

ENCOUNTER: **TESSY JIBODU**, COO, ZARIS ACADEMY

‘SEVEN IS THE YEAR OF SUCCESS FOR BUSINESSES’

AT any point, the world of Tessy Jibodu revolves around fashion—fashionista, fashion designer, fashion tutor, she is fully 3-D; immersed in the art and business of fashion.

Her institute, Zaris Fashion and Style Academy, is a mecca for young and aspiring designers. In seven years, Zaris has become the Harvard of fashion education in Nigeria, graduating 700 designers who have founded 100 fashion businesses nationwide. Presently, the institute is revving up plans for its seventh year anniversary in October with a Zaris Power-themed week.

In this encounter Jibodu recounts her trajectory, drawing out the dichotomy between being a designer and a tutor in fashion and subtly let out the success secret of the fashion business.

Which one describes you better, a fashion designer or a fashion-designing tutor?

I studied Fashion Design at the Department of Industrial Design, Yaba College of Technology. So I have a requisite background in fashion education. Then I had business entrepreneurship training at Lagos Business School. I sew clothes for seven years, then closed shop for one year before setting up Zaris Fashion and Style Academy. So I am both a fashion designer and a fashion academy owner. I still do fashion designing. I got involved in training because I found that we needed to be innovative in what we are doing.

What gives you more joy, doing fashion or teaching fashion?

Teaching, though the training aspect of fashion is more tasking. You have to do more research, more reading to be able to teach. Having tried my hands on all aspects of fashion, I feel teaching is on a higher level. If you studied fashion, you have the ability to impart what you have learnt to the younger generation via teaching.

How does having gilt-edge training counts in your profession?

Today's fashion designing is totally different from the traditional idea of fashion designing some 10 years ago. Now there is a whole lot—pattern drawing and drafting, illustration, cloth ornamentation etc—these are the basics of what fashion education is about. The training helps to improve the output of garments that are produced in Nigeria. And we felt that was the best way to make a difference in what tailors produce at the end of the day.

What do seven years mean to a business?

To sustain a business in Nigeria—any business at all—is a lot of work, a lot of dedication, a lot of sacrifices. We pay a lot of taxes and we face other regu-

lar challenges encountered by business owners in this environment. So existing for seven years—wherein we have graduated 700 designers who have established 100 businesses and are doing great—is a great achievement. It is a milestone.

As a fashion school, we have won several awards, amongst others the Best Fashion School in West Africa. The best Designer for Africa Fashion Week 2017 was a Zaris alumnus. We have also been Da Viva ambassador consecutively in 2014, 2015 and 2016. We are graduating 80 students in 2018. It is a fulfilment for me to see those that we have trained making a difference in the industry.

How easy is it to earn a living as a fashion designer?

It is easy if you are creative—to be in the business of fashion, you have to keep evolving, doing new things—and if you understand how fashion business works in Nigeria in relation to elsewhere in the world.

Any highlight for the milestone anniversary?

The academy is showcasing the crème de la crème of its alumni, the very best and their businesses, alongside other established designers in the industry in a “Zaris-Power” theme exhibition.

We are also working in partnership with interested corporate organisations whose CSRs are oriented towards empowering young entrepreneurs to empower 20 young designers with passion for fashion education.

It has been an easy journey so far?

There is something called the Nigerian Factor to contend with—you want to take a loan, for instance, you have worked to meet the set criteria, at least 90 per cent, and yet, you still cannot scale the hurdle. It will be helpful to the industry and the general business ecosystem if the procedure can be lowered a bit so people can access much-needed loans. That is one way the government can help young businesses and young entrepreneurs in Nigeria.

Is there a secret to earning a living your own way?

Yes, two. The first, passion. If you don't have the passion, the stress inherent in the business can easily defeat and drive you to leave it. The second is persistence. Be consistent in the business. Always be there in the face of people, do a lot of adverts; use the social media to sustain your business.

What does it take to run a fashion outfit and a fashion school?

They are two different things. Running a standard fashion school takes a lot



JIBODU: PATIENCE IS THE KEY TO BUSINESS

from you and so, you cannot afford not to be well grounded in the business. You will not, for instance, be in any business and think, oh, I can run a school. As you are grounded in the fashion business, you must at the same time be grounded in fashion education to understand how to run a fashion training school.

Founding a fashion outfit whose stock-in-trade is sewing of ready-to-wear, for instance, will not require you being an expert—you can get someone to handle that part of it for you. The requirement for running a fashion school is the same as in any school—you must have a background in education for you to be able to teach effectively. So don't open a fashion school solely because you want to make money and not have a background in fashion designing.

The big lesson from your experience so far?

The lesson of patience. On one hand, we need people who studied fashion education to be teachers and facilitators in the institute. But they are difficult to come by. To find and engage them is an exercise in patience.

On the other hand, lots of students come into the training with a totally different idea of fashion and therefore makes it difficult for us to make an immediate impact. We first have to counsel them, and then try to understand their ideas before we proceed to inculcate ours into them. That process calls for patience.