

Birungi, NCHE's success story

Education

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Success story: Phenny Birungi

When I called Phenny Birungi, the assistant executive director at the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE) to schedule an interview, he asked if I could make it at 7:30am on a Friday.

I told him I couldn't. We then scheduled the meeting an hour later and when I got to the NCHE offices in Kyambogo, Birungi had put in an hour of work.

The irony of this did not escape me. I am decades younger and have so much to work for but Birungi, who has already seen his family into adulthood, puts in more hours than I do.

And unlike many civil servants, Birungi earns his salary. He is at work by 7:30am every workday and leaves at 5pm, sometimes later. He is efficient, competent, civil and receptive.

So, what shaped Birungi?

His mother. Once, in a bid to dodge school, Birungi thought sitting outside in the open air was more exciting than going to school. And to make sure that he wouldn't go to school, he deliberately lost the pen that was supposed to write his primary two exams. However, his mother foiled his plans when he whacked him and sent him back to school.

"She was as tough as nails," Birungi recalls. His mother's insistence paid off when Birungi joined Nyakasura School in Kabarole; he became a good student. Not only was he excellent in academics, he was an excellent debater (representing his school at the Schools Elocution Competitions at the national level) and a good sportsman (he climbed the Rwenzoris up to the top of Mount Baker).

Birungi was also an ardent reader. His daughter, Eva Kentaro Mugerwa, says he still is. He read a minimum of two books a week while at school. This perhaps explains why he enrolled for Literature in English when he joined the University of East Africa (now Makerere University) in 1966 and embarked on a Masters degree in 1969.

"I was the single student in that class," he says. Did a single student occupy those medium size lecture halls at Makerere and get taught, alone? Yes he did.

"I used to have some of my lectures at the lecturers' homes though," Birungi says. He remembers Margaret MacPherson (who recently passed on) as one of the lecturers whose classes he had at her home.

Birungi held his first job in 1972 at the Public Libraries Board as a trainee librarian, a job he left after three months for a postgraduate diploma in librarianship at the University of Wales. When he completed this diploma, he rejoined the Public Libraries Board, of which he later became a director.

"I did not want to be a director of that body," Birungi says. "It was as if that position was jinxed. Beginning 1964, whoever held it was sacked within two years. I did not want my young career to end by assuming that position," Birungi says.

But he stayed on and in 2003, he lectured librarianship at Kyambogo University before joining the NCHE in 2004. As an assistant executive director, he is in charge of the council's public relations work, documentation (he edits and ensures that the council publications are published and those that need to appear in the Uganda Gazette do appear), librarianship (he ensures that the council's documents are stored) and support service (he organises staff retreats and trainings).

However, he says the work load is too much and yet "age does not help the situation."

"The work I used to do in one day I now do in three," Birungi honestly reveals.

While he believes age has slowed him down, his co-workers are full of praises. Ambassador Yeko Acato, the assistant executive director (Quality Assurance) at NCHE, calls him a "wise manager, who gives good leadership to those under him".

Yet Acato should know considering he's been in the public service for several years, including more than 10 years as a diplomat. Moses Talemwa, a journalist, describes Birungi as "competent, helpful, open and independent minded".

"When I was researching for an article that entailed ranking the universities, he [Birungi] went beyond his call of duty to help me," Talemwa says.

Family

Birungi was born in November 1941 to Philemon Kavuna and Everina Mbasa in Kigezi. His father passed on when he was young. He is married to Sarah Birungi and they have four children. His children say he is a wonderful father. Mugerwa is amazed that even though they are old enough, he still parents them.

"He is caring and loving. He looks out for us, our spouses and children," she says.

Mugerwa also reveals that her father is a sharp dresser. "He would rather have two good quality shirts than a bag-full of trash," she says. Paul Bagyenda, his son says their father sowed seeds of humility, pragmatism and a strong work ethic that encouraged hard work and honesty. "I guess the best measure of anything is whether, given a choice, one would choose the same thing again. We do not choose our parents of

course, but if I had to, I'd choose mine again," Bagyenda says.

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