

# PEOPLE

As a child, Byaruhanga suffered discrimination which inspired her to work hard for the girl-child

## From cassava seller to proud owner of a secondary school

By Sylvia Juuko

**W**HEN I was growing up, I got bitter with the problems around me especially my own relatives who didn't value girl-child education. They told my father that he was wasting money educating girls instead of marrying us off to get bride price," recounts Beatrice Ayuru Byaruhanga.

"It was sad that the clan valued bride price more than education. At the time my father was supporting us girls, the elders were scheming to get animals," she says.

"I wanted to prove to the men that I can make it and perform better than the boys. I had a vision during my A-levels of setting up a school. It wasn't refined then but because of the problems I encountered going to school in my region in northern Uganda, I worked hard to ensure I got good grades to study education at the university," she says.

**When was the dream born?**  
Byaruhanga was the first student in her school to go to Makerere University through private sponsorship to study education and scooped an award from her school. At the university she kept her dream alive.

"The late Betty Okwir (former minister) came to university and told us not to think about government employment. She asked us to embark on fulfilling our vision.

That is when I knew I had to set up a university. But I decided to start with a nursery primary and a secondary school at a go but focusing on the university as an end goal," she says.

**Lira Integrated School**  
Ten years ago, 39-year-old Byaruhanga's dream came to pass. She set up Lira Integrated School (LIS) to challenge the mindset of those who did not value educating the girl-child in northern Uganda.

It comprises a nursery primary and secondary school with a student population of 1500.

This investment worth \$770,000 (about sh154m) currently has a turnover of \$480,000 (about sh960m) per year.

She started the mixed boarding school with four pupils in nursery section, 10 pupils in the primary section and 203 in secondary.

Today, the school boasts of 180 toddlers in nursery, 560 in primary and 941 in the secondary section.

The school has 14 classes, each with the capacity of 40 pupils. There are 12 classrooms in the secondary section, each with a capacity of 50 students.

The nursery has three classes with the capacity of 60 pupils. The school has blocks to house



dfcu's Theopista Sekitto holds the Empretec Women in Business Award which Byaruhanga (R) won

a boarding school with 23 pupils in primary and 912 in the secondary section.

LIS puts special emphasis on science subjects. It has a fully equipped computer resource centre and has a sports centre, the only one of its kind in northern Uganda.

The school also has a brass band, a swimming pool and a fish farm that generates earnings of about \$100,000 (about sh200m) per year.

Byaruhanga notes that her unique approach to the curriculum has enabled her students excel, placing the school among the three best schools in northern Uganda. Over 160 of her students have gone to university.

"We do not concentrate on formal education but more on informal education. We know that each child has unique abilities so we nurture them.

Our students are different when they go for holidays. They are confident about themselves and seek ways to earn an income or set up businesses," she explains.

She has ensured that the girl to boy ratio is the same in her school and also finds time to mentor the girls by sharing her experience.

**The Women Business Award**

On April 28, Byaruhanga beat nine top finalists to get the coveted UN Trade and Development Agency's 2010 Empretec Women in Business Award because of her efforts.

She received the award of \$6,000 (about sh120m) study tour offered by Margarita Cedeño de Fernández, the First Lady of the Dominican Republic.

Commenting about the award, Byaruhanga said: "I am grateful, humbled and proud to be a

**She beat nine top finalists to get the coveted UN 2010 Empretec Women in Business Award**

woman from a war-ravaged area, struggling to make a difference in the lives of war-ravaged children. This is God's blessing." She says she was intimidated by the finalists, most of who were handling international business and more exposed than her.

"These ladies were confident about winning and were talkative. I was humble and kept quiet.

"But when they read my name, I screamed. I wasn't prepared for a speech. After my testimony, people were moved to tears. The Secretary General UNCTAD said he had never heard such an incredible speech in the two years of the competition," she recounts.

**Supportive family**

She admits that it has been an uphill struggle often characterised by self-doubt and tears along the way. But she cannot underestimate the support of her father, husband, siblings and children, her members of staff, dfcu Bank and Enterprise Uganda.

"My husband has been very supportive and patient. I have run to him on many occasions sobbing. But he kept me focused," says this mother of six

children aged between four and 19 years.

It was her father's gesture of giving her an acre of land which she cultivated with the help of her siblings and planted cassava, which set the stage for the realisation of her dream.

**Determination paid off**

"When I graduated, I set up a small business selling cassava and preparing eats for students at Comboni College where I was teaching. It was from these savings of about sh100,000 that Lira Integrated was born," she says.

Byaruhanga recalls that, sitting in the scorching sun and comments from her peers wondering why a degree-holder was embarrassing herself by engaging in petty business did not deter her.

"They had no idea I was earning sh50,000 in net profits per week, an amount they didn't earn. Interestingly, when I set up the school, some of them were my pioneer staff."

She used the savings from her initial cassava harvest to set up a wheelbarrow business. She hired out wheelbarrows to men in the bus park.

From the 25 wheelbarrows, she earned sh500 per day. She was later given the business, to manage the canteen at her teacher training college in Comboni.

"When I had accumulated sh700,000 in savings, I went to my father who had promised me the land for the school. He thought it was too early to start but he kept his promise.

"When my clan learnt of the development, they called for a meeting to rebuke my father. They wondered if he had gone mad to give me land, a gesture unheard of at that time in my

clan. "I sat in that meeting with my tears flowing, but my father defended me saying whoever wanted to kill me would have to kill him first," she recounts.

Because she was a hands-on person, she participated in fetching water to make the first bricks. She also hired help for the burning of the bricks.

**Good business practices**

She recalls that dfcu Bank's intervention with a loan of sh26m in 2003 facilitated the expansion of her school. The bank further supported her with more funds.

Theopista Sekitto, the head of corporate retail banking at dfcu, points out that banking in the traditional manner is not sustainable anymore.

"When it comes to credit, you have to design programmes that suit customer needs.

"If we had followed the conventional guidelines supporting clients at that time, there is no way Byaruhanga would have qualified for a loan," she says.

It was upon recommendation from dfcu Bank that she got training from Enterprise Uganda.

"If it wasn't for the training by Enterprise Uganda, my business would have collapsed by now. I was carrying the burden of doing everything, bursar, head teacher of three sections etc," she says.

After the training, she implemented systems, created policies, involved her staff in decision making and has improved customer care.

Charles Ocici, the executive director Enterprise Uganda, notes that Byaruhanga's global award was a manifestation of the winning formula for private sector development.

"The philosophy is a simple one, proper teaming business development services and put in mindset ready to sprout and back it with suitable credit facilities. You create something that is unstoppable," he said at a recent meeting to recognise Byaruhanga's achievement.

He said Byaruhanga implemented the five pillars of running a winning enterprise that include; competent staff, marketing and customer care, operations, finance and leadership.

Byaruhanga says the six acres of land adjacent to her school will house the university which should be opened by the end of the year.

The award propelled her to a global level, with officials from Brazil and Botswana requesting her to visit their countries to speak to their girls and women.

Byaruhanga, who is an embodiment of resilience, is now confident that she can use her institutions to make a difference in the lives of the girl-child.