



Our November UDSM Alumna

This is a “light corner” on the UDSM portal intended to feature for one month in turns two among many of the University’s graduates—alumni—since its foundation in 1961. The corner is designed to inform the public and the University itself, without prejudice in terms of historical precedence but guided only by professional information search, on the past graduates of the University, their whereabouts, their current position or engagement, what is remembered of them as past ‘boys’ and ‘girls’ of their time and, finally, on what is reckoned about their contribution to their Alma Mater, their nation, the Africa region and/or the wider world.

Esther Daniel MWAIKAMBO



Year of Graduation: 1977 (Master of Medicine - Paediatrics)

More:

Doctor of Medicine, MD (Friendship University, Moscow, USSR 1969);

Institute of London on Childhood Infections and Immunology (1981-82);

One year at Harvard University on Anthropology - health and behaviour (1994-95)

As was with our ‘Alumna of the Month of November 2019’, in this Alumni Profile feature for November, we are ecstatic to feature Esther Daniel Mwaikambo as a first woman in Tanzania to study for a medical profession. This was way back in 1962, when she entered the Friendship University, Moscow, for a Seven-year training programme in medicine in the-then Soviet Union of Russian Republics (USSR) until 1969. Upon return from that long training, not only did she join the medical profession and begin to practice, but also became—in a series—the first female medical doctor in Tanzania, the first female paediatrician in 1977, first female professor of Medicine specialising in paediatrics (in 1993), first female vice-chancellor of a university in Tanzania (1999-2006), the first female founder and Vice-president of the Tanzania Academy of Sciences (2004-2011) and later its first female President from 2012 to 2018. The self-reproducing ‘firsts’, not surprisingly, made her friends and well-wishing colleagues christen her ‘the woman of many firsts’. In 1974, she undertook a three-year masters’ degree course in paediatrics and child health at the-then Faculty of Medicine, University of Dar es Salaam from which she graduated in 1977.

Esther Daniel Mariki, as her maiden name went, was born on 12 December 1943 in Mwika, in the Moshi-rural district of Kilimanjaro region. She attended school at Lyakirimu Primary School in Mwika (in 1948-1951), Ashira Girls Middle School in Marangu (1952-1955) and Tabora Girls’ Secondary School in Tabora (1956-1959). At independence and in the years that followed, a number of achieving young Tanganyikans—male and female—were offered higher education scholarships by a number of countries overseas through the newly independent government. Esther was among those young girls, who went to Russia in 1962, studying the Russian language plus the science subjects of Physics, Chemistry and Biology as well as Mathematics for two years before admission, in 1965, into a five-year doctor of medicine degree programme.

There is an interesting story about her scholarship and her academic pursuit in Russia. Esther was originally granted a scholarship to study journalism in Russia. She was admitted to the State University of Moscow for a one-year pre-university programme during which time the students had a comprehensive study of the Russian language in order to gain language competence for entry into all other study programmes. It was during this time that Esther experienced a somewhat a mind-boggling moment of reflection and decision-making. She observed that more than 80% of the doctors in the Soviet Union were women, something that was the reverse at home in Africa and Tanzania. With this observation, coupled with the curiosity and desire to find out “what caused the death of her mother”, Esther

decided to request the university administration at Moscow to allow her to study medicine instead of journalism. As it were, she was not qualified for admission at the medical school because of reasons including the fact that she had not taken science subjects in her Cambridge school certificate. However, the University administration agreed to allow her to change the faculty on the condition that she would go back to a secondary school programme for two years in order to study science subjects. If she should pass well, then she would join the medical training programme. This is exactly what she did! She happily agreed to the requirement and was admitted to a Russian secondary school in Moscow where she studied high school science subjects for two solid years. She passed the necessary examinations and in 1965, she was admitted to the Friendship University, Moscow. There is a great moral in this. It was a clear demonstration of determination and prudence engineered, as it would seem, not only by her own search for a cause of the death of her mother but also by a motivation that she, too, as a woman could succeed as women in Russia did to the extent of outnumbering men in the medical profession. She also sensed that if this was achieved in a foreign land, it could also be achieved in Africa if girls were encouraged to pursue what seemed at that time no-entry professions. Why couldn’t [indeed shouldn’t] this situation be reversed in a young and aspiring post-independence nation, she asked herself. She decided that it should begin with herself. If there is any lesson to learn from this kind of drive—and in a foreign country environment—then it is this one for the young and upcoming girl youths in our country: a brilliant example and a perfect role model!

Prof. Mwaikambo has since her return from overseas training served as Medical Officer III, II and later I at the Muhimbili Medical Centre from 1971 to 1976, thereafter teaching paediatrics and child health in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Dar es Salaam from 1977 to 1997 and, later, at the Hubert Kairuki Memorial University (HKMU) from 1998 to date. At the latter, she has subsequently served as the Vice-Chancellor from 1999 to 2006. From 2002 to 2006, she served also as Chairperson of the National Examination Council (NECTA). Among many other professional roles she has played for the medical profession is as the founder and first president of the Medical Women Association of Tanzania (MEWATA) from 1987-2005. Prof. Mwaikambo, who was recipient of the ‘Harvard Distinguished African Lecturer Award’ in 2009, is still working with HKMU, guiding or else assisting in efforts of academic strengthening and professionalization of the University system there. The young scholars and academic staff alike are continuing to benefit from her contribution and her rich experience.

***Esther Daniel MWAIKAMBO is Our November 2019 Alumna,
and her greater stories begins here!***