



SERVING WITH DILIGENCE AND PRIDE IN A COMPETITIVE INDUSTRY

Working under the direction and supervision of licensed pharmacists, a Pharmacist order, prepare and dispense medicines. Introducing seasoned Pharmacist Assistant, Isabella Gustavo, whose caring, but methodical nature makes her a favourite amongst customers at one of the capital's landmark pharmacies, Langerhans Pharmacy. This is her story.

CHILDHOOD

Isabella Gustavo is the second eldest daughter of Angolan refugees who grew up at Rundu in the Kavango-East region. Bella, as she is affectionately known, grew up in a close-knit family and excelled in Mathematics and Science at primary school level. "I come from a family of science minds. Some family members in Angola are medical doctors and my dad's brother is also a renowned scientist. So, I guess it's in the genes", she shares.

Her teachers at Grootfontein High School soon recognised Bella's aptitude and encouraged her to pursue career options in the science field, which included the option of one day qualifying as a medical doctor. Not that the young Rundu girl needed their encouragement. "Seeing people in my community suffer because of a lack of access to medical services convinced me to get involved in the medical industry. I knew early on that I wanted to play a part in ensuring that people who need medical attention are attended to", she explains.

TERTIARY STUDIES

It came as no surprise to her parents and close friends when after matriculating; Isabella applied for a Bachelor of Science degree at the University of Namibia. "I had good grades and was accepted. So, I made the journey to the capital and enrolled", she notes.

It was not to be, however, as financial constraints pushed her into abandoning her studies in 1996. "I had no choice to abandon my dream; not because of academic performance, but because of not being able to afford tuition and other student-related expenses. I couldn't secure a bursary or loan. My dreams were shattered. It wasn't easy", she reminisces.

Bella's science background played a part in her landing a job at a private medical practice, until she learned of an apprenticeship opportunity at Langerhans Pharmacy, to undergo in-service training as a pharmacist assistant. "It was a true case of grasping the opportunity. I did my utmost to impress at the interview", Bella notes.

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Isabella Gustavo

Pharmacist Assistant

APPRENTICESHIP

Although initially placed on a week's probation, Isabella's diligence, friendliness and attention to detail convinced Langerhans' managers to offer her a fulltime apprenticeship.

Working under the tutelage of seasoned pharmacists, Bella took to her new environment like a fish to water. "Apprenticeship is all about a commitment to succeed and a willingness to learn. The work is multifaceted, and on top of the technical and clerical parts, covers various other important aspects including a customer-service orientation, sound planning and organisational skills and being able to work in a team setup. These are all important skills to possess", Bella shares.

Isabella also excels on the customer-service front. Coupled with her multilingual ability and excellent communication skills, her customer-first approach has made her a favourite amongst the pharmacy's loyal clientele. "The apprenticeship at Langerhans offered me a way back into this sector. I've been here for fifteen years now and what keeps me going is the fact that I'm able to play my part in assisting others in caring for their health. I'm learning every day. And yes, it is nice when some of our regular customers walk in and ask for me. Some don't want to deal with my colleagues. They just want Bella. I'm their favourite", she jokes.

EMPLOYER ASSET

Pharmacies attach significant importance to quality, hygiene and safety; and expect employees to adhere and subscribe to such requirements. Isabella's attention to detail, methodical approach and professional demeanour make her an asset to her employer. Sound judgment and decision-making add to her reputation as a diligent and industrious employee who requires minimum supervision.



"Retail pharmacies can get very busy at times and our work is all about precision. As pharmacist assistants, our most important job is to lessen the pressure on our pharmacists and ease their workload. We need to be agile and flexible - mix a cream here, or stock a shelf there; or offer advice in terms of affordable off-the-shelf medication here, and place an order there. You're always on your feet. Never a dull moment", Bella explains.

"I cannot dispense all types of medicines; some are only dispensed by the pharmacist. Dispensing is not just about taking medicine off the shelf and giving it. Medicines can be dangerous. So, labeling and ensuring that medication instructions are clear and accurate are important. Furthermore, it is also about being pro-active to potential contra-indications. So, when a patient comes in, we need to know a bit about them, before giving them their medicine. We also ask questions such as what they are allergic to", Bella explains.



PEOPLE SKILLS

Not only are good pharmacist assistants multi-skilled, methodical and responsible, they also possess excellent people skills. Bella ticks all the boxes. “In as much as my approach is always very customer-centred, I appreciate that medication is highly legislated - and for good reason. As such, those of us who work in this sector need to have a thorough understanding of all requirements. It’s all about responsibility and often you need to be very firm with clients who might want to take shortcuts”, she explains.

“Although some of our clients consider me a favourite, make no mistake, I’ll be the first one to call them to order, should I sense that they are trying to take shortcuts. Trust and honesty from the client is very important. Just the other day, I had a customer who was not honest about the headache medication he took before, and after a cycling event. He kept on taking more of the same medication and ended up in the emergency room”, Bella shares.

“Communication is very important in my line of work. Sometimes you need to talk to people about things that they are very uncomfortable with. You need to be firm, yet tactful; steady, yet considerate. Often your interaction involves sharing confidential information and the client needs to be comfortable that she can trust you with that information. And you can never betray that trust”, she adds.

FAMILY LIFE

When away from the demands of work, Isabella finds sanctuary in the company of her 18-year old son and

her sister, Eunice, with whom she has formed a close bond, since childhood. They don’t only appreciate her friendship and support, but trust her advice and guidance on the responsible application and use of medication and a healthy lifestyle.

“My family is my refuge. Yes, my job can be taxing at times. Then, they are the ones I reach out to when feeling a bit down and out. My father instilled in all his children the value of family and the importance of strong family ties. I’m now like their own ‘family doctor’, as they will first call me to double check if their doctor-prescribed medication is indeed safe to use”, Bella shares.

Asked about the prospects for future local pharmacist assistants, Isabella is very enthusiastic. “With the right skill set, anyone can succeed. Although still a relatively small market, more and more opportunities are coming up with new retail pharmacies opening their doors and more hospitals and public health facilities being constructed across the country. These facilities need pharmacies, pharmacists and pharmacist assistants. So, if this is what you want to do, then by all means, give it a go. It’s a fun job”, Bella concludes.

Isabella Gustavo - A principled, diligent and industrious servant leader. Her selfless commitment to her calling allows her to enrich the lives of everyone she comes in contact with. Her story teaches us that in serving others, the seeds you plant are of more value than the harvests you reap. She is living her dream. She is living her passion!

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