

1 on 1 with Captain USAF Lukiah L.Nakabembe Mulumba

Contributed by Robert Kalugo
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American Sickle Cell Rescue Fund "To work towards the improvement of the general quality of life for people with sickle cell disease through treatment, fighting against the stigma associated with the disease, providing education and information on Sickle Cell disease management"

Where do you come from?

I am originally from a village called Kiiti in Wakiso district, Bombo road, 15 miles from Kampala city.

Where did you go to school?

I attended primary school at Uganda Marty's girls' primary boarding school Namugongo. I attended secondary school at Ndejje and Caltec Academy in Uganda. I obtained a degree of Bachelor of Science in Nursing at Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. I attended University of Detroit Mercy for masters in Nursing. Currently, I am enrolled at Stony Brook University in New York for completion of Master's degree in Family Nurse Practitioner.

How did you join the US Military and why?

As a United States Citizen, I was eligible to join any part of the four services I wanted. I decided to join the United States Air Force (USAF) in 2005 through the Officer Accession Program. I was immediately commissioned at a rank of second lieutenant. I attended the Commissioned Officer Training School at Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama. After graduation, I was posted at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. I joined the US military for three major reasons; first, to serve my country "America" and to give back to America for what it has enabled me to be who I am today. After 911, America was in great need of nurses like me to take care of the wounded soldiers and to support the men and women at war. Secondary, to be able to take care of my chronically ill child, and lastly, to use this plat form to help those unfortunate children suffering from sickle cell disease in Uganda.

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What role do you serve in the US military?

Currently, I am attached to the pediatric Intensive Care Flight at a military hospital here in San Antonio, Texas. I am an officer at a rank of Captain and I serve on active duty. I am always ready to serve any time for the success of the mission that USAF is entrusted.

How does it feel serving in a US military, do you feel proud?

First of all, I feel quiet blessed to be part of the most technologically advanced and professional fighting machine in the world. Secondly, I am also serving at the time US is at risk of terrorist attacks. And I feel like serving is doing part as a citizen. Finally, I am also able to use my status to raise awareness for the sickle cell disease patients in Uganda and especially the dying and suffering children.

Why did you start a non profit organization and what inspired you?

My first born daughter who is 7 years old now, was diagnosed of sickle cell disease in 2001 at the age of few days old. Since her diagnosis, she has gone through multiple hospitalizations with complex diagnostic studies and procedures. Most of these hospital visits are very painful and emotionally draining for me and my entire family. We have experienced sleepless nights, stayed up late administering narcotics to my angel just to eradicate her sickle cell pain crisis. There have been times when oral Morphine, Dilaudid, Tylenol with codeine, Motrin, and heat pads could not relieve her pain at home. For several times, we have traveled in the mid-nights to take our little angel to several emergency rooms. One day, I realized that I was so fortunate that my daughter was born in the US because she is able to access the latest medical interventions in sickle cell disease management known to man. Also, I was so distorted to learn that sickle cell disease in Uganda was a forgotten enemy where by sickle cell patients are ostracized where the basic pain management protocols are missing. I realized I had to do something. I got in touch with the local sickle cell association of Uganda. The best way to help was to form a non profit organization called Uganda -American Sickle Cell Rescue Fund (UASCRF) that would serve as conduit of assistance to the Uganda sickle cell disease cause.

So far what have you done to contribute to the help sickle cell disease sufferers in Uganda?

The first thing I did was to buy a van to alleviate transport problems the local Sickle Cell Association faces. 80% of the money came from my family and the rest were donations from well wishers here. Following my visit to Uganda in early 2008, and touring of the Sickle Cell Clinic and the Association offices, I was so surprised to find the clinic in deplorable situation. There was patient overflow, lack of any equipment. This is a dilapidated building made of plywood with mold and fungi growing in all crevices. The pediatric and adult patients are all seen in the same small space without privacy. There was no electricity, no running water, and most certainly no political will to change the situation quo. I realized that the sickle cell community needs to have a center with clinics, counseling, and training facilities. Mrs. Ruth Nakanja Mukiibi, the Chairperson of Sickle Cell Association of Uganda and a fore leading figure in sickle cell disease informed me that there is no land to build such a center in Uganda. I therefore decided to donate land for this purpose. I am happy to

report that the ground breaking ceremony will take place this month. I have also done counter-less interviews to the local, electronic, and print media that has helped to give sickle cell disease in Uganda a front line. I have also been assisting the local Sickle Cell Association of Uganda both financially and material. I have funded the first sickle cell disease documentary which should be airing on local TV next month.

How do you think Ugandans in the Diaspora should help?

Right now we need financial and material support to build this center. Ugandans in diaspora can send their contributions to Mrs. Ruth Nankanja Mukiibi in Uganda or they can send it directly to UASCRF. Those living in the US need to be reminded that their contributions are 100% deductible since my organization falls under 503 (b). Secondary, they can help us increase awareness by providing unbiased objective information on sickle cell disease to help eliminate stereotyping abroad and in Uganda.

Do you have offices in Uganda, how do you coordinate your activities?

I don't have offices in Uganda, but I have good working relationship with the Sickle Cell Association of Uganda through their Chairperson Mrs. Ruth Nankanja Mukiibi

How would people make donations?

People who are in Uganda can make financial, material contributions, or volunteer their time through the Sickle Cell Association of Uganda. People who are living in diaspora can make donations directly to UASCRF at website <http://www.uganda-americansickle.org>, or directly to the Sickle Cell Association of Uganda chairperson, Mrs. Ruth Nakanja Mukiibi.

According to statistics, 5,400,000 (20%) Ugandans suffer from sickle cell disease, this is an alarming number, how do you think we can effectively raise awareness for this deadly disease?

It takes concerted efforts of everybody including local and national NGO's, healthy industry, and all well wishers. The most important thing to do right now is that, this is a genetic inheritance which has nothing to do with black magic that sickle cell disease patients do not pose any curse. With medical achievements of today, they can lead a fairly normal life. It is not a death sentence as people want to believe, it just needs a little more emotional, and physical care, and support.

How do you cope with a family life and the expected military schedules?

The US Air Force is family oriented. It is a place that promotes growth by providing me with time off and other resources that help me to grow as a human being. Secondary, where there is commitment, there is always time to do things.

Thanks Lukiah for the interview. For more information about Captain USAF Lukiah L.Nakabembe Mulumba visit her website www.uganda-americansickle.org

By Robert Kalugo.