How Ssenganda turned frustration into school

For Nabillah Mbogo Ssenganda, what began as a mother's frustration with long school commutes grew into an inclusive, child-centred learning space in Gayaza, shaped by faith, purpose, and a commitment to supporting both children and their mothers. She shares her story with **Joan Salmon**.

Nabillah Mbogo Ssenganda during the interview . PHOTO/JOAN SALMON

While some businesses are built from business plans, others are built out of necessity. The latter explains the birthing of Twinbrook Elementary School in 2014, after Mr Jaffa Ssenganda and his wife Nabillah Mbogo Ssenganda moved to Gayaza around 2007–2008.

For six years, while the family had a place to call home, the children still needed to endure the long drive to Kampala to study. Ms Mbogo did not like the arrangement but had to go through with it because, as a parent, your biggest concern is always your children: where they will study, who will take care of them, and whether they are safe.

"At the time, there were very few schools in Gayaza, especially for young children. We had to drive all the way to Kampala every day just to take them to school. It was exhausting, stressful, and unsustainable," she says.

That daily struggle planted a thought in her mind: What if we created a solution, not just for ourselves, but for other parents facing the same challenge?

Another paradox was that most schools were religious-based. While that is not wrong, Ms Mbogo saw a gap for a more inclusive school. Twinbrook would be a space where every child felt they belonged, be they Christian, Muslim, Catholic, or Seventh-day Adventist.

"As a Muslim woman, many people automatically assume that anything I start will be centred around Islam. But I wanted something different. Twinbrook is non-denominational. It is a place for all children. That inclusivity was very important to me," she says.

Building blocks

Apart from being a mother, Ms Mbogo loves taking care of children.

"There is something about watching a child grow. It is in the small milestones; the way they learn, how they respond to love and care. It opens your heart differently," she says.

However, this entrepreneur had studied Information Technology in Business and CISCO networking, with her focus on building a career in the IT space. Education was not part of the plan.

But life has a way of redirecting you. All around her were teachers; her father, a Sheikh, and her husband. Teaching was beckoning.

"I resisted teaching because I did not like how teachers were looked at then and their way of life. But eventually, I accepted it. And once I did, everything began to align," she says.

Before starting Twinbrook, Ms Mbogo had also volunteered in a kindergarten during her time in Maryland, USA, while her husband was studying. That experience left an indelible mark, and she later transferred those lessons to Twinbrook. While the school was started out of necessity, Ms Mbogo thought it wise to study early childhood education to better understand children. She needed to go beyond being a mother.

"Early childhood is the foundation. It is where everything, character, confidence, curiosity, begins. If you get it right at that stage, you shape a whole human being. That realisation made me commit fully," she says.

Beyond education

Mothers were also at the heart of the enterprise. Many are building careers, running businesses, and chasing their dreams, yet society still expects them to carry the full responsibility of raising children. This creates pressure.

One of the biggest challenges is trust when it comes to childcare, as many parents are not comfortable leaving children with housekeepers. Ms Mbogo wanted to give them a stable place where they could leave their children without worry.

"Twinbrook is not just a school. It is a safe space. A place where a mother can leave her child and go to work without fear. That way, they can grow, dream, and move forward," she says.

2014 FOUNDED SCHOOL

But life does not end at 5pm. Parents have meetings that go beyond school hours, get stuck in traffic, travel, or are building careers and businesses that demand more of their time.

"We introduced both day and night care to support that reality. Being intentional about that, we neither punish parents for being late nor add charges just because a child stayed into the night. Our goal is to support, not stress them further," she says.

Her staff work in shifts, so children are always cared for by people who are alert, present, and ready, ensuring comfort for both the child and the parent.

Managing a school requires tact, and you learn to become everything, from manager and leader to listener. It gets even tougher with preschool, where the work is demanding and staff turnover is often high.

When she recruits someone, Ms Mbogo takes time to understand them; what they want, what they are capable of, and their expectations. That creates a clear platform to agree on roles and responsibilities from the start.

"I believe in respecting my staff, paying them on time, and treating them as human beings, not just workers. When people feel valued and understood, they are more likely to stay. At the same time, I set boundaries," she says.

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> – Nabillah Mbogo, entrepreneur.

Despite being the proprietor of a school, Ms Mbogo remains a wife, mother, and homemaker. Balancing these roles is no walk in the park, as each demands full attention.

"You can be physically at home, but emotionally absent. Your husband feels it and so do the children. Home is not just the people but also the roles, such as preparing meals, cleaning, and managing people who help you. It is a whole system," she says.

There is no magic formula, but she relies on prioritisation, patience, perseverance, and being intentional about what matters in each moment.

Mentorship

While Ms Mbogo has a tough skin, there have been times she has doubted herself. She has learnt that growth comes from learning at every stage of life.

She draws inspiration from other women who have proved strong, disciplined, and focused, including Zaujja Ndifuna of Mbogo High School and Zulaika Kabuye, a former head teacher of Nabisunsa Girls School.

"Confidence does not come from knowing everything. It comes from being willing to learn, be it from others or by digging for knowledge," she says.

She values mentorship, networks, and community, participating in women's groups, old girls' groups, and a Muslim wives' platform where she learns and shares.

She also believes in practical empowerment, running a demonstration farm where women freely learn skills such as poultry, dairy farming, and vegetable growing. At Twinbrook, she creates opportunities for women, especially female parents, to supply the school with goods and services.

"For me, empowerment is not just talking but creating opportunities," she says.

Today, Twinbrook Elementary School has grown from a kindergarten to include a primary section, which began in 2016.

Advice

To young women feeling stuck, Ms Mbogo says never wait for the perfect moment, as it may never come.

"If you know and trust Allah, it all works out. Unfortunately, many of us doubt Allah. We will only thrive, even in tough circumstances, when we wholly trust Him and our abilities," she says.

She also encourages resilience and starting from scratch when necessary.

"That is why I am never afraid to start from scratch. I know that Allah has got me," she says.

BACKGROUND

Challenges

- Long daily school commutes before starting the school
- Limited early childhood education options in Gayaza
- Balancing business, family, and home responsibilities
- Staff retention in early childhood education
- Overcoming perceptions about teaching as a career

What Makes Twinbrook Different?

- Inclusive, non-denominational environment
- Focus on early childhood development
- Combines education with childcare support
- Day and night care for working parents
- Emphasis on safety and trust
- Encourages practical parenting support

Lessons from Nabillah Mbogo

- Start with the problem you experience
- Do not wait for the perfect moment
- Be willing to learn and adapt
- Build something that serves others
- Balance purpose with patience and perseverance
- Trust your faith and your abilities

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