



HUSNAH KUKUNDAKWE - A WINNING MINDSET

In terms of your career, it's silly to use the word career with a 13-year-old, but you're a real trailblazer in lots of different ways. There were only 10 African swimmers out of 593 at the Rio Paralympics and only four of those were female. I know you're aiming for Tokyo, but let's just start at the beginning. You were born without your right hand and your left hand was impaired as well. What was that like growing up?

It was difficult because I was very shy and I would always try to hide my hand whenever I was out of the house. My mum also told me that she used to hide my hand, so then she realised it was for nothing and she encouraged me to go out and see people and be myself. Then I tried sport after my mum encouraged me and I found out swimming was where I felt myself the most because I was free and you can't get into the water with an artificial arm or anything else. You have to take off your clothes so I felt more myself in swimming and I kept going forward.

What made you want to hide your arms when you were younger?

People would look at me differently but when I was at school, people would stare at me. Some people would laugh. One time they laughed and I got so angry. That day I went home and told my mum they were laughing at me, and there was nothing I could do about it because I can't say bad words to them because of school rules.

It's interesting that you ended up taking up swimming because your body is out there for everybody to see. Were you nervous about swimming when you tried it?

When I was younger, I used not to think much about my disability. At the age of three when I started swimming, I wouldn't think so much about it. I didn't feel different because I went to a school with able bodied people, I did the same things that they did, played in the playground, played with different kinds of toys. When I got into the water I didn't feel so different. But I realised I was different when I begun primary school and I became more cautious of how people thought about me. I became very shy and would always put on my sweater from the moment I stepped into school until the moment I leave. That disturbed me until I realised I didn't need the sweater anymore. After I started swimming I was very, very confident. I didn't find any point for the sweater anymore. It actually got lost and my mum said she wouldn't buy another because she realised what was happening and she thought it would be best if she didn't buy another sweater.

It's interesting hearing you speak because I spoke to Ellen Keane a few weeks ago and I know you've met her and listened to her podcast to prepare for today. She spoke about wearing long sleeves and even some of her friends at school not knowing she had a disability because she'd hide it for so long. How is it to have Ellen as an inspiration?

Ellen Keane is really, really an inspiration to me because, a while ago I didn't know anything about the Paralympics. In Uganda there aren't many people with disabilities who like to come out and sport isn't encouraged. But when I found out about the Paralympic Games and Para swimming, I decided to look through it. I went through social media to see what swimming was like and I found they did a really good job of encouraging people with disabilities to join sport. I happened to come across Ellen Keane and you know the poses she makes where she raises her hand up? She's being free and accepting herself for the way she is. She was born like that, there's nothing she can do about it. She didn't wear fake arms or stuff like that, and I thought to myself 'How can I do this for myself?' It was a very big coincidence to know that she was in swimming. And I thought to myself that maybe I could be like her some day. Be free, make poses like that and show everyone in the world that I can do anything because I'm disabled. She's a really big inspiration. Her life story is inspirational. She hid her hand for 18 years with nobody seeing. That was depressing for me to

hear because I thought that not all countries are like Uganda, where people with disabilities are seen different. But knowing there are such conditions like this, not only in Uganda but everywhere else in the world is depressing. I hope it will change someday.

Well we've been talking about the swimmers you've met at other competitions and the ones that mean a lot to you. I think there's one in particular that does mean a massive amount to you. We've got a little surprise for you here Husnah, listen to this.

Ellen Audio

Oh my God! Wow! Wow! Let me turn on my camera...wow!

Are you happy with that?

Yes. Thank you so much! Wow! Thank you so much! I would really love to meet her again soon, maybe in a Championships. It was amazing to meet her at the Championships.

One of the aims of the Paralympics is to have this global impact, and for you in Uganda to be made aware of her is quite something. Going back to those first few swimming sessions in Uganda, can you explain the pool and the facilities in those early days?

My first swimming pool in nursery was a small pool but always outdoors, so there was this coach who was my first coach. He didn't see me different. He saw I liked the water, and he encouraged me to not be afraid of the other kids and the way they saw me. In my first pool I was just playing around and then, when I went to primary school, I decided to try competitive swimming.

