

PAKASA

HOW SICK CHILD INSPIRED THE BIRTH OF PLAY CLAY BUSINESS Entrepreneurship, pages 36-37

TURNING WASTE INTO A FASHION LABEL

Juliet Namujju, the founder and director of Kimuli Fashionability, a multi award-winning fashion house in Maya, Mpigi district, has made a name for herself internationally, through recycling trash to create beauty. She shared her story with **MAUREEN NAKATUDE**

As a child, Juliet Namujju, the founder and director of Kimuli Fashionability, a multi award-winning fashion house in Maya, Mpigi district, struggled to understand why people with disability were discriminated against when her father lost his legs.

“My father was involved in an accident and his legs were amputated. I recall the pain in his eyes when he could no longer earn a living for his family. Worse still, his friends and relatives discriminated and always left him out of social gatherings until he passed on,” she said.

For the 26-year-old, her father’s pain birthed her business, Kimuli Fashionability. It is a brand which does not discriminate against people with disability.

The company which was set up in 2017, turns waste into fashionable items.

“It offers employment opportunities to people with disability and youths through turning waste such as cement bags, polythene bags as well as milk and sugar sachets, into waterproof garments and accessories,” Namujju says.

The products include raincoats, jackets, shirts, dresses as well as laptop and shopping bags and those



Most of the people who work in Kimuli Fashionability are impaired

KEEPING UP WITH TRENDS

Being open-minded and creative is the first key to surviving in the fashion world, Namujju says. She explains that it starts with listening to the customers’ needs.

In order to stay relevant, one needs to keep up-to-date with the trends.

for school-going children. They also make jewellery such as earrings and necklaces.

Namujju says she employs 25 people. Of these, some have physical disability, a few have hearing impairment while others have speech challenges.

JOINING THE FASHION WORLD

When Namujju’s father died, her grandmother who was a seamstress, took her on.

“Whenever my grandmother

disposed of fabric offcuts, I would pick them up and sew them into flowers, dolls and dresses for myself,” she says.

In 2015, Namujju did a certificate in fashion and design. The following year, she joined the Social Innovation Academy in Mpigi, Uganda, where her desire to set up a business was nurtured.

“The academy empowers marginalised youths at no cost to find employment,” Namujju says. She spent four years there.

In 2017, Namujju’s mentors at the academy encouraged her to start her own enterprise. The academy provided sh50,000 as capital and a sewing machine. She used the capital to buy materials from Kampala to start making her products.

At the academy, Namujju met Zahara Nabirye, who was passionate about environmental conservation and working with people with disability. The duo partnered and formed Kimuli Fashionability.

The business name started with Namujju’s love for flowers and beauty. “We wanted to transform what people saw as trash into beautiful things like flowers, while ‘Fashionability’ is a blend of fashion and inclusion of persons with disability.

Namujju graduated from the academy in 2019, but still returns for mentorship to push her business further.

Regarding the waste, Namujju says they train and employ marginalised youth from rural and urban communities to collect it. The youth are paid sh2,500 per kilogramme of waste.

The workers wash and clean the materials, with some used at the workshop and the rest distributed to persons with disability to make the products from their homes.

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In 2020, Namujju says although COVID-19 disrupted their activities, they found ways of working from home.

The company had the challenge of communicating with their clients who have hearing impairment and thus had to remove their masks.

“That was dangerous because COVID-19 was still rampant.

For safety and to ease communication,

Namujju

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NAMUJJU DISCOVERED GOLD IN TRASH

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we came up with a transparent face mask, which was made with recycled polythene and African fabric, to enable people to easily communicate using signs," Namujju says.

She says as soon as the mask was advertised online, they got a large order from Diversability, an organisation in the US. She says the organisation works with people with disability. They ordered over 800 face masks, with each going for \$3.

That order opened doors for other opportunities. Namujju says the mask was featured on international news cable CNN's programme, *Inside Africa*.

Namujju reveals that they are also still experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. She attributes this to losing some of their customers due to loss of employment.

Namujju also explains that since their revenues were reduced, seven workers were laid off and adds that they are working on reinstating them as the company stabilises.

AWARDS WON

In 2018, Kimuli Fashionability won the Ye! Community Youth Entrepreneur Awards, Uganda. She says although there was no cash prize, the award gave them media exposure.

That same year, Namujju won an award from Green Preneur in South Korea. "I was awarded as a project that has fought for climate change in Uganda and got a prize of \$5,000. The certificate was signed by Ban Ki-moon, the former secretary general of UN," she says.

Namujju also scooped the best Tailoring and Fashion Business Award in South Africa in 2019.

