

From begging on streets to Makerere graduation

Against odds. Born without limbs and taken to the streets at five years old, Fatuma Nabuulime, aka, Wonder Gal nearly dropped out of school. She has graduated university degree.

BY NOELINE NABUKENYA

Wonder Gal, born Fatuma Nabuulime, is among the hundreds of students who were conferred degrees during the week-long 76th graduation ceremony at Makerere University in Kampala. Born without hands and legs in Kisekka Village, Kisekka Sub-county, Lwengo District, Nabuulime was born into a family of subsistence farmers with a very humble background.

"The situation was horrible. Even getting what to eat was another hustle on its own," Nabuulime said. Her father later separated from her mother, leaving her in the care of a single parent.

As a housewife, her mother struggled even more. Finding money to cater to the children's needs and putting food on the table became extremely difficult.

Street life

At around five years old, a distant relative living in Kampala approached her mother and offered to take her in, promising to cater to her needs and enroll her in school. She never imagined she would instead become a beggar.

"That was my first time coming to Kampala. Upon reaching, the following day, I was taken to the streets to start begging," she recalls.

The money she collected fed a family of more than five members. She would hit the streets as early as 7am, targeting people heading to work, and remain there until late evening. Food and other basic needs came from what she collected.

The 26-year-old explains that street children are often used as "projects" by individuals who exploit them to solicit money from the public, offering food in return as their "salary".

After some time, she was taken back to the village to visit her mother. From their conversations, her mother appeared to know what she was doing in Kampala but did not seem bothered.

"Actually, she told that relative to give her part of the money and build a house at home because I was earning a lot from the streets," she added.

Despite mostly staying at home, the relative eventually

Arcade, Wandegaya, Lugogo, and the Shoprite area on Ben Kiwanuka Street, begging.

After about four years of begging, she finally started school, which reduced the hours she spent on the streets. She would beg in the morning before school and again in the evening after classes. Her education journey began in Kalerwe.

"That was my daily routine. I would only spend the whole day on the streets during weekends since on Saturdays and Sundays we were at home."

Realising it was a lucrative activity, her mother decided to take her back from the relative when she reached Primary Two, since she was receiving none of the money.

"At first, my relatives would stay at a distance watching over me, but later they started hiring people to carry me when I needed to ease myself and to give me food."

While in the village, her mother tried to enroll her back in school, but nearby schools refused to admit her because of her disability. Those willing to accept her were far away and expensive.

She skipped two terms without studying. Due to the difficult conditions at home, the family eventually decided she should return to the streets. Another relative, who was on good terms with her mother, brought her back to Kampala.

Returning to the streets

This time, the money she collected paid rent, school fees, food, and other necessities.

"We changed the trick. I would go with books to the streets, and if people asked, I would tell them I was looking for school fees," she said.

In 2011, Mr

son, alongside Pastor Grace Kintu from US2UG4LYE, an NGO, approached her and offered to take her to school on condition that she left the streets.

"I loved being at school and since my main intention was getting a sponsor, I did not hesitate. I just shared the contact of my brother, and we coordinated with the sponsor, who took me to a school in Masaka," she recalls.

The fifth-born resumed her education at Jireh Children's Centre in Masaka, where she faced numerous challenges.

As the only learner with a disability at the school, she was isolated by fellow pupils. Hunger nearly forced her to drop out.

"When I went back home for holidays, because I had grown thin, my mother told me to drop out of school, arguing that even if I don't

study, I can still live," she narrates. But her passion for education kept calling.

She sat her Primary Leaving Examinations in 2014 and scored Aggregate 21. Her benefactor secured her admission to Yessu Akwagala High School in Kyamulibwa, Kalungu District, where she studied Senior One and Senior Two before joining Hope Comprehensive High School in Kalungu to complete O-Level.

Despite studying in schools not designed for learners with disabilities and facing numerous challenges, she persevered and obtained a Third Grade with Aggregate 47.

From Senior Three, she started living with her sponsor's children in Kalungu.

The "Wonder Gal" moniker

While in high school, the director of Hope High School was amazed by her independence and ability to perform tasks on her own. She could use a computer, write and actively participate in school activities just like other students.

Her determination and ability inspired the director to name her "Wonder Gal."

When the school published its annual magazine, she was given a full-page feature.

After Senior Four, she pursued her A-Level studies in the same district, where she experienced one of the most difficult times.

While in Senior Five, she relied on a friend who was two classes below her to push her wheelchair to classrooms. Evening prep classes would go on until 11pm.

One day, while revising, she dozed off. The bell rang for students to return to the dormitories, but no one woke her up. It was only later that night that the school gatekeeper, who was switching off classroom lights, found her asleep.

"I felt like quitting, but since I had no option apart from studying, I played it cool and kept pushing," she said.

Wonder Gal sat her Uganda Advanced Certificate of Education (UACE) in 2021 among the Covid-19 cohort assessed using the 2020 examinations. She obtained three principal passes and was admitted under the government scholarship scheme for students with disabilities to pursue a Bachelor of Social Work and Social Administration at the main campus of Makerere University.

At university and on TikTok

Unlike other students living with disabilities, Nabuulime could not stay at Mary Stuart Hall due to her personal hygiene needs. She required a self-contained room. With support from donors and government allowances of Shs750,000 per semester, she stayed in hostels in Kikoni throughout her university studies.

"Midway my course, I started selling earrings to peers," she said.

Nabuulime later joined TikTok and, in 2024, began live streaming with the intention of motivating others and building a following. Initially, she simply interacted with viewers.

Later, after realising she could earn rewards from live streams, she began peeling matooke during her sessions to stay active and engage viewers longer.

Her live streams sometimes last up to six hours, during which she reads comments while peeling. The food is later prepared and distributed to needy people in Kampala and Wakiso slums.

Today, Wonder Gal has more than 810,000 followers on TikTok and over three million likes.

Drawing from her life experience, she hopes to start an organisation to support people living with disabilities by providing shelter, food and access to education.

AT A GLANCE

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Quick take. Wonder Gal likes watching movies which are based on true stories. For example, *A Walk to Remember* and *Remember Me*.

She also has read several books including *Poor Dad Rich Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki, and *Wonder* by R.J. Palacio.

Favourite food: Matooke and meat or chicken stew

Advice to PWDs: People take PWDs for granted but they should always work to prove them wrong. They should keep pushing and