I read about this. One of your first swimming competitions, you weren't allowed to take part in a second race, which was your first taste of discrimination in a sporting context. How did that make you feel?

I was angry and I was very disappointed in my teachers I'm just like the other kids, the only difference is I have one hand. Myself, I didn't see myself different. We all went to the same school, I can do anything an able bodied person can do. But when I didn't get to participate in the second years and I was switched for someone who was thought to be faster than me or who the teachers thought would be better than me, it made me very, very disappointed. Since my dad was there, I told him to take me home and I stopped swimming for a while - one year. I tried different sports like football, volleyball, netball. But those didn't work out so well. As a footballer I was mostly the goalkeeper because when I was striker, my friends wouldn't pass me the ball. That was another kind of discrimination because my friends thought I couldn't do as well as they did in striker

And were you the only disabled person where you lived?

In an area like this, people like me don't like to come out.

I've never been to Africa or Uganda, but in your experience, what is the general attitude towards disabled people and disabled children in that region of Africa. I'm sat here in London and we see horrible stories about some of the attitudes in other parts of the world. What's your experiences been like?

In the rural areas of Uganda, parents who give birth to children with disabilities are seen to be outcast. Their kids are cast. 'How could you have a kid that looks like this?' Sometimes they will even pray to the original Gods because they think giving birth to a child with a disability means you're cursed. Yet it just happens. A child is born like that. And job opportunities for people with disabilities are very, very low. Some people with disabilities can't access certain areas, there aren't any ramps in buildings. And when a person with a disability applies for a certain job that they know they are capable of doing and they maybe have been to university, everything they need to do to become an engineer or a doctor, they aren't seen as fit to get those jobs, leading to people with disabilities losing their self esteem and confidence. They start begging on the streets or they just decide to drop out of school completely and not pursue the dreams they have always had. That's very, very depressing.

I read an incredible interview with your mum and her pride bursts out of the page. She talks about her feelings of trauma when you were born and how long it took to accept you. Do you talk about that?

My mum told me the stories and sometimes I would ask her random questions like, 'How did I end up like this? How come I'm different? How come I have one hand? How come I have three fingers and others have five?' I would ask her those questions and she said she would explain everything better to me when I was older and I could understand everything. She told me the story that she was terrified to see me be born like that, and she was trying to always hide my hand in public, keeping me very close. But then she thought to herself, 'what's the point of hiding?' If she continued hiding me, she would feel bad about herself because when I grow old, I would try to hide myself as well, which wouldn't be good. She stopped seeing me as different, treated me the same way that she treated my other siblings.

When you travel, are your eyes opened to how disability can be treated in other countries?

when I travel around, I see that they are treated as normal. I think to myself, 'why can't Ugandans be like this?' Stop criticising people with disabilities. Kids in school, stop bullying other kids with disabilities and see them as normal people. I really want to try and spread the word in Uganda. Most people with disabilities are on the streets or in rural areas in poverty because they are rejected. Poverty is caused because they can't get the job opportunities for themselves that they would love to have. They are also shy to come out in public and speak about their rights because they aren't encouraged by society and they are rejected by their parents at times, it's why they end up on the streets.

What's the biggest factor holding disabled people back from competing in sport in Africa?

I think it's the way they're treated in public. A child would be rejected by their family and you see them end up on the streets or in a poor building, a hut. Then they leave them at home to hide them from the public and they aren't taken to school - if they are, it's poor schools with poor buildings, and they aren't getting the education that they deserve. That's really really disappointing. Boys, girls, anything. Maybe the girls would want to come out of their houses but they're stopped by their parents and sometimes they end up getting into teenage pregnancies - even when they're disabled - and sometimes they can't handle it and end up getting disowned by their parents, sent off to the streets and sent off to the man or boy who made them pregnant. They aren't then encouraged to go through this pregnancy and then go on with life, they can't keep on pursuing what they'd love to do. I'd really love for many more parents who have children with disabilities to actually encourage them and maybe just... believe in them. If you believe in them, they will eventually believe in themselves and they'll want to do what they want to do.

