smartphones so staff could talk to their families. No one died then from Covid in our district. The spread was minimal," she says with pride.

A Message to orphans

Opia urges young people to work hard, control adolescent impulses, and seek productive activities.

"During holidays, go dig or lay bricks. Learn to knit and sell the products. A girl who lives in my home earned Shs300,000 during the holidays by selling juice at the hospital. Let us work towards success and make positive friends. Negativity will pull you down," she says.

In Adjumani District, where poverty, chronic illness, and limited opportunities persist, Opia stands as living proof that adversity can be a launching pad rather than a life sentence.

Her journey - from orphanhood to healer, from molokony vendor to master's degree holder, from nurse to political aspirant, has become woven into the district's collective memory.

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