

Former Miss Uganda, Ellah, reveals plan to scale business heights, empower women.

Ms. Stella Nantumbwe, fondly called Ellah, shot to fame when she won the 2013/2014 Miss Uganda crown and later represented the country in Big Brother Africa, a continental showpiece.

A media personality, actress and pageant trainer, Ellah tells the New Vision her reinvigorated ambition for scholarly works and drive to be the next trailblazing social entrepreneur.



Q: What does a normal day in Ellah's day look like?

A: A day in my life starts with a prayer, a work-out and practicing mindfulness. I think it's important to prepare your mind before taking on any day.

Q: You have been an actress, beauty queen and media personality. How would you describe yourself?

A: I would describe myself as all that and more. I would describe myself as an entrepreneur & philanthropist. I'm multi-talented and I like to discover and nurture new and old talents.

Q: What is your view on the current state of the film industry in Uganda?

A: The film industry in Uganda is one that is lacking a clear, unified sense of direction and specified standards of operation. It's budding, yes, but we still haven't truly captured the essence of the Ugandan story.

We are unable to effectively define who we are as a people so we're often caught up working so hard to be defined by standards that we are too weak to set, support, and maintain.

We also lack patriotism for our craft or people who portray that craft. We aren't proud of what we portray and, therefore, and unable to fully support it.

With that being said, the amount of talent is an untapped resource. Focus needs to be put on harnessing, polishing and protecting that talent.

Q: In your view, has the Ugandan woman risen to that position of prominence to which she rightfully belongs?

A: The Ugandan woman hasn't even scratched the surface of her full potential. Yes, we are resilient, strong and hardworking, but we are in an environment where our rights are often abused and it has become so frequent that we consider this normal.

From addressing issues of gender inequality, domestic violence, equality in the work place etcetera, the Ugandan woman is still finding her way. I believe it starts with learning how to truly support one another and embrace our differences and harness that diversity that creates a perfect rainbow of talent, personality and uniqueness that truly define what a woman really is.

Q: The media has been awash with allegations about your relationship status. What is the truth?

I'm currently in a relationship. That is true. However, in staying true to myself, I believe there's a need to establish and protect my personal life away from the media and the public.

It's my right like any other Ugandan. I'm in a happy committed relationship and no, it's not Prophet Elvis Mbonye, as media outlets have been falsely speculating recently. I'm determined to protect the people I love and also enjoy the opportunity to build a relationship away from the prying eyes of the media and the public.

Q: So there was or is nothing between you and the Prophet?

A: I am not and I have never been in a relationship with Prophet Mbonye. I have attended Zoe Fellowship for a few years now. However, beyond the fellowship, I do not have any other relationship with Prophet Mbonye of any kind.

Q: What then do you suspect to be the motive of the creator of this rumour, and what's your message to them?

A: I would like to think that this whole story was motivated by malice by either an individual or a group to run a campaign of calumny against me or Prophet Mbonye for whatever reason. My response was captured by my consortium of lawyers; each a legal luminary in their own right, in the cease-and-desist notice published in Uganda's two leading newspapers complete with potential legal consequences. Following the legal notice, the false publications on the internet were taken down and my lawyers and media consultants remain vigilant. Uganda is a country that has laws that guarantee certain rights and its high time these laws were given effect.

Q: You always seem to be having one project or activity and clearly you are a hard worker. What inspires you in life?

A: I'm inspired by my mother mostly. I believe she deserves all the accolades. I'm also inspired by the uncertainty the future holds. Due to this, I have no reason to get comfortable with any of my achievements. This is the reason I've always been a hard worker and I'm a strong believer in doing your absolute best with the resources made available to you and reaping the benefits of consistency and determination.

You seem to be particularly keen on entrepreneurship. Do you think enterprise is a fact of nature or nurture?

I believe it's both; it's a fact of nature and is to be nurtured. Uganda is one of the most entrepreneurial countries in the world, if not the most entrepreneurial.

However our new businesses have a short lifespan and present a significant absence of innovative ideas and poor business management techniques.

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This can be attributed to a myriad reasons. In a bid to understand and contribute and change this narrative, I, in the past academic year, have been studying a Master of Science degree in Entrepreneurship and Managing Innovations.

The goal is to foster innovation through the establishment of innovation centres to equip young business owners with the necessary skills to build sustainable businesses. As an aspiring social entrepreneur, the businesses that I create and support should target social inclusiveness and aim to illuminate social issues.

Q: To what extent would you ascribe your success to your family background?