And just as a sign of different facilities, are they all outdoors?

Yeah, so if it rains, it's a huge disadvantage. In Uganda, it's the rainy season and the pools get really dirty. It makes me angry on the day that I get to swim, it's really dirty and I can't swim in it. Or maybe there's lightning and I can't get in, it's really depressing.

Me training in the kind of swimming pools I train in, and sometimes they don't even have diving boards, shows other people around the world that you don't need a fancy place to train or major equipment. You just need to believe in yourself and focus on your goal. Maybe once in a while I get facilities like that to train in, to see what it feels like to compete in a competition pool. In Uganda, we have only one 50m pool and it's still outdoors. Sometimes it's dirty, most of the time it is very expensive to access because it's in a very expensive hotel. And it's mostly private for people in that hotel, so is very expensive. Once in a while I get to go there and see what it's like to swim in a 50m pool.

You mentioned sport not being particularly accessible to ordinary people in Uganda. It felt to me that access to sport is often down to how much money a family has.

Yes and swimming is a very, very expensive sport, so maybe it also depends on the funds parents have. If they can be able to support their kids, disabled or not, Ugandans aren't really big fans of sport. Most parents don't like seeing their children in sport, especially in school, because they see it as a distraction from education. But they can balance both. I remember when I was preparing for my final exam, my relatives had thought about it and they had told my mum that Husnah should stop swimming and focus on exams. That was right when the Championships were coming. They told my mum I should stop for a while, when do I get the time to catch up on work. But I did my best to prove them wrong. In that period I was making sure that I go for training in the morning, get to school, read about stuff I have missed, ask the teacher what I may not have understood. Also get ready for training in the evening. Balancing school and homework, doing homework, getting home late. And preparing for the Championships at the same time. Then while the final exams came, I was very happy because I was among the best people in the country, I got the best grade and I was very happy to know it is possible to balance being an athlete and being a student at school. **I love this. We spoke about you being discriminated against and now you train alongside non-disabled swimmers. Does that pose any challenges when training alongside people with two arms and two legs?**

it kinds of increase the pace at which I swim at. But the problem comes when it comes to competitions, At times I would make brilliant times and a new personal best, but when it comes to medalsthe top three are usual able bodied swimmer and I'm usually the only disabled swimmer at most of the meets. So it's very difficult to get into the top three.

And that must be quite difficult to cope with from a motivation point of view. You know you're a very good swimmer in Paralympic terms, but does it get you quite upset sometimes?

I feel bad that I can't get on the podium, I can't get a medal or be handed a medal with my name, like I see the rest of the people getting them. After all the hard work I put into the race, I get very sad. But the main reason of the meets is to make a Ugandan personal best and to do better in the Paralympic Games or Championships or World Series

All of the Paralympians I've spoken to and met in my jobs, they all have that potential to make a difference. But you are doing it against a big backdrop, where Africa and Uganda may not have the same resources as more developed countries. More than an Ellen Keane or a Jonnie Peacock, you have an even bigger opportunity and responsibility to change people's lives. It's not pressure but it's an incredible thing to hold on your shoulders.

I would really love to continue inspiring people and trying to promote equality among people in the world, showing them that people with disabilities can do anything other people can do and encourage them not to give up on life. Maybe people with disabilities, I can encourage them to keep going and never give up on whatever they want to achieve.

Do you recognise, and you're only 13, but do you recognise that you have the opportunity to make some changes to how disabled people are perceived?

I do my best by posting about people being discriminated on social media and encouraging people around my country or people around the world, mainly people who are seeing us differently, and trying to encourage them to see us as normal people and just as people who can do everything they can do. We are disabled but we are just normal people. We can do everything and I really love to encourage and spread the word, try to make sure everyone in the world understands this kind of situation. Maybe parents happy to have children with disabilities are encouraged by my mum and inspired, because you shouldn't see your child as different. You shouldn't treat them different from the other children that you may have. Just other people who are able bodied can learn from children with disabilities to keep working hard and never give up on something you want to achieve.

How wonderful would it be for you if there were more disabled swimmers in Africa?

