

“It's one opportunity that I've never taken for granted. It gave me the drive.”

A Conversation with Sheryl Apondi, graduate and staff member of Digital Divide Data

Ann Mikia
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Ann Mikia: What is your name, and how did you first learn about Digital Divide Data?

Sheryl Apondi: My name is Sheryl Apondi. I got to learn about DDD through a friend back in the village in Migori. He shared with me what DDD does. I got interested because at that point, I had finished Form Four, even though there was no fee for me to join the campus. I was just back there at home waiting, "Okay, I've waited for one year, nothing is happening." Then you're just there.

One thing that gave me the drive is because of the kind of options that I was given, considering the type of mindset that was there in the village, you get to find people recommending you for marriage to people, telling, "You know I have a brother who is a soldier. You can pick from that option." Then it's something that I didn't like. It used to be a painful thing. I didn't like it. When he shared, I applied. I did the application, and then I was invited for the interview.

When I came for the interview, I wasn't sure whether I would be picked because at that point, there was some kind of training that we were supposed to go through, and a lot of typing tests. At that point, I had not even interacted with any machine. We didn't own a laptop at that time. I'd go somewhere around town there, do the typing, get to match the speed so that I get to be picked, because speed was one of the things that they were looking for.

I got picked, and then I went through the training. Then after the training, when I came to DDD, in my mind, I was not looking at it as employment. I remember being very categorical when I was doing the interview, like, "I'm here for school, I just want to go to

school. My interest is not to get the job," because that is what I wanted. I had seen my mates, my colleagues who we had back then, had joined the campus, now in their second year, and I had not joined. I was desperate, like, I need to be in school.

Then I got the opportunity to sign both a job and an education contract, and we started from there. After two years, I was enrolled at KU [Kenya University] and did my bachelor's degree in education. I graduated in 2019 with a second-class upper. Then I was continuing with my job at that time. The drive now changed. You see, I've already gotten the degree, and now I'm looking at it like, "Okay, the money aspect is coming in, considering with the maturity." At that time, I was a bit naive, and my priorities now start changing.

I now have the work, and then I've also graduated from school. Because there were so many of us here, but now what makes you stand out is the kind of work you are doing. Just staying focused. You are one person who is dedicated. You try to deliver things as you have been assigned. I got to rise through the ranks. I started as an associate, and then now, I was promoted to a team lead, and this was based on my performance.

Ann Mikia: When did you graduate from DDD, the initial training that they give?

Sheryl Apondi: The initial training took six months, and then after the training, they were picking people who had passed the training.

Ann Mikia: Did they pick those who passed for university education?

Sheryl Apondi: No, the training that we were taken through was a setup like the one we have right now, where you are taught typing skills, you are taught choreography, you're taught how do you construct an email, and such kind of things. It was a different kind of thing comparing it with what we learned in school.

Ann Mikia: Where were you living when you came to Nairobi?

Sheryl Apondi: I was living in Kawangware with my elder sister.

Ann Mikia: Did you have any work before you were picked by DDD?

Sheryl Apondi: No, I had no work experience. It was the first job I landed.

Ann Mikia: Which technical skills were you trained in by DDD?

Sheryl Apondi: A lot of computer skills. They were very categorical because of the kind of setup here, you have to be very conversant with computer skills. You would know how to type, how to maneuver around things, around a computer, and all that..

Ann Mikia: Now, looking back, do you think there are some things DDD ought to have done or should do for its students?

Sheryl Apondi: The reason why I'm saying no is because at that time, around 2014, computer wasn't a big deal. It was already in place, but then, not everyone had access to it. Now, with that, us getting access to it and getting to learn those skills here was an opportunity for us. Now, things have changed. The world is moving in a different direction, and it's going the machine learning way. Even if something is to be done, then it has to go with the tech skills needed, the machine way. A lot of things are being done with robots and machines.

Ann Mikia: What work do you do here at DDD?

Sheryl Apondi: I'm a project supervisor.

Ann Mikia: Did they train you in project supervision since you told me you did a bachelor of education?

Sheryl Apondi: Yes, I think I learned through experience, because I started from an associate and then now to team lead. Then I get to learn through the job. It's all those experiences that I gained here.

Ann Mikia: What would you say has been the impact of DDD, the training, and your employment on your personal life and that of your family?