A: My family has been a great support system throughout my life. The values I've been raised to respect and emulate have shaped my life significantly.

My mother has been a significant part of my upbringing. Her strength, resilience and business acumen are all things I admire greatly and aim to replicate, if not surpass.

Q: A number of public figures lately seem to venture into politics. You have great communication skills and a presence wherever you go. You seem to be well equipped for a career in politics.

A: A political career is not on the cards for me currently. Political participation is not always necessarily standing for an elective political office. This is why, for a functional political entity, there are policy-makers, strategists, thought leaders and private sector participants in executing public-private partnership programmes arising from policy decisions.

Therefore, my current and foreseeable predisposition is towards a private sector led contribution to Uganda, my community and my family. There are some foremost politicians like our President Yoweri Museveni who combine long-term strategic thinking, political astuteness, grassroots mobilisation skills and economic mastery to drive a transformation which is admirable and empowering. You'll see populist politicians bereft of depth and political philosophy, which is quite misleading.

The challenge is for us to ensure clarity of long-term and short-term strategies for sustainable development, functional institutions and the necessary or required environment for a competitive business landscape.

Q: You are keen on education and mentorship. Do you think education is critical to success or we should encourage more practical learning to address the huge unemployment problem in Uganda?

A: As an advocate for social entrepreneurship and innovation in business, I believe formal education with an extension of practical learning to encourage and boost innovation would create a conducive environment to effectively address

the unemployment issue that could be attributed partly to a lack of understanding of proper business principles and opportunities to apply these principles in practical situations with minimal real-life repercussions.

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Q: Amongst the many hats that you wear, you're a pageant trainer and there are now a number of categories of beauty pageantry in Uganda. What has led to the increase in popularity?

A: Pageants give people a sense of community, something to believe in and for some of the youth something to aspire to. Training future queens is something I take great pride in.

The ability to help someone achieve this dream always gives me a sense of accomplishment. The increase in popularity and diversity in pageant categories is simply a reflection of the world's current direction.

The world is moving towards diversity and inclusion in society and, therefore, different communities should be represented. There isn't a single representation of women or men for that matter.

Q: Would you say that the girls who have participated in beauty pageants have shown exemplary lives?

A: A pageant is either a start to your career, a boost or one of the biggest mistakes one can make.

The results depend on the effort applied, the organisation that owns the pageant you're competing in and individual effort applied to reap the potential benefits of the platform you're exposed to.

Several beauty queens have gone on to have successful careers in various fields. The only story I can tell is my own. I believe I'm on the right path.

Q: Your life has been quite a journey. What are some of the specific events that shaped you?

A: I've been shaped by a few moments in my life; moments where life has forced me to rebuild, situations that have challenged me, loss, failure and adventure have all played significant roles in shaping my life.

Q: As a budding social entrepreneur, what do you think is restraining social entrepreneurs, especially women, from making the leap to success? Do you have recommendations with regards to investors and governments to capacitate your business to mature and continue to enrich lives?

A: Female social entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs at large are faced with the age-old problem of defying social expectations centred on women in the business world.

There's unseen pressure exerted on women to take on a generally 'male persona' to be able to fit into any male-dominated industry.

The second issue that I would say restricts female social entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs, is the scarcity of dependable support networks.

Several industries lack available advisers, guides and mentors to help guide up and coming entrepreneurs. There isn't enough information or access to women who have treaded similar ground and there are very few

opportunities to interact and learn from them.

The third would be balancing business and family life. Women are often in a position where they have to choose one or the other and suffer with attempting a balancing act. This backed with a fear of failure are instrumental in inhibiting entrepreneurial success.

With regards to recommendations on investors and governments, the key to accessing funding is usually only as strong as your pitch and this is a difficult balance to strike even for seasoned entrepreneurs. Raising capital and attracting funding is exceptionally harder for female entrepreneurs.

A report by the Babson College [a private business school in Wellesley, Massachusetts], found that less than 3 per cent of companies funded by venture capital firms had female chief executive officers.

I've taken a particular interest in this and look forward to effectively altering this narrative.

Women that are interested in attracting investors and accessing funding should look into developing well-structured business plans and building effective and sustainable teams.

Q: Where do you see yourself in 10 years? What are your future plans?

A: The old adage goes, 'the best way to imagine the future is to create one'. There will be significant focus on family the next few years, creating more business enterprises, building and expanding my knowledge base to withstand the ever increasing and competitive global business environment. All these should hopefully culminate into a successful and revered business woman with capacity to innovate and create opportunities and to employ Ugandans and also to be able to teach innovation and entrepreneurship.

