



EMPOWERED TO BECOME A LEADER.



Hon. Joan Akena smiles for the Camera. @2021, Mercy

“Like any other human I have faced challenges, picked lessons from here and realized that life is always a learning process. Some of my greatest education has come from CARE International in Uganda.” begins 41-year-old Honorable Joan Akena.

10 years ago, growing up in Gulu district- Northern Uganda, Joan had no political ambitions. Her immediate goals were to find money to continue with secondary school since her parents were unable to afford school fees for six children at a go. Without her father’s knowledge, she started doing house-maid duties for a few

people in her community and would earn Shs 50,000 a month.

“School fees was not the only problem. The LRA war was also ongoing, many youth were abducted and I was not spared. I managed to escape the first two times and during the last attempt, the rebels let me go because I wore a holy rosary just like them. As soon as I returned, my father decided to send me to my Uncle in Kampala for both safety and school’s sake,” she narrates.

Unfortunately, just when all the trouble seemed to cease, Joan’s father passed away in 2010 and left with her dreams to become a nurse. Unsupported by her uncle, Joan decided she would join a convent and become a nun but she was rejected because her father had two wives.

“I started selling cassava and fish to make money for my siblings. I figured since I could at least read and write, why not let the others study too? However, I kept thinking about my future and how I want to change it for the better. Will I ever be able to return to school?” she wondered!

2011 was when Joan was introduced into the world of politics and campaigns. Through the contestants’ speeches, she started realizing what her community lacked, especially government aid in the health sector. She started building her manifesto, picked nomination forms for Women Councilor, Laroo Pece Division, Gulu district.

“I contested in 2011, 2016, 2017 for women councilor and women chairperson respectively. I sat down and asked myself what was wrong.”, she continues narrating.

Eventually, Joan was identified as a community activist by CARE and was summoned for a women leadership training

“I specifically benefited from the topic ‘How to become a leader.’ I realized the reason I had been failing was because I was not knowledgeable enough and lacked courage. The trainer talked about being bold enough, having direct eye contact and being humble. We were warned that people will accuse us wrongly, ask tough question but we shouldn’t lose our temper. We should answer calmly and appropriately. Above all, we were taught to dress respectfully and according to the occasion,” she smiles.

Joan diligently took notes which she constantly refers to, to this date. Before her campaigns in 2021, as taught, she would stand in front of the mirror every day wearing a gomesi, remind herself of the lessons learnt, rehearse her speech, and then step out courageous enough.

“I got 574 votes making me win by 10. I was very happy. Even though the expectations are sometimes higher than my pay, people have started to respect me and I am getting exposure on leadership. I am forever grateful to CARE and the training they offered that changed my life,” Joan concludes.