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How They Built a Clinic Where There Was None in Lwala, Kenya

A DREAM COME TRUE: DELIVERING HEALTHCARE TO LWALA

Sons fulfill a father's dream to have a clinic in Lwala, Kenya, their village. You are listening to ReachMD, The Channel for Medical Professionals.

Welcome to a special segment Focus on Global Medicine. I am your host, Dr. Maurice Pickard, and joining me today is Dr. Milton Ochieng. Dr. Ochieng is a Resident in Internal Medicine at Washington University, Barnes-Jewish Hospital, St. Louis, Missouri, and his brother, Fred, who is a third year student at Vanderbilt Medical School in Nashville, Tennessee.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

Thank you both for joining us.

DR. MILTON OCHIENG:

Thank you Dr. Pickard.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

Thank you.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

I know you both grew up in Lwala, Kenya. To begin with, could you tell me a little bit about Lwala Community Alliance.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

This is Frederick Ochieng speaking. Lwala Community Alliance is actually a non-profit organization that we started over a year ago.

Basically it's just a group of friends and some mentors that we met along the way when we started this project of building the clinic back in Kenya. So, its basically you know our friends that we met during college and some of the mentors that have helped us form this community alliance. So, basically it's our non-profit organization that supports the work that is going on Lwala in Kenya.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

Could you give us an idea of what kind of village Lwala is and the place you grew up?

DR. MILTON OCHIENG:

This is Dr. Milton Ochieng. So, Lwala is a small rural village in Western Kenya. It has no electricity and no running water. It is situated about 2 hours south of Geisomu and about 30 kilometers from Lake Victoria in Western Kenya. Lwala is still a very communal community centered place. We have people, who still do a lot of subsistence farming as the back bone of the economy in Lwala and health care is very difficult to access and basically the reason for that is the nearest hospital is over 30 kilometers away, and in order to get any sick person to the hospital, previously we would have to put the sick person either on a wheelbarrow or if the person is able to balance on the back of a bicycle then you would have 1 person propping the sick patient on the back of the bicycle and then you know have another person pushing the handle bars and then you would go for over 45 minutes to the nearest paved road and then once you get to the paved road, you have to flag down a taxi and then travel for another hour or so to get a person to the hospital. So, it is the kind of ordeal that would take over an hour or two or sometimes even 3 hours to get to the nearest hospital. This was all before we got to the point where we were building the clinic in the village.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

How did you get this building started? How did you get the wherewithal to get it built and funded.

DR. MILTON OCHIENG:

This is again Dr. Milton Ochieng. The idea to get the clinic built, I would say was something that we in the village, while I always thought about for a long time and both Fred and I and our late father kept thinking about the needs of a village based on the realization that you know day in and day out, we would have close friends and family members who would fall gravely ill and we would see firsthand how difficult it was to get those people to the nearest hospital and so growing up we always longed for that opportunity to build a clinic or to have a clinic in our village and when we finally got to attend college in the United States both of us got to Dartmouth and then at Vanderbilt Medical School. The idea came about when I was in my sophomore year of college at Dartmouth and we went on a trip to Nicaragua and while we were there, we built a Women and Children's Health Clinic and it was while I was in Nicaragua for that trip through the Dartmouth Tucker Foundation that you know an idea occurred to me that the people in Nicaragua were experiencing just the similar problems that we were experiencing in rural Kenya, and so you know they did not have any electricity or any running water and it occurred to me that just as a college student we could make a difference working hand in hand with the local Nicaraguans, then I figured we could do a similar thing in Kenya and so then I got back to Dartmouth and talked to some of our advisors there and really just from you know getting together all of our connections at Dartmouth College and then later on at Vanderbilt, we were able to rally little kids in elementary schools and college students initially to get you know help us get the money that we needed in terms of fund raisers. You know we had kids at Richmond Middle School and schools in Hanover who put together you know penny vase and got over 70,000 pennies, you know that is like \$2000 that we needed to get us started. So, those were some of the humble beginnings of this project and Fred can talk more about how it all kind of came together. But, we started from such a small organization that was really just youth based and back bone of which was you know young people putting in their efforts towards realizing this dream.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

Fred, can you tell me growing up in Lwala, Kenya, what were things like medically before the clinic was built?