It would be really, really lovely getting to compete with para swimmers and I would love for disabled swimmers from Uganda or Africa to come out, so we can have a huge team so we can encourage other people with disabilities who might be hiding, to go for a sport that they love to do. Whether it's swimming or tennis or wheelchair basketball or athletics, whatever it is, for them to go for it and also making people in Uganda meet with disabilities would be a very good idea, to encourage other people to come out if they love swimming and enjoy themselves, and be who they are.

How can you start that change? To start to change attitudes in Africa so people do take care of disabled children?

My mum was thinking about starting up a foundation where I could go to different schools or places in rural areas, speak to people and speak to parents. Maybe she could speak to fellow parents on how children with disabilities should be treated, and I could speak to fellow people with disabilities how to believe in themselves and pursue what they want to do.

You have a role model in this sense. You've used your voice and platform already, which is very similar to Malala. She used her platform to fight for educational rights and she won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014. Is Malala and her Fund an inspiration to you?

Yes they are because they encourage anyone around the world, mostly girls because girls are seen as minority to boys and in Uganda, they are people who are only supposed to get pregnant, have children and keep making families, instead of learning and getting what they want, like a dream job or pursuing a sport. Malala Fund really encourages girls and people with disabilities around the world to go to school, pursue their dream in sport or education and get what they dream about. Some people only think about these things in dreams, but Malala brings it to real life.

It's interesting as I speak to you because I've said you're only young, you're 13 years old etc. I hope that doesn't sound patronising because then I think of Malala who has also done incredible things. Do you think age doesn't matter when it comes to making some change in the world?

Age doesn't matter because anyone can do anything to change the world and make it a better place for other people to live in.

Do you think it's an advantage? You come with new ideas and a fresh way of looking at things.

Yes, it's a really big advantage because the new generation is more creative and will come up with much better ideas on how to change the world and make people see how we can be treated equally or how people can see the rights of others. Maybe even the new generation comes up with new and better rights for people to follow.

Have you ever thought about trying to get into politics?

I'd love to, so they can see politics doesn't only matter on focusing on people who are able bodied and 'normal people'. They should also consider people with disabilities. Maybe people with disabilities should participate more in politics so that maybe there's someone to represent us in that department. We need more representation.

I'm assuming you've never met Malala.

I would love to meet her. She is such an inspiration to everyone around the world, an inspiration to me and I would love to meet her someday.

And I can imagine actually that she, I don't think she came from a sporting background, so somebody like yourself could bring that element into the Malala Fund.

Yeah, she came from Pakistan in a not rich family, but she decided to help make change in the world. She believed in herself and look at the change she is already making. She has encouraged people around the world to believe in themselves. Girls, she has encouraged girls to go back to school. People with disabilities to pursue what they love to do. She's an inspiration to everyone.

And what would you say to some of the adults, maybe we would call them ignorant, who dismiss Malala and say she's only a child?

I think they should stop being arrogant and actually try to educate themselves about stuff like this. A teenager like that to have the guts to walk upto an ignorant adult and teach them about stuff like that, it should encourage other people, especially adults, to edcuate themselves more about stuff like this. Maybe they could help her and help people around the world to make it a better place. Because if a teenager can do that and make so much in the world, why wouldn't an adult try to do the same?

I think people listening will be bowled over by your maturity and the sense you speak, and the perspective you have on the world. Just one final question then, which is looking ahead to Tokyo. What do you have to do to compete? Would you be going by yourself or as part of a Ugandan team?

I'm not sure I'd be going with a team. I've seen some potential Para swimmers in Uganda but they are very young, they are nine, eight, ten, eleven. They're not active. I haven't seen them around much and their parents are kind of, reluctant to encourage them. My mum has been trying to get into contact with them, maybe they could go for classification next year when they are older, but I would love for them to join Para swimming because I can't keep going alone, we need more representatives. And it would be nice to be part of a team, and develop Uganda. For now, I'm with my coach and my mum.

I wish you all the luck in the world and I'm sure everybody listening has been charmed by you and impressed by you. And I'm sure we all join in wishing you well with that. I look forward to hopefully watching you swim in Tokyo next year and perhaps I'll be able to come and watch you and meet you.