

By Jennifer Bakawa

Elizabeth Namuleme held a pink reel string, but swore it was blue.

Elizabeth was once a pretty woman, with normal eyesight. A malicious acid attack left her virtually blind. Today she can't tell black from blue, or blue from pink.

Next to her stood four other blind women and a man. They swung and hummed a tune in unison.

Jane Perfect, one of the other women, shares Elizabeth's misfortune. Both were blinded and disfigured by acid.

Jane, 40, thought it would safe marrying Victor, a motor vehicle technician in the Kampala Industrial Area.

Jane was young and ready to do anything for Victor.

"I had too many expectations. I was probably living in a fantasy world," she says.

Twelve years later, the marriage had lost its appeal, and she asked for a divorce.

Victor said nothing.

Three days later he returned from work carrying a black plastic bag. Jane saw it, but paid little attention.

At about 8.30pm, he called her to the bathroom in the sweetest of voices. "I thought he wanted help and I obliged. Suddenly, I felt a burning splash on my face. I fell down. I managed to get up and run to a neighbour's home," she recalls.

Her neighbours rushed her to Mulago Hospital.

That was in August 1995, and she was 34 years old.

She was after a month before she was transferred to Aga Khan Hospital in Nairobi by Africa Air Rescue (AAR) for whom she worked.

Jane was in Nairobi for two months, being treated for wounds all over her face, neck and chest. She underwent plastic surgery four times. An eye specialist helped her to partially regain sight in the left eye. She is completely blind in her right eye.

While Jane underwent emergency treatment in Mulago, her husband, Victor, was also wheeled into the hospital in critical condition.

Apparently, after ruining her face with some sulphuric acid, Victor drank the rest. He died six weeks later.

Only Jane's first child, Esther, was living with her at the time of the incident. She was a student at Makerere College School. The other children, Irene, Jacob and Paul, were all in boarding schools.

Jane returned from Nairobi depressed about her loss of sight, looks and her job. She didn't know how the children would take it.

"All that time I was in hospital, my relatives kept the news from the rest of the children. One day, a nurse took me for a walk. A child saw me and screamed to its mother 'look at that monkey'. It was so hurting. I could not eat for two days. I thought this is how my children would react to me".

But her children accepted her. "It is a day I don't want to remember. There was a lot of wailing, crying," she says of the day when they first saw her after the incident.

AAR took her back. However, she had to leave a year later when the company computerised its operations. Without good sight, there was nothing for her to do.

For three years, she kept to herself. Then one day she heard about the National Union of Disabled Persons of Uganda

(NUDIPU) and Uganda National Association of the Blind (UNAB) on radio. She approached UNAB for support, and they referred her to Blind But Able Organisation near her home in Kyebanda.

She attended a four month course run by the Community Based Rehabilitation Alliance (COMBRA), before flying to South Africa for a six week computer course for the blind.

Meanwhile, the AAR took care of the family's medical and subsistence expenses.

Jane did not only agonise about her looks and job, but her name too. For some reason, her maiden name, Apuko, started to haunt her.

"Apuko does not mean anything specific but if you removed 'A' and replaced it with 'E' to become Epuko, it would mean sack".

It struck her that none of her relatives with that name lived to the age of 40. Her aunt died at 38 and two of her nieces with the same name died before they made one year. But an inner voice told her that "the Lord has made you perfect".

That is how she changed her name to Perfect.

When she returned from South Africa, Jane became the coordinator of Blind But Able. She recruits members who became blind as adults. Elizabeth Namuleme was one of her recruits.

Elizabeth, 20, was not only disfigured by acid, but totally blinded as well. She was on her way to Kisenyi from Owino Market, where she worked as a food vendor, when someone emerged from a side path and acidated her face with sulphuric acid.

She fell down in pain, screaming for help. Her assailant fled and she never got to know her. She was taken to Mulago Hospital. That was February 1999.

In January this year, Elizabeth left hospital and joined Blind But Able in Kyebanda for vocational training.

She is one of 10 students learning how to knit sweaters, make doormats and to type.

Elizabeth will complete her course next month. She hopes the NGO shall retain her as a graduate attaché.

Graduate attachés identify blind people within their communities and train them in self-reliance skills. They recommend those in need of further training.

The attachés are paid a salary by the NGO for the first six months. But they don't leave empty-handed. They assume ownership of the machines they previously used to train others.

Elizabeth remains a very sad woman. Despite the counselling she has received, she is still depressed.

"After here, I'm going to be sadder. The way I am disfigured, nobody can give me a job, yet my people are very poor," she says.

Elizabeth hopes someone can help her have an own machine to knit sweaters.

Blind But Able has limited resources and cannot help much. The NGO relies on donations from Goal Uganda, Canada Fund for Local Initiative and Small Grants Scheme and World Bank. But there is never enough to cover such individual needs.

Students pay Shs 250,000 for the course at Blind But Able. Most students are however only able to raise the money through charities, including the church.

• At Jane's request, we have not used her husband's real name in this story - Editor.

Acid attack victims seek another life



Jane Perfect was attacked with acid by her husband (Photo by John Nsimbe).