

BULLETIN

Sharing skills, saving lives

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by LAURA BUSHEIKIN



n Uganda, there are no biomedical engineers. When medical equipment breaks, it is often just shoved into a storage room. Sometimes, even new, perfectly functioning medical equipment, donated by a well-meaning NGO or foreign government wanting to help this country recover from years of brutal dictatorship and repression, just sits, gathering dust, because no one knows how to use it.

-They have lots and lots of graveyards of equipment!" says HSA member Tina Mi-rembe, a biomedical engineer at Richmond General Hospital.

But now, thanks in part to Mirembe, some of those graveyards are smaller, the "dead" equipment brought back to life.

Last February, Mirembe flew from Vancouver to Kampala, Uganda, her two-month-old baby in her arms, to volunteer her considerable skills as part of the Rotary Hearing Health Care Program.

Mirembe was born in Uganda. When she was still a child, her mother emigrated to Canada as a refugee. Shortly afterwards, Mirembe was able to join her mother here and was given landed immigrant status.

During her volunteer trip, Mirembe traveled with a group that included otolaryngologists, critical care nurses, operating room nurses, anesthesiologists, and other biomedical engineers. The team had three weeks in which to help as many patients, pass on as much knowledge, and leave conditions as improved as possible.

The odds against them were formidable: an estimated 7.5 million Ugandans live in abject poverty, lacking access to safe and clean water, and to health and education services. HIV and malaria are widespread. Medical education is severely limited and hospitals lack not only equipment and supplies, but trained personnel.

It was not necessarily the first place a hard-working 29-year-old nursing mother of two ... she also has a seven-year-old ... would choose to go.

Mirembe, however, was neither depressed nor daunted by what faced her.

-I felt that what we were doing was so important that I didn't have time for those kinds of emotions. The hospital we were working mostly out of provided care free of charge so we were taking care of the poorest people.

-If we even saved one patient, it was even more than sufficient. Because if you save one life, you save one

world, entire. We had to keep looking at that," she says.

Justine Mirembe Biomedical Engineering Technologist Richmond Hospital

During working hours, Mirembe would meet up on-site in a private hospital room with a nanny she had arranged ahead of time. That way she could easily take breaks to nurse her baby, and then get back to work, fixing one piece of equipment after another, from microscopes to thermometers.

Mirembe came to Canada when she was 12 and feels fully Canadian. She loves her life here, but says it was important for her to be able to go back to Uganda and help.

-There must be a purpose in me being born somewhere else in the world, a reason for it. Maybe it's so I can go back and give what I have learned."

Mirembe's capability, energy and optimism in the face of challenges have served her well in life.

Several years after the family moved to Canada, Mirembe's mother died, leaving her alone and responsible for two younger sisters. With help from the Ministry of Children and Families, she brought up her sisters while finishing first year college and later going on to complete a two-year biomedical engineering diploma program at BCIT. By then she had given birth to her first child. It was not an easy time.

-Learning to be a biomedical engineer was much harder than I anticipated. I did not know much about the technology, and had no background in health. Pretty soon I realized I was really in for it because I had so much to learn. But I absolutely managed it, even though it included failing one of the years so I had to redo it. I was just so determined to finish," she says.

-I feel like whatever happens, you just have to overcome, and keep overcoming. We can't let circumstances limit what we can become and do ... we have so much potential. There's a time to grieve, but no time to feel sorry for yourself. There's no way you should use your problems as an excuse to not do things in life. We can always help people," she says.

Helping people is a passion for Mirembe. That's why she loves her job.

-I love the fact that I'm able to help other professionals get their stuff done. You feel like you are a hero! Something doesn't work ... and you have a solution. Or a doctor is in the middle of a procedure and the power goes out and you can get it back. You get immediate gratitude!" she says.

Mirembe plans to return to Uganda again in 2009 for another stint with the Rotary Hearing Health Care Program. -One year is not enough. Follow up is very important. I feel very positive that it's just a matter of time and those guys will definitely get to where they need to go.

-Sure, I missed my pillow; the conditions were not the most comfortable, but it was absolutely, absolutely worth it. I thought I was going over there to give something, but I found I received so much more than I gave."In particular, the trip made her appreciate working conditions in Canadian hospitals.

-We complain a lot here in Canada ... we really do. But we have it so good here." That doesn't mean, however, that she thinks health care professionals in BC can take a pass on striving to improve their working conditions.

-There are a lot of things we can do to make this system better. We have to make sure we respect the people in our hospitals, that they are given a fair wage. Biomedical engineers have struggled in the last five years; we had the new government come in, had wages slashed, and had to go through lawyers to try to increase them. These are injustices! It means there are people who do not understand our work.

-Patient safety has to come first. That is one thing that we do right, and that is what makes our medical system great, compared to other places in the world. As for everything else ... it's an imperfect system but we are still

working on it," she says.

Tina Mirembes hard work and exemplary attitude are proof that there are indeed grounds for optimism ... not just here, but in Uganda, as well. 

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