

Ebola Fight becomes personal for University of Notre Dame Family



When I arrived at Notre Dame University from Liberia in June, no one ever thought I would have been faced with an impossible situation in the matter of weeks as a result of the Ebola crisis. As one of the prestigious Mandela Washington Fellows studying at Notre Dame, I was left amazed by the love and support everyone demonstrated. In fact, it felt like one big family by the end of the first week. But it all took a sudden turn for the worst when the Ebola virus sped out of control in my home country Liberia. Even though I was in Liberia working as a nurse at the onset of the crisis, I remained hopeful that it would all just go away. I was wrong! By the time I was wrapping up my study at Notre Dame, the phone calls and news about the escalating Ebola crisis from my family and friends in Liberia became so unbearable that two days felt like a year of depression. Confused and not knowing where to turn, my Notre Dame family engaged me immediately in an effort to understand what was happening in Liberia as an act of reassurance that they were ready to stand beside me.

I declined an offer to stay in the United States temporarily and returned to Liberia in July at the peak of the crisis. As a local medical professional, I was fully aware that we were the only defense and symbol of hope standing between the complete destruction of entire communities already devastated by the Ebola virus. Upon my arrival, I was able to provide a complete assessment to my Notre Dame Family and other colleagues who were so eager to understand the evolving situation and how they could help. As a result, Notre Dame sprang into action immediately and within weeks raised enough money to load a 40ft container with medical supplies and equipment to bolster our efforts in the fight on the frontlines of the Ebola crisis.

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Community members celebrate the arrival of medical supplies from ND

The container was cleared through customs with the assistance of the Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach team on February 7 and supplies successfully delivered to the Ma V. Maternity clinic, which focuses on maternal and infant health. Between my work as a Nurse at the ELWA Hospital, which is home to one of the largest Ebola treatment facility in Liberia, and my community work through the Ma V. Maternity clinic, we are determined to defeat the Ebola virus while ensuring that mothers and infants are protected and cared for. Words could not describe the look on the faces of community members and staffs at the clinic as supplies were being offloaded. Everyone including my mother who founded the clinic with me about eight years ago looked on in total disbelief and joy that Notre Dame was willing to go through everything it took to get help here so quickly. For those of you who may not understand, the craft of empty promises is something we've gotten so used to in Liberia that it is almost impossible to trust anyone. Even worse, those of us from very poor families who do not have the resources to see our dreams through are left to live for everyday since we are not guaranteed the next day. Nevertheless my fears, Notre Dame left me with no choice but to trust them as we worked together with the Mission Outreach team to see this through. They did not only send us much needed supplies that will save the lives of hundreds of mothers and babies, they have helped restore our dignity and belief in humanity once more as a community that has been abused for so long. It may seem like we are a world apart, but we couldn't have been closer as a result of the warmth and love that comes with this assistance. To my family at Notre Dame and everyone that worked to make this a reality especially the Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach folks, you refuse to feel sorry for us, instead, you are standing with us shoulder to shoulder as we take on a common enemy in the Ebola virus. For this, our community and country will forever be grateful for your belief in the dignity of humanity. I couldn't have been more proud to be a part of this family, you welcomed me without any hesitation, you never give up on me even in the face of danger, and for this, and I will forever remain truthful to the spirit and value of this family.



Community volunteers help offload supplies

To President Barack Obama who made all this possible through the brilliant Young African Leaders Initiative (YALI) otherwise known as the Mandela Washington Fellowship, an ordinary young woman like me who could only dream of ever getting the opportunity of further education now serves as a beacon of hope for thousands of my peers who felt there was no place in this world for them. You may never read this article, but I hope you feel it in your heart, I will forever be indebted to you and the people of the United States along with the thousands of young women, mothers and children whose lives I have been empowered to save as a result of this opportunity. The world will bear witness to this testimony as we emerge from the Ebola crisis through the breath and heartbeat of the mothers and children we continue to care for. With renewed hope, we are winning the battle against Ebola, we couldn't have done it without you, and we will let our children know tomorrow what you did and where you stood when it mattered most.

Yassah Lavelah has more than five years of experience as a Registered Nurse in Liberia. Her work focuses on social enterprise and sustainability in community healthcare with a specific emphasis on reducing infant and maternal mortality. Based on her nursing experience in four of Liberia's major medical centers, Yassah believes that future of Liberia's economic success and productivity lies in the reduction of infant and maternal mortality. She currently works as a nurse at ELWA Hospital and is the Ministry of Health Detached Field Supervisor to MSF focusing on the Ebola crisis. In addition to attending to patients, she conducts workshops and lectures on disease prevention and other safety measures. She is also a nurse at the Ma V. Maternity Clinic, which she established with her mother in 2005 in Paynesville, Liberia. Yassah holds weekly health assessments and workshops for youth in her role as a volunteer community health nurse with Youth Crime Watch-Liberia. She has a Bachelor of Science Degree in Nursing from Cuttington University and is a Mandela Washington Fellow at the University of Notre Dame.