

Bright girl, who had little time for boys

By Oscar Obonyo

Straight talking presidential hopeful, Prof Julia Ojiambo could be relatively small bodied, but she was born a very heavy baby. Her elder sister describes her as an admirable healthy girl who was also light skinned.



Julia Ojiambo holds a gourd at a campaign to show she is equally qualified to be an MP

"The rest of us were tiny and dark skinned. But Julia was brown with big ears, eyes and a huge head. In fact when we wanted to scold her, we teased; "okutwe okukhongo koti olugulu lwa Ageng'a (huge head like Ageng'a hill)," says Mrs Ruth Vuyiya in reference to the hills next to their late parents' home in Kadibworo, Busia District.

As it turned out later, Julia maintained her "huge head" — not in physical size but as a reservoir of intellect, knowledge and wisdom. And Vuyiya looks back with nostalgia at the life of the politician she fondly refers to as "kid sister".

"I watched her grow. She was a pleasant kid that mum would leave her behind with me whenever she had to travel," says Vuyiya.

"When I look back at the direction Julia's life has taken, I can't help recalling how thirsty she was for

education."

According to Julia's 84-year-old sister, although the Labour Party of Kenya boss was too young to work in the farm, she woke up very early and accompanied her senior siblings — assigning herself the role of time keeping. She achieved this by monitoring the morning sunshine and marking the movement of her own shadow.

"When the shadow struck her markers, she would shout that it was time to stop and take her to school. She loved school so much and made sure she reported in time," Vuyiya recalls with a chuckle.

A very reserved girl

Julia's efforts indeed paid off. She holds a PhD in Human Nutrition from the University of Nairobi and a Masters in Public Health from the prestigious Harvard University in the United State. She is also a pioneer female academic giant in East Africa.

The mother of four has over the time scored several firsts in both political and academic spheres.

She is member of the first class of eight students at the prestigious Alliance Girls' High School.

Julia was also the first female African lecturer at the University of Nairobi in the 1970s.

On joining politics in 1974, she became the first female MP from Western Province and later the first woman Assistant minister, following her appointment by the late President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta.

The entry of Julia, a daughter of a senior Anglican Church prelate, into politics indeed took many by surprise.

Her closest friend and former classmate at Alliance Girls and The Royal Technical College of East Africa (present day, University of Nairobi), Mrs Sarah Lukalo, was even amused.

"Coming from a strong Christian upbringing, I understood Julia as quite humble and forthright. I totally did not expect her to join the rough [game](#) of politics — I was actually tickled by her move," says Lukalo.

The MP's childhood neighbour, Mrs Peninah Ojiambo, equally confirms the politician's humble character as a teenage girl. Peninah, who says she got acquainted to Julia in 1950 when the politician was 14, remembers her as a very reserved girl.

"While most girls occasionally attended overnight dances performed by artistes from neighbouring Uganda, Julia kept off completely from the village fun," she recalls.

Peninah, slightly older than Julia, observes that unlike most teenage girls, the nominated MP had no interest in boys, whatsoever. Books were her closest friends.

Then, explains Peninah, it was commonplace to see young girls paired up with boys along village paths at sun set. Looking down, the barefoot girls would shyly make marks in dust with their toes, in response to the boys' overtures.

Asked whether Julia used to partake in such arrangements, Peninah vigorously shakes her head sideways: "Who? Julia? Never! And by the way, do not forget that she was a daughter of a Church minister and could not therefore loiter by the roadside in search of boys!"

Girls were denied education opportunities

Julia's neighbours say her late father, Mr Paulo Okello, was a respected prelate who raised her children in a strict and almost secluded way. Most village boys merely admired Julia and her four sisters from afar during Mass on Sundays.

"They lived in a fenced compound and were therefore totally inaccessible to boys. Even some of us who made it to the pastor's house could not easily find time with



-Julia Ojiambo (second right) the Girl Guide with the organisation's officials.

Picture by File

Julia, who was mostly engrossed in studies," says Peninah.

The brilliant pastor's daughter indeed met and found her lifetime partner, the late Professor Hillary Ojiambo, in academic circles.

Says Julia: "We first met when Hillary was at Mangu High School and I at Alliance High School. We started off as academic rivals. Hillary was chairperson of Mangu Busia students association while I was chair of Alliance Busia students' association and we used to compete bitterly in academic debates during holidays."

While conceding that her relationship with Hillary was initially purely academic, Julia explains their friendship gradually flourished. They re-united later while overseas and finally love blossomed, leading to the altar.

