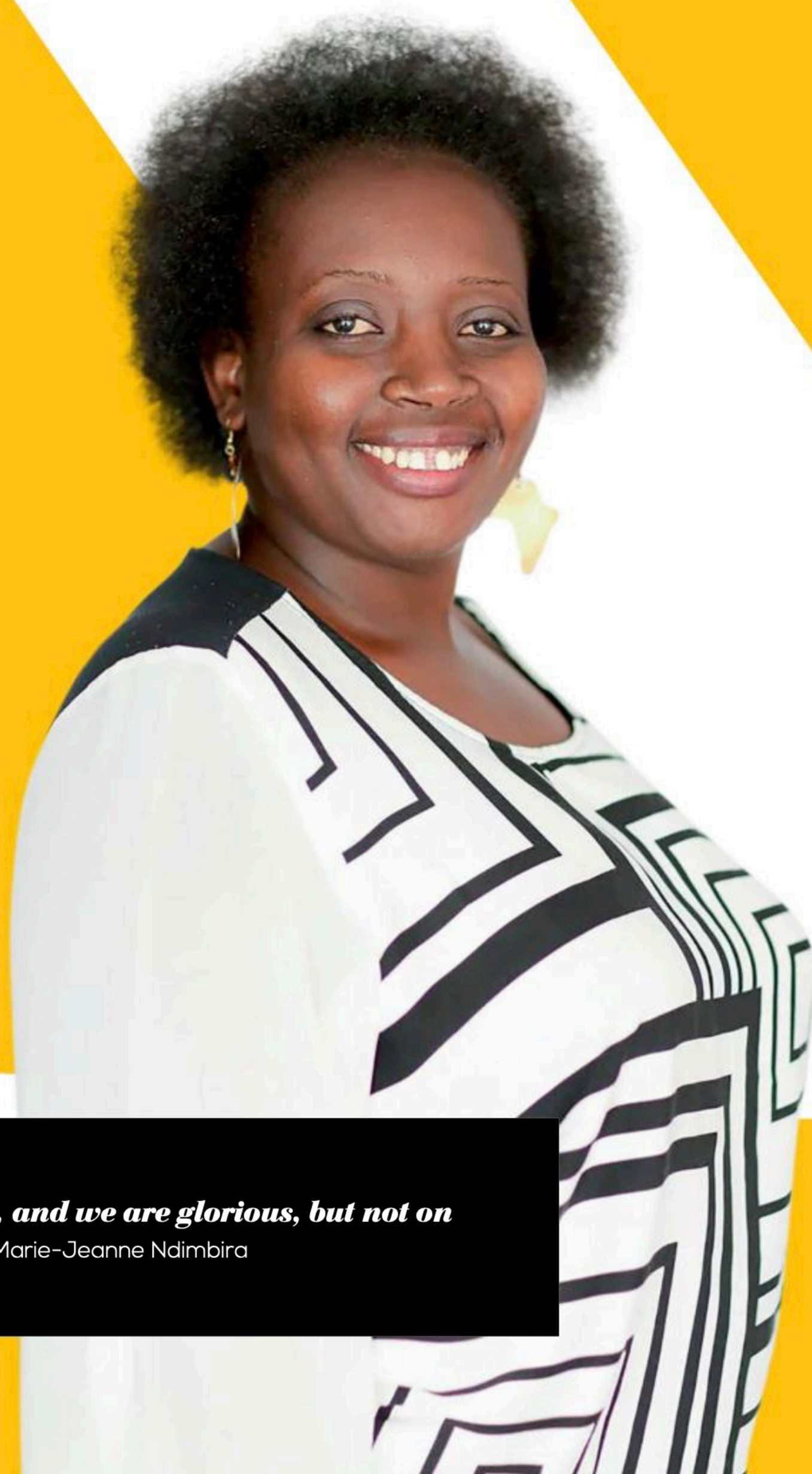


Wurturing

Marie-Jeanne Ndimbira

on building a healthy foundation



Life's a gift, and we are glorious, but not on our own. – Marie-Jeanne Ndimbira

Solid foundations ensure that growth and development can happen, but what are the foundations on which a nation can thrive? Is there a platform for connecting everything that allows us to create the very best?

Mother Theresa said, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Physically Active Youth (PAY) is a community-based project that focuses on the healthy development of young people in low-income communities through physical health, academics and life skills. Marie-Jeanne Ndimbira, co-founder of this project, spoke to 99FM's Master Your Destiny about providing an equal platform for life.

M-JN: I work predominantly with youth in an after-school programme. We provide holistic programming – and it's reinforced every day. We give children a meal every day, we do homework with them every day, we do sports, and then once a week we do life skills. We speak to the person's entire being and we've been doing this for 13 years.

MYD: Tell us what you've seen in the work that you do.

