VALERIE OLEKIA BUSAKA
Disability is not something you plan for

If she is not carrying a white cane, you might expect a smile back when approaching Valerie, but you are not likely to get one until you are about 5cm close because that's how far she sees clearly. Beyond that, she can only see a human figure approaching. What started as a headache at form three in May 2012 led, in about three months, to the loss of almost all of her sight and a brain surgery to remove a tumour. She narrated the three-month journey and thereafter to ANN MUITIRIRI

Valerie was having bad headaches, but her teachers said she was either pretending, homesick or just had exam anxiety. Sometimes, she was allowed to rest at the sick bay but even the pain medications she was being given by the nurse were not effective. Besides the headache, she started to lag behind especially in math classes. She was in pain and had a hard time moving as fast as she previously did with all those equations. What she did not know was that she had slowly begun to lose her sight and was sometimes even hitting the wrong keys on the calculator without knowing it.

At some point she decided enough was enough and through the help of a friendly teacher, she called home and explained to her parents her predicament. They sent her uncle who was available then to school, and despite teachers' explanations of Valerie just being troublesome, he insisted on taking her to hospital.

At Kakamega General Hospital, the doctor she saw told them that she seemed to have a tumour in her brain, which was pressing on her optic nerve and affecting her sight. He referred them to Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital for a CT scan that confirmed that indeed she had a brain tumour and needed surgery for its removal. For this, she was referred to Kenyatta National Hospital (KNH) where there were neurosurgeons. The appointments, tests and consultations took time and they started to go to Kenyatta in July.

For three weeks, in which her sight continued to deteriorate, Valerie and her mother made trips to KNH where they would join the queue but were never reached. One day, on the corridors, they met a neurosurgeon who told them that if they could, transferring to Nyeri Provincial General Hospital would hasten their case, as the same surgeons went there on select days, and there was a shorter list of patients in Nyeri. The list on which she was in Kenyatta had patients waiting from all the way back in 2010.

By the time she was at the top of a list with five patients waiting surgery at Nyeri Provincial General Hospital that August, sight in her right eye was lost completely and her left could barely see. The tumour was removed alright, but Valerie and her mother had bad news to contend with. Her sight would not be restored. This news was made worse by the fact that she had been told of lenses that boost sight and so had been sure that after recovering from surgery, all she needed was a pair of glasses, which was cool anyway.

Shock on her! After recovery after going through six months of medication for tuberculosis of the brain (the tumour had been a tuberculoma), she had to accept her state and go for rehabilitation at Machakos Technical Institute for the Blind in April 2013. Life had to move on, and she knew it. She learnt braille, mobility skills, independent living skills, socialisation and computer skills using assistive technology.

In 2014, she was admitted to Form two at a special school for the visually impaired. This was a year late for her studies, but she was also still new to braille, so she needed to catch up. She also needed to change her learning subjects as she could no longer study subjects such as math, chemistry and physics. She switched to others such as home science and business studies, which she had never taken.

She took all this in good stride and emerged with a C+ which earned her an internship at Inable, a non-governmental organisation which works to improve access to resources and opportunities for the visually impaired, and admission to Kenyatta University to take a Bachelor's degree in Gender and Development Studies.

She recently completed her undergraduate studies and as she awaits her graduation, she continues to volunteer at the Do it With Boldness Foundation where she has been since 2017 tackling gender issues. She plans to start a Masters in International Relations early next year and start a family while on the course.

"Life is a privilege," she says. "Out of the five patients that were operated on that day, I am the only one who fully recovered and is alive. But still, even disability is not something that one plans for. I have learnt to appreciate life."