Julia's late husband was a pioneer African heart specialist and respected personality in the field of academia and heart surgery.

Nonetheless, Julia was not dull or a bookworm in her youth: "Yari omukhana omuyungubafu (She was a very active and mentally alert girl)".

Lukalo, her high school and university classmate concurs: "Julia was an active sports girl who played tennis and hockey for the school team. She was also a girl scout."

Indeed, Julia, had every reason to be active and feel happy about being in high school, for despite her academic brilliance she had initially been denied a chance to study beyond class six. Only boys enjoyed that privilege then.

Interestingly, it took the combined efforts of Julia's father and [Canon](#) Jeremiah Awori — the father of her perennial rival for the Funyula parliamentary seat, Vice-President, Mr Moody Awori — to win her admission at Butere Girls' School in Western Province.

Although Okello and Awori were respected Anglican Church leaders from the province, they were not spared discriminative policies directed at the so-called African natives by both white missionaries and colonial officials.

Vuyiya recalls how her father and the VP's father provoked a crisis in Busia District when they suggested that their daughters would have to proceed with their education beyond class four, the highest level girls were allowed at that time.

However, the two men of God stood firm, insisting their daughters would proceed to upper primary classes — never mind there were no schools in the district with upper primary classes. The nearest school, Butere Girls, located about 50km away, had no class six for African girls.

"One morning, my father and Canon Awori presented my sisters and I at Butere Girls and demanded that we be admitted. The school was run by American Church of God Missionaries who did not take it kindly that their own Church officials were daring them to enroll their children in an American institution," recalls Vuyiya.

Instead of apologising, the two old men offered to resign from their church positions than to back off pushing for their little girls' education case. The missionaries gave in.

With the doors to her future finally opened, young Julia pursued her education to greater heights, securing employment at the University of Nairobi as a lecturer.

When she eventually opted out for politics, she went to see the late President Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, who also served as Chancellor of the University of Nairobi University.

"Mbiyu Koinange (Minister of State in the President's Office) booked an appointment for me at the OP, Harambee House. When I told Mzee that I had come to tender my resignation so I could join politics, he said it was alright if that is what I had chosen but warned me he would not accept me back to the university if I failed. That was May 30 1974," recalls Julia.

But first, Kenyatta wanted to know whom Julia was challenging as MP. She informed the President that she was going to fight it out with independence hero and trade unionist, Mr Arthur Ochwada, who was Mzee's grandson in-law.

Julia accordingly requested Mzee's help since "I was wrestling with his relative". She told him she was confident of beating Ochwada in a fair contest — if he would not be allowed to use State resources to harass her and her supporters.

"Mzee Kenyatta quickly called Koinange and jokingly told him that this girl here wants to go fight with muthoniwa (son-in-law). She has asked me that she be left alone to fight her battle, and the girl should be left alone," Mzee ordered.

True to his word, Mzee kept off from the rather explosive Funyula (then Busia Central) constituency campaigns of 1974. And true to her word, again, Julia trounced Ochwada — then considered a political heavyweight and a relative of the President.

She first set foot in the august House in 1974 and ever since — over three decades — Julia has refused to fade away from the political arena.

And although she lacks political clout comparable to fellow ODM-Kenya presidential aspirants —Mr Raila Odinga, Mr Kalonzo Musyoka and Mr William Ruto —Julia views the three in a completely different light. She is their "experienced elder sister" who deserves utmost respect.

"I want Raila to realise that I am very loyal to ODM-Kenya and also want him and Kalonzo to work as brothers while at the same time recognise me as their elder sister," she told The Sunday Standard in the wake of the storm that greeted the defection of Kalonzo to her Labour Party of Kenya.

While some perceive her as subordinate to most of the opposition presidential aspirants, Julia thinks otherwise.

The LPK boss boasts a rich experience, unparalleled academic credentials and

international exposure.

When Julia joined politics in 1974, Mr Najib Balala and Ruto were in still primary school, Mr Musalia Mudavadi in secondary school, Kalonzo was a first-year student at the University of Nairobi and Raila, a manager at the Kenya Bureau of Standards.

While Julia has been around longer than any of her presidential challengers, she has re-invented herself politically to stay relevant and forceful. In fact, many politicians agree that few have Julia's tact and resilience.

During the official launch of her presidential vision in February at the KICC, Nairobi, Raila, for instance, equated her energy and vibrancy to a ripe orange ready to be plucked.

It remains to be seen whether Kenyans will pluck the mother of four from the congested field of presidential aspirants later in the year or whether she will exhibit the same academic prowess and succeed in the slippery political field.

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