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Cover Story

At 82, she earned PhD and that's just one chapter of her story

Wanjira stands as proof that learning has no expiry date, and the most compelling journeys are those that wade through valleys of sacrifice to reach the peak

anja Mbuthia
e EastAfrican

For someone counting down to her 83rd birthday in a few days, Mary Wanjira Mbuthia Bishota is sharp, athletic, and witty es sparkle with the quiet confi someone who has lived sever es in one – teacher, Girl Guide r, farmer, polyglot, business wyer and, as of November in Public Law.

ation from the Open Univer nia was not only a person it also a testament to a re that refused to be defined e, age, or societal expec

y begins in the green mbu, Kenya, the first lygamous family that, ted as a cohesive unit. rvant and an agricul tured in her a deep ion.

e magazines with he recalls, explain the mortarboard ficial graduation the other side

ucation works." row into a life

owever, was e joined the rs' Training tory chose Girl Guides ed at the Nairobi.

a weighty decision. She would leave regular school and train as a teacher, thereby earning an income sooner to support her siblings' education. It was a sacrifice that would redirect, but never diminish, her dreams.

"I did not want to go for teaching initially because I wanted to be a nurse," she says. But her father persuaded her, citing the noble path of figures like Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, Mwalimu Jeremiah Nyaga and Jomo Kenyatta.

She excelled at Kiambu Teachers' College and became a dedicated P2 teacher, first at a school attached to the college itself and later at Maria Goretti Primary School Mang'u, where she rose to the position of deputy headteacher, after qualifying as a P1 teacher, after her Cambridge School Certificate - GCE Ordinary Level, in 1966.

Even while teaching, the itch for learning persisted. She earned the Cambridge School Certificate through the British Tutorial College correspondence courses.

Life then took a romantic turn during a visit to one of her cousins, a law lecturer at the University of Dar es Salaam. There, she met a charismatic young lawyer, Deusdedit Mujwahuzi Kagisa Bishota, fresh from studies in Dublin and London, and a courtship ensued, leading to marriage and a move to Tanzania.

This move began a vibrant, peripatetic chapter. In Tanzania, she joined Mtendeni Primary School as a teacher though not for long. Her husband left for Harvard Law School University to further his studies and Wanjira, expecting their first child, Furaha Bishota, now a renowned fashion entrepreneur in Kenya, accompanied him. When her husband took a sabbatical at Harvard,



Wanjira Bishota at her graduation last year. Picture: Pool

chusetts, USA, to better balance future work and family life.

"I told my husband 'I think, I need time for my children and I don't think teaching will give me that'," she says.

She wanted a scenario where work time was work time and home time was home time. She did not want to bring marking and preparation work home.

After the collapse of the EAC in 197 looking for greener pastures, the couple moved to West Africa for her husband to work at the African Development Bank in 1980. As a diplomat's spouse in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, formal employment was restricted, so Wanjira's entrepreneurial and academic spirit soared. She first mastered French, earning a Senior Teachers' Diploma Certificate in



Law scholar Dr Mary Bishota and her family at her graduation ceremony. Picture: Pool

ta, and a shortage of supervisors at the university meant feedback could tak months and, at times, up to a year, they were overwhelmed with the n bers of students under their sup sion.

"And you know what that m That you cannot continue with per without the green light f supervisor." This meant that more time studying, for the than she would have wish kept the spirit alive and n pervisors at times, where essary, especially the P her goodwill to see h pervisor, astonished t asked why she kept was simple: "I'm n son who can give see the end of th decide to do."

In Novembe Draped in her awarded her the oldest w izen Certi on the Co 2025.



Furaha Bishota, founder of the Cocoon brand, in Nairobi. Picture: File

Tragedy struck when her husband became bedridden for 10 years due to paraplegia, paralysis affecting the lower half of the body. Yet, even while caring for him, he encouraged her to continue with her studies.

When he, a doctorate degree became more than a goal; it was a covenant with her younger self.

"It was all the time nagging me. Let me prove that I can do it. I can read to those higher degrees I didn't leave school because I'm stupid!"

Her research focus was both personal and prescient. Her thesis title was: "Evaluation of the Legal and Regulatory Framework for Consumer Protection in Mainland Tanzania's Digital Economy."

She explains her justification with the clarity of a seasoned businesswoman: "We looked at the business and realised we are no longer in the brick and tar era. Business is now digital. Your body is immune to digital s Even with me, if I am doing b line, I may turn out to be a ing cheated."

She saw that as consu online, consumers in T ywhere else in the wo ble to fraud and cha tions scattered ac

Her thesis

Dr Bishota's thesis analysed initiatives from different legal jurisdictions such as Tanzania, Australia, United Kingdom, Malaysia, Mauritius, the European Union Countries (Directives), South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya. All these jurisdictions have already put their consumer protection legislation in place except the United Republic of Tanzania. Hence, the argument