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

So, just to give you a little background of where things were when we were growing up, you know growing up in this little community where most people would rely on other community members, who were you know slightly more educated than they were to offer them health advice. Our dad used to have this book called "Where There Is No Doctor."

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

Yes, I know that book.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

And, he would use this book to teach us, but then also he would use it to advise people around home who had medical questions, because basically growing up in this little village, you know if you had a headache then you kind of self diagnose, the same shop where you buy your sugar, buy your bread in the morning, that's the same place where you would go to buy your, you could go get your antimalarial medications, but any ways so you know just growing up and seeing their medical needs in the community, both Milton and I growing up, you know we thought that you know health care would be something we could contribute to our village by becoming physicians at one point, but really thinking about building a clinic in our village that was something that we never had in mind. We never thought we could do it until late in college like Milton was saying after he visited Nicaragua and he was finishing up his first year of medical school going into his second year and I was just getting ready to enter medical school that fall. I was still a senior in college at that time. When Milton got back from Nicaragua and you know he had been communicating with my dad back at home about you know the possibility of building a clinic in our village just like what he had seen in Nicaragua and so I was a senior in college and Milton tells me to be the one in charge of fund raising and I thought to myself, well what a strange idea. I mean, here I am busy with college trying to survive getting my degree and here Milton wants me to lead major fundraising to raise money to build a clinic in our village.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

This is what an older brother can do to a younger brother.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

This what an older brother can do.

DR. MILTON OCHIENG:

Yeah, delegating.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

Certainly, so.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

He certainly gave you the hard part of the job.

FREDERICK OCHIENG:

He gave me the hard part of the job, but I thought to myself well it sounded so difficult to do because I think our initial budget that we received from dad was \$27,000 is what we would need to build a clinic, so when in college then I started speaking to my soccer coach up at Dartmouth. I also spoke to one of our campus ministry leaders and just told him about you know the idea of building a clinic in our village and you know they were really supportive and really excited about the whole idea and so, I remember in January of 2005, our campus minister came to me and told me that I should get ready to give just a quick presentation about 5 minutes to a group of college students, who were coming together to fellowship on a weekend and share with them my story and he would convince the organizers to raise some money for the clinic. So, he sent me an e-mail saying that it would be great to have a live Kenyan speaking about this need in this little village in Kenya. So, I saw the e-mail and I felt challenged and I said. Well, if he would like to have a live Kenyan speaking about medical issues and needs back in Kenya, then I am willing to take up that challenge. Anyway, that weekend, we raised \$9000 for the clinic and I remember calling Milton really excited about the news and just it looked like this idea that had just looked so far away could finally come to fruition could be a reality. So, that's one of the most exciting times and you know just to feel a kind of support that we got from our friends and mentors it was just something special.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

What are you doing now to further the awareness of this project as far as raising funds so that our listeners, which are mainly medical professionals can respond if they indeed want to help.

DR. MILTON OCHIENG:

This is Dr. Milton Ochieng. So, we have had a lot of involvement in terms of putting together funds and doing fundraising for one-time investment in terms of infrastructure and then also money that we need for continued running expenses. We have our website for the Non-Profit Lwala Community Alliance, it is www.lwalacommunityalliance.org, and also we have the documentary that's being shown across the country on different college campuses, its called "Sons of Lwala", the website for that is www.sonsoflwala.com, and this documentary we are using it as a fundraising tool and also to raise awareness across the country, so that people who hear our story can go to the Lwala Community Alliance web site and join us in providing money that we need for getting the health care to the people of Lwala Community and the surrounding villages.

DR. MAURICE PICKARD:

Well, I think we have heard your story. I have seen the documentary and I encourage everyone to watch it. It tells a great deal about, who are the people who live in Lwala and it is not only Lwala, but the surrounding area that come to this clinic.

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