

A TRIBUTE TO THE LATE JOAN RWABAMANZI EJANGU 1953-2008

It is with great sadness that we, the staff of the UNICEF Uganda Country Office, announce the passing, on 15 October 2008, of Ms. Joan Rwabamanzi Ejangu, Education Officer, Moroto Zonal Office.

Our thoughts and prayers, first and foremost, have been with Joan's family during this difficult period. We share in their loss. But knowing also the joy she brought to so many, and the kind of personal passion and professional dedication she exhibited during her work with UNICEF, it is only fitting that we share with you this tribute to a beautiful life.

To say that the expansion of the UN Girls' Education Initiative (UNGEI) and the Girls' Education Movement (GEM) in Uganda was achieved through Joan's perseverance, creativity and energy would not be an exaggeration. Joan was fully engaged in the national "Go to School, Back to School, Stay in School" campaign in 2007 and 2008 – which you may have read about in these pages – and also played a leading role in the humanitarian response, supported by UNICEF, during the devastating floods of 2007 in eastern Uganda. In these and other instances, those who worked closely with Joan – old staff and new staff – got to know her warmth and generosity.

Joan was called to be a teacher. Education was much more than just a job to her. To educate, and to ensure that children and young people were educated, embodied a life-calling that drew from her a strong and abiding commitment. In her own words, she said, "I want to engage in work that provides opportunities to contribute to the overall development of education in Uganda, and also fulfills my personal passion to champion the rights of all children, especially girls, to education."

Is it any wonder, then, that Joan began her professional career in teaching immediately after graduation from Makerere University's National Teachers College in 1975. That same year, she became a mother and like many modern women, she balanced her career with being a wife and a mother. When the children were still young, and the family tragically lost their father and husband, Joan's deeply spiritual faith sustained her. Although she reached the level of headmistress at Hombay High school, she courageously decided to return to university and graduated with a full Bachelor's degree in Education from Makerere University in 1990. She then took a job as Deputy Headmistress at Kololo Secondary School. A multi-talented, versatile professional, Joan later went on to be Editorial Director of the *Mail* newspaper.

Joan came to UNICEF and WHO, as a valued consultant, in 1998. As a colleague, she excelled at promoting the education of marginalized and disadvantaged children; and she was instrumental in developing the now famous GEM, working with the Forum for African Women Educationalists. She also used her expertise in teaching and curriculum development to facilitate adult-learning, working for Agrivisual Media Forum to mainstream gender into training modules. In 2004 she became an activist, coordinator, advocate and trainer for the UNGEI. Her work with UNICEF cut across many areas, including HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence and violence against children, gender parity in education, psychosocial support, life skills, reproductive health and sanitation. The list of her multiple professional interests and contributions goes on and on.

In 2002, at an age when most women are ready for a life of relative ease, and despite a serious health problem, Joan was confident in her healthy lifestyle to not hesitate in assuming a challenging assignment with UNICEF in Moroto, a hardship duty-station. She wanted to bring the Girls' Education Movement to the marginalized Karamoja sub-region, and to strengthen partnerships for girls' education there. Joan strongly believed in UNGEI and GEM, and proved their complimentary link at the grassroots level through the participation of young peoples. (The underlying principle of GEM is to involve both girls and boys, as strategic allies, to promote the education of all girls. To highlight some of Joan's tremendous achievements toward gender parity in education in Uganda, we are happy to announce that GEM currently covers 25 districts through school-based GEM clubs, and that there are 17 district-level GEM chapters and a national chapter.)

We remember Joan as being totally dedicated in everything she did. She remained always a teacher at heart, wanting others to benefit from her own life's lessons. She was constantly mentoring, coaching, advising and teaching young people and colleagues, even when her working hours were long and office demands were stressful. There was always time in her life for others, and in this she was a true role model.

To her final day, Joan battled valiantly against cancer of the gall bladder, diagnosed only a few months ago. Upon hearing of her death, many colleagues the world over sent messages of condolences that speak to why Joan is so missed, why her passing is truly a loss to all Ugandan children. Here are some of those sentiments:

“What a committed person she was. Her life is remembered in the achievements that she made for the disadvantaged children of Uganda.” – *Martin Mogwanja, UNICEF Representative in Pakistan (former Representative in Uganda)*

“Joan was truly dedicated to the women and children of Uganda. When she took up the challenge in Karamoja, she told me her dream had come true because she had always wanted to contribute to the programme there. We have lost a committed colleague.” – *Gloria Kodzwa, UNICEF Representative in Burundi (former Deputy Representative in Uganda)*

“It is a loss for the children of Uganda.” – *Pirkko Heinonen, Chief of Programme Planning, UNICEF ESARO (former Deputy Representative in Uganda)*

“She was a true girls' education champion. She did her best for girls' education until the last moments of her life, and her memory continues to inspire us.” – *Yumiko Yokozeki, Senior Education Adviser, JICA, and Aster Haregot, Education Advisor, UNICEF ESARO*

“A true champion of girls' education and human rights, her work and achievements are there for all to see in the most vulnerable parts of Uganda. Her passing is a loss to the cause of girls' education in Uganda and to us all. We witnessed firsthand her fine work and the fruit of her labour. She inspired us to be determined to carry forward her work.” – *Changu Mannathoko, Senior Advisor, Education UNICEF HQ, and Cheryl Gregory Faye, Head of UNGEI Secretariat*

“Joan was first and foremost a warm, supportive, perceptive and always available colleague – somewhat of a rarity in UNICEF. We will all miss her humour and practicality, as well as all her dedication and skills. When I was first trying to get interest and results happening in Karamoja and the rest of Eastern Uganda, she was one of the very few who truly believe in it – the need for it and the possibility to achieve it – and was brave enough to get involved right from the start. What I saw in the three years I was in Uganda places her as the single most important influence on our programming there and a real example of what can be done.” – *Jeremy England, former Eastern Region Manager and Supervisor, UNICEF Uganda*

We, Joan's colleagues and friends in the UNICEF Uganda Country Office, thank Joan for blessing us and the children of Uganda with her life. We are grateful for all the minds that blossomed under her influence and of all the children who received a chance at education thanks to her. We will do our best to continue the excellent work she started, hoping that her dedication for girls' education will be an inspiration for many.

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