

# STAYING TRUE TO HER ROOTS

*Adelaide Laourou*

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*In the journey of life, we may reach different destinations, travel various paths, go places and explore the world, but like the trees that stand tall and monuments that are positioned erect, we always come back to our roots the component that keeps us firm no matter where our circumstances lead us to.*

## **Worth the sacrifice**

A native of Bantè, Mrs Adelaide Laourou is a wonderful example of someone who has remained true to her roots. An overview of her life leads us to the conclusion that she has made huge sacrifices for the comfort of those around her, but as it is with kind people, her sacrifices did not go for a waste. No matter how difficult they were at some point of time, years later, she found the pieces of puzzle falling in place, and bearing sweet fruits as her reward.

## **Her mother played a crucial role**

Peeking into her early life, we are informed that Mrs Adelaide spent her childhood in Dassa until she obtained her bachelor degree, after which she was required to step out to Abomey Calavi in order to pursue her Master's. Having lost her father at a young age, her mother was a strong figure in her life. However, as life would have it, around the time she started university, her mother passed away, leaving behind her two siblings under her guardianship.

## **Setting her priorities straight**

With a challenging economic condition, two siblings without a guardian and her being away in a distant land, she had to set her priorities right. At such a crucial moment of her life, where she was given the choice between pursuing her own dreams and stepping into the shoes of her deceased mother, she selflessly chose the latter option. She quit her studies in order to be a support system to those who needed her.

## **She quit her studies to provide for her family**

By quitting her studies halfway, she started working at an NGO in her village, Akpassi, so that her siblings would not be deprived of education. She did not succumb to the humongous tides of difficulties, and did her utmost to make ends meet. She shouldered the responsibility that she was left with and since opportunities knock on the doors of those who are seeking for it, in 2000, she witnessed one that proved to be a blessing in disguise. In that year, she heard about a call for candidature by a local structure and succeeded to obtain a scholarship, thanks to which she was able to





resume her studies and thus achieve her Master's degree in Local development and decentralization.

### ***Using her degree to start her project***

After obtaining her degree, she went back to Bantè in order to value local fruits and vegetables. However, due to the lack of financial resources initially, she sought help from her town nationals. She was thereby able to start her project in 2008, by working with a group of 35 women named OLORE, in which she was responsible for processing and external relations.

### ***Succeeding through much needed support***

Taking baby steps, as a team, they started setting goals and working towards achieving them. Gradually, they started processing local products such as cashew apple juice, which is their key product, pineapple juice, mango juice, baobab juice and tamarind juice. In 2011, the group received the support of the African Cashew Initiative (iCA) which trained them on cashew processing methods. Considering that Mrs Adelaide did not have much experience in this segment and hadn't received many trainings, it proved to be extremely beneficial. This was also followed by the support of the project GiZ in 2014 which provided them with equipment for cashew apple processing.

### ***Establishing her enterprise***

In 2013, Mrs Adelaide reached a milestone where she established her own company named "AGBARA" and her processing unit in Dassa. This was also the center for processing local fruits and raw cashew nuts into roasted kernels which were then marketed under the brand VITA'LINES. Presently, Mrs Adelaide's unit has a capacity

of roughly 7 MT of roasted kernels processed and about 6,000 liters of cashew apple juice. She has 20 employees, mostly women.

### ***Providing added benefits to the women employees***

While elaborating on the topic of labor availability in her region, she comments, people these days do not prefer tough works, especially women, and as the processing methods used in her factory are difficult and manual, it's not easy to find workers, so she deals with those who are available.

Since she has many women employees, she works towards giving them added benefits from the job, which include, sensitization on rural women empowerment and emancipation by executing many trainings on agri-food processing methods, fruits juice production technics, good hygiene and good manufacturing practices, HACCP method, food safety and many more. Along with this, she generously offers advices and help when they face some familial issues. She believes that through trainings and modification of market policies, condition of women in this field can be improved significantly.

### ***Standing tall in a male dominated sector***

Similarly, commenting about her male employees, she says she has no problem when it comes to dealing with them as everybody knows their place in the factory and are aware about their contribution to ensure smooth flow. Also, she does not think she is denied rewards in the market or discriminated.

This is generally a male dominated sector, but she feels being a lady does not stop her from being recognized in it. After all, with the motto to keep working hard and never give up, she is bound to receive recognition.

***Not an easy job***

However, she faces her own set of challenges in the cashew sector, shortage of raw materials being one among them. Also, when it comes to roasted cashew kernels, the work is very difficult as it is done manually, by craftsmen.

So far, quite unfortunately, these challenges remain unsolved although she is working hard to be able to buy modern equipment to make work easier and produce more.

***Catering to many fields***

While discussing about her firm, we see that as the Managing Director, she shoulders many responsibilities. Working full time, she monitors the production chain from the beginning to the end; she enters in contact with the customers, the suppliers to make sure everything is going well with their commands, also ensuring their delivery on time.

***Juggling to the best of her ability***

While looking into the management of these processing units, she is heavily involved in educating her children and does her best to be there for them. As she has the full support of her husband, he is comprehensive when she is busy at work. Her children are getting familiar with the idea as well, even though it is difficult for her to go weeks without seeing them. Nevertheless, she does her best to juggle her role as a spouse, mother and owner of her firm.

Having such a supportive family is a boon definitely, for her profession is her passion. It is a source of mighty happiness to her as she is doing it for her community, her people and her family.

***Self-made woman!***

Considering the fact that she had no family members working in such a sector whom she could look up to, and not much experience when she started with the aim of valuing local fruits, especially cashew apple since in her village, people discarded it after using the nut, it is a moment of pride to be a witness to her beautiful journey. It is safe to say that she is a self-made woman, as she ended up in the sector through her own research, findings and dedication towards her land to offer social service.

While staying true to her words, we see that her products stand out in the market as they are available in the natural form, sans the chemicals as she holds customer satisfaction in very high regard.

***Aiming for growth***

About her future projects, Mrs Adelaide comments she is working hard on getting certification for her products, getting modern equipment to be able to satisfy her customers because of the growing demand. She is also aiming to make her products known abroad.

Above all, she sees herself as a leader in the industry in the years to come. And this statement of hers is proof enough, a message and a hope to all women across the globe who wish to work in this sector, to pursue their goals. For if you can dream it, you can do it!

