

NAZZIWA MAKES WIGS FOR CANCER PATIENTS

CHARITY BIRTHED IN GRIEF

DIANA NAZZIWA'S GRANDMOTHER WAS DIAGNOSED WITH STAGE THREE CANCER. ON A RANDOM DAY, WITHOUT ANY ANNOUNCEMENT, NAZZIWA SHOWED UP WITH FOOD FOR HER. THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME SHE SAW HER GRANDMOTHER WITHOUT HER ONCE BEAUTIFUL NATURAL HAIR; THE SOURCE OF HER PRIDE, ESTEEM AND CONFIDENCE. NAZZIWA RESOLVED TO START MAKING WIGS, NOT JUST FOR HER GRANDMOTHER (WHO IS NOW DECEASED), BUT FOR OTHER PATIENTS BATTLING THE DISEASE. SHE NARRATED HER STORY TO AHMAD MUTU

Diana Nazziwa had only flirted with wigs at a salon where her mother used to send her during the school holidays to keep busy. After school, she worked at Makerere University as a secretary. Then, her grandmother was diagnosed with stage three cancer. During the course of her treatment, Nazziwa's grandmother lost hair and was no longer receptive to visitors.

On a random day, without any announcement, Nazziwa showed up with food for her. That was the first time she saw her grandmother without her once beautiful natural hair; the source of her pride, esteem and confidence.

Realising that Nazziwa had seen her bare

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scalp, she quickly reached out for a scarf and wrapped her head. The old lady then opened up to Nazziwa. The scarf made her sweat, and



Nazziwa fits a wig on a patient's head

would slide off whenever she slept.

"My grandmother explained to me the effects of cancer treatment. I then proposed getting her something to replace the scarf."

Nazziwa hit downtown Kampala, moving from shop to shop to find the perfect wig for her grandmother. However, she could not reconcile her expectations with the actual price of wigs.

"I went to Gazaland [building] and tried on some good ones, but they were expensive, starting at sh500,000. The affordable ones were of bad quality (synthetic) and kept falling off my grandmother's head as they were too big. Others caused her headache because they were too small," she recalls.

The answer at this point was something

custom made. Nazziwa's salon apprenticeship sessions came in handy – she would make the perfect wig for her grandmother.

Nazziwa bought a pair of leggings to act as the elastic base, took the size of her grandmother's head and trimmed it to size. She sewed chunks of hair on it.

"The first one looked funny, she didn't use it, but it fit. Then I redid the wigs and they looked better. That was the start. It was around 2017."

When Nazziwa's grandmother succumbed to breast cancer, it also marked the end of her wig making custom hand-made wigs.

HOW GRANDMOTHER BOOSTED NAZZIWA'S WIG BUSINESS

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She packed all the logistics she had acquired for wig-making and decided to focus on her job at Makerere University. What she did not know was that her late grandmother had garnered quite a following at the Uganda Cancer Institute. She had showed off her wigs to other patients, telling them her granddaughter specially made them for her.

"I remember whenever she went for check-ups, she would wear one of the wigs. And she liked the attention she got from the other patients. The nurses, doctors and patients used to ask where she got her wigs. She would tell them it was her granddaughter who made them," Nazziwa says with a smile.

MAKING WIGS FOR CANCER PATIENTS

After her grandmother passed on, the other patients started to call her for wigs. It took her a while to warm up to the idea because it reminded her of special moments with her grandmother and left her devastated. But that would change two years later, when a nurse at the Uganda Cancer Institute called with a tale that made her reconsider making wigs.

"The nurse called me and said there was a patient just like my grandmother, but in a bad state. She suggested that a good wig would help cheer her up like it was for my grandmother."

A video was shared with Nazziwa of the patient trying on the wig and her cheerful reaction. Seeing the smile on the patient's face prompted her to start making wigs again.

She made five wigs and then visited the cancer institute to ask the patients if any of them needed a wig. She then gave them out randomly.

"Those that were really sick declined, but most said yes. That day, I returned home with over 30 orders from patients who wanted wigs. I realised people really needed the wigs," Nazziwa says.

Nazziwa posted on social media asking people if they wanted wigs for their loved ones battling cancer. She also asked those that knew those fighting the illness to share her contacts. She would donate the wigs.

The advice from her mother was that a wig is a sensitive issue for women and she should, therefore, be sure that her target – cancer patients – are the ones that receive the wigs.

