

Muka's long struggle for an education led her from African bush to university

By DEBORAH GRAY

When Mukanyanga Muzyamba was a 4th grader in Sichibeya, a remote and impoverished village in Zambia, she knew her struggle to pursue her dream of becoming a doctor was about to become even more difficult. The school in her village only went through the 4th grade.

The people in Mukanyanga's rural village, including her family, were subsistence farmers, and lacked the means to build the additional classrooms needed to expand the school to upper grade levels.

So Muka and the rest of her classmates were faced with the choice of either ending their education after fourth grade – and with it ending any hope for a better future, a chance at a career, a pathway out of grinding poverty – or walking each day over six miles on footpaths winding through the bush, to the nearest school serving 5th grade and up.

Daily 12-mile round trip

Clinging to her hope, and buoyed by a strong faith in God, 10-year-old Muka chose to make the daily 12-mile round-trip walk to continue to 5th grade.

For the next few years, Muka had to arise by 4 a.m. each weekday, in order to finish the work that was expected of her at home before starting her long trek to school.

In her rural village, water had to be fetched and carried long distances; cooking was done outside over open fires; dried corn was laboriously pounded into meal used in cooking.

Muka tried to finish her chores in time to start walking by 5 a.m. in order to arrive at school when classes started at 8:00. Some days, by the time she finished her work, she had to run, rather than walk, in order to arrive at school on time and avoid being punished for tardiness.

When the school day ended at 4:00 p.m., Muka would begin the long walk back, arriving home about 7:00 p.m., giving her just nine hours to eat, bath, and sleep before getting up and doing it all



Muka dreamed of being a doctor her whole life. But her village school went only to 4th grade.



Above: A woman preparing a meal in Muka's home village. Gathering wood, carrying water, and pounding corn into meal are some of the chores Muka helped with before her long walk to school.



Left: In 2007, Muka retraced the long walk to her old school with her visiting sponsors.

over again.

In spite of this exhausting schedule, the intellectually gifted Muka excelled in her schoolwork.

Seventh grade is a pivotal year for Zambian students. A standardized test is given nationwide. Only the students scoring in the top 20% are allowed to continue on to 8th grade. Muka was the only student from her village to make the cut.

She went on to high school, making it past the final cut in 11th grade when another nationwide test eliminates another 50% of the students. She graduated with top grades.

When the Maanza a Leza project, a ministry of Mullins United Methodist Church in Memphis, began funding the construction of additional classrooms in her home village, they learned of Muka's story and her dream, and began sponsoring her education.

The options for higher education in Zambia are very limited;

the number of qualified applicants vastly outstrips the enrollment capacity of the nation's few universities, causing a wait time of about two years before new high school graduates are admitted.

When Muka was finally able to begin classes at the University of Zambia, she was deeply disappointed to learn that there were no openings for pre-medical students; the only opening available to her was in the teacher's education program.

Since there were no job opportunities for her, due to Zambia's poor economy and high unemployment rate, and no other educational choices available, her sponsors at Mullins United Methodist urged her to go ahead and start classes at the University of Zambia while continuing to look for colleges outside of Zambia which were within the means of their financial resources for sponsorship, and which would offer a program in medicine.

At the end of her first semester of classes, the University of Zambia faculty went on strike the week before final exams. They were protesting the Zambian government's failure to pay them what was promised in their contracts.

Since students couldn't complete their courses and receive their credits without the final exams, Muka and the rest of the students were left in limbo while the strike dragged on for weeks.

God opens a door at Africa University

Meanwhile, however, God opened another door. A relative of Muka's with friends in the United Methodist Church learned about Africa University and urged her to apply. She was accepted and started classes in August of 2007.

Since Africa University doesn't have a medical program, she chose the next closest course of study available. She will graduate

this June with a bachelor's degree in Health Services Management.

Mukanyanga has these words to share about her life's journey so far:

"God has been good to me. My life from childhood has not been easy, full of struggles, but I thank God that through these struggles I have been made strong in my faith. The purpose of sharing my faith with others is to encourage those who are discouraged or hopeless, due to financial and social instabilities, that there is a God who does more than we can ever ask or imagine, as long as we remain faithful to Him.

"I had always dreamt of becoming a medical doctor, but God always has His own way. He directed me to study Health Services Management, and I feel this will impact my country, where inadequate health resources are misappropriated and not well managed. My prayer is to make a difference in my country by ensuring that health resources are managed effectively and efficiently. It is my dream to run my own medical center, where I would also offer consultation services to the public and private sector in Zambia.

"Africa University has been a very useful tool to equip me with the knowledge and capacity to manage health resources in any health care facility," she wrote.

After her graduation from Africa University, Mukanyanga hopes to attend graduate school at the University of Memphis.

"I feel I will be more equipped and influential in managing health care resources," she wrote to her sponsors, "if I do a masters degree in Public Health in a developed country, which would open my eyes wider and give me new strategies for improving the system in my own country."

Fitting last step

Maanza a Leza, her sponsoring ministry at Mullins United Methodist Church, is trying to help her achieve this goal, and is seeking partners in sponsoring her for the two years it will take for her to complete a master's degree.

For somebody who walked 12 miles a day to finish elementary school, crossing an ocean to finish her college education is a fitting last step in a long journey of faith and hard work!