



The Canadian Gift Tableware Association award (that Sara received) along side the bark cloth bag which was one of the top 10 winning products of the season.

## Sara Katebalirwe Scoops Prestigious CGTA Award

Sara is a graduate of and trainer with UWEAL's ACCESS! for African Businesswomen in International Trade Programme.

At 51 Sara Katebalirwe is the proud owner and Managing Director of Marie-Sar-Agencies Ltd., Uganda's leading exporter of indigenous hand stitched authentic bark cloth fashion and home accessories to the United States of America.

Widowed with two children; Sara struggles to be a good parent as well as a successful business woman. With her Makerere University Bachelor of Arts Degree in Social Administration and Sociology coupled with certificates in weaving, surface design, product development and entrepreneurship, Sara started Marie-Sar Agencies in 1985 as a sole proprietor. It was basically a home based business which was later incorporated in 1993 with three directors – producing made to measure ladies' garments. When the business started to make measurable profits, Sara moved it to bigger premises employing 10 full time staff.



Sara poses at the Africharisma booth. She sells the bulk of her exports in Canada through Africharisma.

In 2000 Sara made a tough decision; she decided to change the product line from producing ladies' garments from imported material to producing handcrafted products from the famous bark cloth. At this point she also decided to move the business back home to reorganize herself and think innovatively. This move was very strategic for the growing tourism industry, the world wide demand for authentic hand made products and the trendy "ethical fashion" which involves using natural or organic materials while protecting the environment.

The change in product line pre-ordained a change in market trends. Consequently in 2002 the business expanded employing 50 full time and temporary staff, with the objective of targeting foreign markets. Sara started attending various trade fairs in Europe, Africa and the United States. Experiences of these were not as profitable as she had anticipated; large amounts of money were spent in travel, food and accommodation. While at these fairs Sara would hardly sell anything. She used to get disenchanted, but what she did not realize was that,

these fairs created strong and lasting networks for her business and widened her product range and vision scope.

Through a training workshop organized by UWEAL and the Trade Facilitation Office of Canada (TFOC), Sara met a Canadian lady - Petra Noyes - who picked an interest in her products. They communicated for a while and eventually decided to conduct business. In no time at all, Sara was exporting enormous volumes of fashion and home accessories to Africharisma in Canada (Petra is the proprietor of Africharisma).

Recently in July 2007, Petra and the Trade Facilitation Office of Canada (TFOC) forwarded Sara an email from the Board of Directors of the Canadian Gift & Tableware Association (CGTA), one of Canada's leading trade associations, congratulating her because her bark cloth bags had been selected for a top 10 product award.

On 12th August 2007 in Toronto, Canada Sara was awarded the prestigious CGTA Award for one of her bark cloth bags. In recognition of the accomplishment Marie-Sar Agencies received the following:

- Product photograph and profile in the July/August issue of the Retail News magazine, a

leading industry publication.

- Invitation to the "Winners Circle" an exclusive cocktail reception and Awards dinner.
- Press releases in Canada's national and regional media.
- Notice to the entire CGTA membership and in the CGTA Wrap up issue.
- The bark cloth bag appeared in the special top 10 product display at the fall CGTA Gift Show.

Sara has faced a number of challenges over the years, the major challenge being the loss of her dear husband in 1993. This was an immense set back as far as business was concerned. It meant that she would have to develop and run a sustainable business on her own which would in turn support her family financially.

The other challenge was the big decision she made to go into bark cloth. It was an industry that had not been fully and creatively tapped into by anybody. She received a lot of discouragement from friends and on lookers about starting the business. However Sara, shut her ears to all the discouragement and followed her dream with persistence and resilience.

Just like any other Small and Medium Enterprise, Marie-Sar Agencies faced a lot of challenges in accessing finance.

She is grateful to UWEAL's WIC (Women Investment Club) Programme which provided loans to her at minimal interest rates. She also requests a 50% deposit or full payment on any orders she receives. Her input suppliers also provide her with credit services.

### Sara's business "dos"

- Always seek new opportunities.
- Strive to keep your customers satisfied.
- Determine your mission and objectives then endeavour to achieve them.
- Avoid getting contented easily.
- Always plan for your business and keep financial records - these facilitate performance assessments and reviews.
- Innovativeness and creativity in business.
- Look up to successful entrepreneurs and seek networking opportunities.
- Produce quality products for sustainable market demand.
- Persistence - even when the business faces overwhelming challenges.

Sara's motto - "Believe that you can succeed and you definitely will".