In 2020, Namujju won the Tony Elumelu Foundation Entrepreneurship programme and got capital of \$5,000, which was injected in the company.

In 2021, the company won the Creative Innovation and Technology Award in Nigeria. That same year, Namujju says, the company won a Commonwealth Innovation award for inclusive and reusable face masks for people who cannot afford them. The award came with 3,000 pounds to distribute masks freely to impaired persons and train more persons for sustainability and independence.

Still last year, Namujju was among



Namujju's award-winning fashion designs



Some of the products of Kimuli Fashionability

MISTAKES AND LESSONS

One of the major mistakes Namujju regrets making was appointing two young men as directors in the company, after only a month of working with them.

"One of them quit unceremoniously because of the workload. The second was not giving the company the time and attention it deserved," she says.

Namujju advised them to opt out, but they refused and the matter is being sorted through legal channels. She says she has since learnt to ensure that one works for one to two years before they can be considered directors in the company.

Another mistake Namujju made was not paying attention to quality, which cost them a large order.

"I worked with a volunteer from the academy, who got market for our products in Germany at a business called the Berlin shop."

They ordered 200 make-up bags. Namujju borrowed money from the academy to buy the raw materials and acquire a second sewing machine. Together with her team, she made the bags and sent them to Germany. However, the customer took only two and sent the rest back.

"The team and I first shed tears and then worried about how I would pay the debt," she says.

At the start, Namujju did everything on her own, but has since incorporated tailors, designers, supervisors and salespeople. She says their products have never been rejected again.

the winners of the Top 40 under 40 influencing the nation, a competition that ran in *Sunday Vision*. She stood out for turning waste into fashion and employing persons with disability.

ACHIEVEMENTS

Namujju's proudest achievement is having both local and international market for her products.

In 2017, she was selected as a panellist and speaker for the Fair and

Sustainable Fashion in Moscow and Germany. The brand has also been recognised worldwide by appearing in international fashion shows. For example, in 2018, Namujju's products, like the raincoat made from recycled polythene bags and sacks, were selected to be showcased in the New York Fashion week. The products have also been showcased on fashion runways in Germany, Holland, Netherlands, Italy, Egypt and Nigeria.

In 2019, Namujju says they organised their second charity inclusiveness fashion show at the academy, with the models being people with disability and showcased recycled garments made from plastic waste.

EARNINGS, LABOUR

The company employs 12 people who earn salaries. Namujju says the people with disability who work from home

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Zahara Nabirye, co-director

Namujju is kind and ready to teach others through her experience. she is very professional in what she does and very creative in all her designs. she ensures that every item is perfect for the customer.



Deborah Nankabirwa, garbage collector

I sew the things we get from garbage. I also train youth to pick the garbage like cement and polythene bags.

Etienne Salborn, founder, Social Innovation Academy

I have known Namujju since she joined seven years ago. She was timid back then, not knowing the potential hidden within her. She has since transformed her painful experience of being an orphan and living in abject poverty into her drive for social change and founded "Kimuli Fashionability."



As a young female entrepreneur, Namujju has become an inspiration for girls and women and sets an example of how challenges can be transformed into opportunities. She is also contributing to ending plastic waste and creating an inclusive society.

Arthur Woniala, client

I am intrigued by Namujju's creativity and passion for skilling women, young girls and persons with disability. Her awards are a testimony that when you work hard, you are rewarded for your efforts.

are paid per number of products made. In a good month, Namujju says she makes between sh2m and sh3m.

PLAN

Namujju dreams of building an inclusive and sustainable eco fashion label in Uganda, with branches all over Africa.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO DO SUCH A BUSINESS?

In case you want to do Namujju's business, she says you need to be interested in fashion and be creative and passionate about it.

You will also need to fall in love with waste because that is where your raw materials come from.

She adds that one has to start small and learn from others in the business.

CHALLENGES

One of the major challenges their company faces is inadequate capital to overhaul its activities.

"We want to start a training centre in Mpigi to equip more people with disability so that they can become trainers," she says.

Namujju also says they want to give their trainees sewing machines when they are financially able.

Another challenge is people not understanding the uniqueness of their projects. Namujju says when one wears the rain coat made from polythene and cement bags, one attracts odd stares. She believes Ugandans can buy such items if only they change their mindset.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

When waste is collected from the community, not only does it leave the environment clean, but it is also a source of employment.

Namujju urges community members not to throw away any waste through sensitisation.

"We encourage people to have different containers for the different waste, such as papers, plastic, glass and organic products," she says. "This is to make it easier for those going to recycle it."

The business has so far trained more than 90 people with disability as tailors, Namujju says, adding that they have upcycled 50,000kg of plastic waste into garments and accessories.