Her mother was right because shortly afterwards, some individuals showed up to get free wigs meant for

Nazziwa saves a percentage of money from the sale of wigs to keep her charity going

cancer patients.

"Five decided to lie. They trimmed off their hair then came to me with bald heads claiming they had cancer; that they were told I was donating wigs. I was shocked. I discovered they were lying after I asked for proof (medical documents) they had cancer. None of them could give me the proof. My mother quizzed one of them and she eventually admitted that she wasn't sick but just wanted a free wig."

Nazziwa says her mother then advised her to consider going to the cancer institute and asking those in charge to guide her on reaching actual patients who deserve the wigs, so as to keep out the fraudsters.

"I target those 25 years and above because there are those that are really young (13-15 years) and

CANCER BURDEN

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates over 35 million new cancer cases in 2050, a 77% increase from the estimated 20 million cases in 2022. The world body says tobacco, alcohol and obesity are key factors behind the increasing incidence of cancer, with air pollution still a key driver of environmental risk factors.

CAUSES OF CANCER

Cancer is a disease that arises from abnormal alterations in the genome (the genetic makeup of cells), and is associated with several risk factors, which are categorised as follows:

- Environmental factors
- Lifestyle factors
- Occupational factors
- Biological agents (infections)
- Genetic defects

OVERVIEW OF CANCER IN UGANDA

- 34,008 new cases of cancer in Uganda per year
- The Uganda Cancer Institute receives only 20% of these cases (6,000 to 7,000)
- 30% of the patients with cancer are HIV-positive
- The majority present in stage III and IV disease. For example, for breast cancer, 71-90% of patients present in stage III and IV

Source: Uganda Cancer Institute and WHO



Nazziwa working on a wig at her studio

those that are old (70-80 years). I target the group that has to go back to work or school, especially university students. Unless the old and young really show interest, I do not prioritise them," she says.

STARTING A COMMERCIAL WIG BUSINESS

Soon, those who saw Nazziwa's work began to want to buy for themselves. Demand for wigs started to come from relatives of cancer patients and medical staff. She decided to immerse herself into the business fully. Her aunt boosted her business when she offered her a sack of wigs she no longer needed.

"I took the wigs home, washed, and coloured some. From that sack, I made six long good human hair wigs of different types – straight, curly and coloured. I picked one of the finished wigs and took it to my aunt. When I told her I had made it from what she gave me, she was impressed."

This aunt connected her to friends and Nazziwa's clientele grew.

"Those mothers had some good money and they supported me. Then I started importing hair from China, upgraded my skills, got some machines. At one point I compared salary from my 8-5 job and what I was receiving from making wigs, and decided to focus on selling wigs because the orders were growing, which meant more earnings."

SUSTAINING THE DONATIONS

Nazziwa continues to donate wigs to cancer patients. She sustains her acts of charity through savings from her wig-making business. At her studio, is a saving box solely for this purpose. She has recently been getting support from some clients after they learn about the donations.

I get a percentage from each sale and drop in the box. "If I sell a wig at sh200,000. I drop sh30,000 in

the savings box. I have never tried to get help from organisations because I wouldn't know where to start," Nazziwa says.

CHALLENGES

Nazziwa says losing some patients to cancer weighs heavily on her emotionally as she builds relationships with them. She says it is not easy to detach emotionally from the cancer patients she meets.

"She observes that seeking training in counselling would enable her to better navigate social interactions with cancer patients, especially since they open up to her about their anxieties and aspirations.

"I would also love to attend counselling lessons to help me understand what to share with them. I know there are counsellors at the hospital, but when they come here, you need the knowledge to know how to have conversations with them. Of course, we talk about nutrition and social life, but I wish I had more knowledge to help them better."

"I also receive patients who come here, talk and I can tell whether they have given up or are on medication and believe they will get better. Because this is a home setting, we talk and joke, and suddenly they reveal their worries about going back home after treatment – their hair gone, a breast gone, whether their children or husbands will see them the same way. Others have to return to work and wonder if they will be wearing scarves. Some are students and worry about how they will go back to school. They will need a wig," she narrates.

Another challenge she faces is finances, which limits the number of wigs she can make for the patients.

Nazziwa plans to reach out to cancer patients outside Kampala, but she says she will do this when she acquires the necessary resources.