M-JN: We focus on making sure that people are able to function optimally in the world for themselves, so they can enjoy the process of life.

When you put yourself out there in the world, how do you bring your best self forward?

We recognise that you have a talent, let's work on it. We help children understand the power of good nutrition, of balancing their time and of academic performance, and the importance of socialising and behaving in a manner that makes your life easier.

The fact that they come from economically depressed backgrounds can't be held against them. Among past participants there is a strong element of social mobility that would have otherwise not been there without the programme. These participants picked up social mobility skills that allow them to get through. Your attending doctor is a former PAY child, or the radiologist or telecom technician. Whoever they are, they're pleasant people, who are also getting the best out of life because they have an understanding.

MYD: And it's an understanding that I'm sure a lot of people take for granted.

M-JN: That's the biggest part of it all. When you look at it through a middle-class lens, you take many things for granted, right?

But when your primary pressure is to sort out food or to survive, all these other things – like saying hello and thank you – are frilly, fairy things that people don't think about. And yet, at the same time these are the things that will give them social mobility. That's the irony of it. You remain behind and even though you want to get through, you don't have the skills to move forward. It's just the small things that in the end make the biggest difference. Two weeks ago we had a seven-year-old

learner who was new and could not identify blue, green, yellow. The concept of colour was not there. That's difficult, and it's not fair on the child. So these are the types of things that we work on.

MYD: Those disadvantages are being exacerbated because we're not getting the fundamentals right.

M-JN: Yes, it's perpetuated by the fact that the huge income divide has created two worlds for us in Namibia. We forget what is happening in the 'other world', and though it seems like such simple work, these are the layers that need to be in place for all the other things to happen – in order for the magical scientist to come up with the cure for AIDS or cancer, or a cheap, accessible transport system that works for the whole of Africa. But that won't happen for someone who doesn't have the core foundation laid out for them properly, for someone who doesn't feel safe in the world.

MYD: What are some of the challenges that you've faced?

M-JN: I think the greatest challenge has been getting the buy-in from communities. From the community that you work with to understand that this is what you need, more than money; this is what you need to get access to the money. Getting buy-in from parents – not because they don't want it, but because their priority is putting food on the table every day or their own pain and their own depression from the economically depressed society they come from.

The context of working in development is that the people that you work with and the people that want to see the change don't always have the skills they need. It could be a teacher or the entire community. So often people work in survival mode and, when people are in survival mode, it manifests as a dog-eat-dog world, and that makes it very challenging to work together.

Finding trust in the process takes so long, and that is challenging. Honestly, it can bring you down harder than bringing in financial resources.

MYD: And on that, how hard is it to bring in financial resources?

M-JN: On many occasions I've had to do training sessions or workshops outside of PAY to raise money to make sure that I can pay the team that we have and make sure that we have food. Food is not sponsored, but it's one of the most important parts of the programme. If we don't bring food, we don't have the same attendance rates or the same attention or participation rates with the youngsters because they just don't have the energy.

When the majority of us are doing well, we will all benefit. If we live in a safe society, you don't have to lock your door because I'm not going to come steal your food because I'm not hungry.

When young children are developing, when neurons are connecting, they need energy to move, to think, to concentrate and, in the absence of food, this does not take place. So you have a five-year-old child who's not eating and weak and lethargic, and fourteen years later, you want them to write the same exam as other children, but from that starting point?

A 2010 UNICEF [United Nations Children's Fund] report on learners' wants and needs in Namibia said that the children want food. The greatest concern was hunger. Even in our programme when we asked them, they said food first, then everything else second.

In a country where we have two million people that shouldn't be an issue. It's something we can address. Just because they are poor, doesn't mean they need less.

We're creating a programme to get parents to grow a garden. With some of this food, one meal a day will be at PAY, and then they can provide the other two meals for their children. This is a model of healthy eating, understanding what you're eating is an investment in your future. Your body will thank you.

The difference is a transformed country. We have all these dreams about Vision 2030. My question is who is going to drive Vision 2030? Less than 10% of Namibians have the skills to do so.

You've got 90% of the population that's probably willing, but not able. We must enable them. Just as we were nurtured, we nurture back. Take the power of nurture and care for and feed the children, give them homework assistance, do sports, do life skills – and then they can compete on an equal platform.

MYD: Tell us about your campaign, 'Lives Matter'.

M-JN: I did a TEDx talk in March on the value of life, and then I thought to myself, 'You did a talk, great! What you gonna do about it?' I have a for-profit company that started a campaign selling 'Lives Matter' t-shirts. It's two prongs, selling the t-shirts to support the work that we do and spreading a message.

The second part of it is getting ambassadors and going into workplaces to speak to our leaders, to our schools and our communities about the value of life. I treat you a certain way, simply because you have life and I have life, and I value and I honour your life. We create a culture of care. That's the missing foundation layer we need.

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 **MYD**