

## NEWS BUSINESS



Queen's Pizza restaurant in Buruburu, Nairobi, on February 7 /LEAH MUKANGAI

## STILL IN BUSINESS

# How baker hit by eyesight loss survived Covid mishap

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Peninah Ntong'ondou was robbed by employees when she went blind but bounced back

THE entrepreneurial world often demands determination, creativity and resilience since challenges are inevitable, as any successful businessperson will tell you.

In Kenya, about 400,000 micro, small and medium enterprises do not get to celebrate their second anniversary due to numerous challenges in a tough business environment.

The story of Peninah Ntong'ondou, founder and CEO of Queens Pizza and Queen Creamery, is however one of refusal to die despite waves of adversity.

She narrated her journey to the Star during an interview at her Queens Pizza restaurant on the first floor of T-Square Mall in Buruburu, Nairobi.

It all started in 2012, when Ntong'ondou parted ways with her employer after sustaining an eye injury that affected her performance.

"I believe the injury fast-tracked my dream because now it was either I start a business or go hungry," she said.

"I also had monthly bills including my eye drops, which were at that time costing Sh15,000 a month."

She had no option but to think of self-employment, hence she ventured into business.

The budding entrepreneur had a dream of starting her own pizza business in the capital one day.

But she did not know when until she got caught up in a riot in Nairobi CBD and sustained serious injuries to her eye, which forced her to resign from her job.

Ntong'ondou had built experience

on everything pizza during her tenure at chain restaurant Pizza Inn, where she worked for six years.

She had also worked at European Foods, which was located at the then Nakumatt Ukay in Westlands, Nairobi, where she was branch manager for one year before the injury, which she describes as a blessing in disguise. "I had to do something and with that, I am here today, to some extent I don't regret the eye injury."

Her journey has not been easy as she weathered the Covid-19 pandemic, the death of her father, temporary vision loss and demolition of her business, all within the span of two and a half years.

Having started baking from her kitchen to survive, she built clients who helped her dream of owning a physical branch come true.

Ntong'ondou went commercial in 2019, when she opened the first Queens Pizza branch on Mumias Road in Buruburu, where Tusksys Supermarket (now closed) agreed to sublet some space to her.

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PENINAH NTONG'ONDU

*No one could come and sit down for a meal. We did not own a motorbike for deliveries, so we had to rethink*



Queen's Pizza founder Peninah Ntong'ondou during an interview with the Star at the restaurant in Buruburu on February 7 /LEAH MUKANGAI

Barely a year into business, the Covid-19 pandemic struck, with the first case reported in Kenya in March 2020.

"It was about six months after opening when Covid came," she recalls.

"We had just revamped the space and got new furniture, when we were told to take out all the furniture due to the Covid-19 strict operating rules. There were no sit-downs anymore."

The business had mainly focused on walk-in customers, meaning it was no longer business as usual with the pandemic.

"No one could come and sit down for a meal. We did not own a motorbike for deliveries, so we had to rethink," she said.

"It was then that we bought our first motorbike and started focusing more on deliveries so that the business could survive and pay our bills. This decision saved the business as it went beyond serving Buruburu clients to some as far as Syokimau."

"Before the pandemic, we were not big on deliveries save for one-off orders, which we would deliver using normal boda boda operators that I was in touch with when I was baking from home," she says. During the pandemic, she sent some of her staff on paid leave in a compassionate move, which ate into the business's bottom line.

As she fought to survive the pandemic, Ntong'ondou lost her father in July the same year.

This hit her hard, and as she was

dealing with the loss of a loved one, she developed a complication that saw her lose her vision.

"In September that year, I went blind for three weeks and I let my supervisor at the time to run the shop because I couldn't see," Ntong'ondou recounted her ordeal.

"I gave my logins and passwords and the supervisor and accountant ganged up to steal from me. Someone even tried running away with my motorbike at that time."

"I lost a lot of money during that period, which almost brought my business to closure."

Luckily, she regained her eyesight but at a high cost, including the medication that she still uses to date.

"If it means letting someone go for your dream to survive, then let them go and that is what I did," she said.

She identified untrustworthy employees and cashflow challenges as some of the biggest impediments to growth.

Her business would later face another trying time as Tusksys started going down in 2021.

"As we shook off the effects of the pandemic, we were hit by demolitions," she said.

"The space I was operating in had been sublet under Tusksys, which had leased the entire building."

"I was a Tusksys tenant and not the landlord himself. When Tusksys was exiting, we were collateral damage. It was a huge hit, worse than Covid."

The demolition came at a time when she had borrowed heavily to refurbish her restaurant.

Ntong'ondou took personal loans to sustain her brand, and having no restaurant space, she invested in a food truck, which she stationed at a different mall in Eastlands.

"I was under depression because I saw my dream dying," she says.

She was, however, lucky to secure space at the same building her first restaurant was in after the landlord reopened it for occupancy after renovation.

"The food truck helped me build back the physical branch again, and yes, we are back bigger and better, with both pizza and creamery business," she said.

"So I am grateful for both branch and food truck."

She plans to open more branches in the city, with a target of Utawala, Thika Road and Lang'ata.

"I am doing my market research to ensure it makes business sense before opening new branches," she said.

For those seeking to become entrepreneurs, she said they should expect setbacks but must believe in their dreams.

"You don't have to start big, just start with what you have no matter how small," she advises.

## (+) INSTANT ANALYSIS

According to the Kenya National Chambers of Commerce and Industry, 80.4 per cent of businesses in the country experienced a significant decrease in sales from the period before the pandemic to Nov/Dec 2020, and another 16.3 per cent experienced limited sales decrease in their businesses. The pandemic killed 2,117 people