Sheryl Apondi: A lot because I always look at it, if at all, I didn't get that chance, maybe I wouldn't be here. I would've been somewhere else. Maybe married, no school. Now that I am here, I see it as one of the best opportunities that I have had. It's one opportunity that I've never taken for granted. It gave me a lot. It gave me the drive. If these people were able to do this, for me, I was like, I would not just stop from what I had gained, like getting my bachelor's, and then I would stop it from there. I had more in my mind.

Ann Mikia: Do you still maybe think about pursuing a teaching job since you graduated with a bachelor of education?

Sheryl Apondi: I changed my career path because I had a lot of experience on managing projects, so I enrolled for project management. That's for masters.

Ann Mikia: What's your greatest success as a DDD graduate?

Sheryl Apondi: Getting my degree. Getting my papers and getting the experience, and having to know that I'm already getting the best in terms of technology, because this is a fast tech environment, so I know I'm learning from the best.

Ann Mikia: How has DDD impacted the tech scene in the country, or even how has it impacted the students, your fellow colleagues, or your fellow alumni, beneficiaries?

Sheryl Apondi: For fellow alumni, I think many people really learned a lot of their skills here. We learned a lot of skills working here. If you look around, even for the alumni, the

skills they had then, the initial skills that they had gained right after Form Four, they were all acquired from here.

Ann Mikia: Is there a continuing network among fellow DDD graduates?

Sheryl Apondi: Yes, we do have an alumni welfare and also a group for the alumni.

Ann Mikia: Does DDD support this network?

Sheryl Apondi: Yes, it does. Initially, it had started while some members were here. Even some people like me who are still here we are on the welfare group. I've seen the impact sometimes in trying to support us. Support in terms of getting job opportunities, because some of them left here and then maybe along the way, they lost a job, and then they had to maneuver themselves to get a place where they can earn some income. I've seen that even if there are opportunities here, we get to see such posts in the group and then get to inform the alumni group that, "Look, we have an opportunity here, you can try," considering the kind of skills that they had gained here and wherever they had gone.

Ann Mikia: If you could tell DDD three things to do differently to improve their program, what would you tell them?

Sheryl Apondi: One thing that I would tell DDD right now is there's a lot that is happening in the machine learning world, and trying to look at the kind of trainings we have currently, I think they should be based on a skill that is needed on the outside market, because it will be very marketable for the people who have such kind of skill. There's a group that was trained about AWS cloud engineers. There's a cohort that was trained like that. You can see 80% of them are successful alumni. At that time, that was a skill that was needed in the market. Considering that they had trained that kind of skill, it made it very easy for them to get opportunities outside.

Ann Mikia: Is the skill still being offered here?

Sheryl Apondi: The training stopped, but it was there. The people who attended that training, I can say 80% of them are very successful.

Ann Mikia: What do you mean by successful?

Sheryl Apondi: Successful in that they were able to get jobs in other companies. If you try to trace the places they have gone to, you can tell that this was a skill that was needed in the market.

Ann Mikia: Finally, anything else that you would like to say about your experience with the DDD and its impact on you and your family?

Sheryl Apondi: The impact is good. I think I would love if these continue, especially for those people who need it, because I know some people are staying hopeful if they could get avenues like this, so that they get to at least advance in terms of their education,

employment, and get to improve their lives, like the orphans and people who need it. I know some really need this kind of opportunity, because at some point, I was there and I'm able to tell that they need it. It's the only way for them. I'd just encourage them to continue doing what they are doing, continue impacting life. It's something good, and it's something we live to appreciate.

Ann Mikia: Have you reached out to others to apply for the opportunity here?

Sheryl Apondi: I've been referring them here through the BEST training, only that some of them, once they have finished the training, they like to get opportunities in terms of job, because now they have to go back to the village and start their lives over again.

Ann Mikia: Thank you so much. I wish you all the best in your work at DDD.

Ann Mikia brings over 25 years of expertise in health reporting, production, training, and mentoring in journalism. She is an accredited solutions journalism trainer with Solutions Journalism Network. She served as a judge at the Annual Journalism Excellence Awards (AJEA) by the Media Council of Kenya. She has published stories on platforms such as Science Africa, Daily Nation, and Mail & Guardian. She holds an MA in Communication Studies and a BA in Communication and Sociology from the University of Nairobi.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*