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## For Founder of Nigerian Charity, Firm Work Was an Offer He Could Refuse

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LOS ANGELES - For someone who does such inspiring work, Afam Onyema keeps a low profile.

The stark, white walls of his headquarters in the downtown Los Angeles offices of Mayer Brown are bare except for a calendar and a few notes on yellow Post-Its.

You'd never guess this 29-year-old, Stanford Law School graduate is co-founder and chief operating officer of GEANCO Foundation. The nonprofit was started three years ago by Onyema's Nigerian-born father, Godwin Onyema, a Chicago-based obstetrician, to build a hospital that offers quality care to Nigeria's poor.

"When I got the calendar, it was a big deal," Onyema said with a laugh. "I finally had something to look at."

But the modest surroundings don't seem to bother Onyema, who decided to forgo a promising career in corporate law. He's too busy trying to raise money for the foundation's cause.

"Even if I was going to be a lawyer, I knew I wanted to do what I could to be charitable," he said. "I wanted to help with homelessness and poverty."

"But by talking to my dad, reading the stats and going to Nigeria, [I realized] the need there is just overwhelming. There's a level that no one can fall below here in the States. But there are literally people in Nigeria and elsewhere who are dying because they're just too poor to live."

"It's the great crisis of our time. In terms of people dying who don't need to die, that to me is the greatest call to action."

GEANCO, an acronym made up of the first initials of the Onyema family members' names, was founded in 2005. The foundation's mission is to raise enough money - an estimated \$22 million - to build a 200-bed, full-service hospital. By building a good medical facility, Onyema said the foundation hopes to not only serve those who need help the most but to also stop the brain drain of Nigeria's most talented medical professionals.

To meet this goal, Onyema has enlisted the help of some big names in Nigeria and the United States.

Stella M. Okoli, chief executive officer of Emzor Pharmaceuticals, the largest Nigerian-based pharmaceutical company, has agreed to fund the cardiac center of the future hospital, to be named Augustine Memorial Hospital, after Onyema's grandfather.

Emmanuel Egbogah, executive chairman of Emerald Energy Resources and special adviser to the president of Nigeria on petroleum affairs, will pay for the burn unit.

Mayer Brown is serving as pro bono legal counsel, and Ernst & Young, a Mayer Brown client, is providing pro bono accounting work. Former Mayer Brown chairman Tyrone Fahner also serves on the foundation's board of directors.

In addition to providing legal counsel, the firm has donated at least \$10,000 in cash, sponsored a fundraising event, paid for marketing materials and given Onyema an office.

Fahner cited Onyema's dedication and enthusiasm for the project, in addition to Africa's obvious need for quality medical care.

"When you meet Afam, you can't turn him down," Fahner said. "You find yourself offering before he even asks. He could be working for any of the best law firms and making a ton of dough, but he turned it all down. He's got it right in terms of decency, honesty and generosity."

"He has a lot of friends in this firm, in all the offices. My only disappointment was that I wanted him to practice law with me."

The dream to build a hospital in Nigeria belonged to Onyema's father, who studied medicine in his home country before leaving for the United States, where the facilities were better. Godwin Onyema

always planned on going back to Nigeria, but once he realized that his children would have more opportunities in their hometown of Chicago, he decided to stay there, too.

As his middle child, Afam Onyema benefited from those opportunities to the fullest. He majored in psychology at Harvard University and graduated in 2001.

Onyema, who had played football since the second grade and was part of Harvard's football team, dreamed of becoming head of marketing for the National Football League. He landed a job at the public relations firm Hill & Knowlton, where he worked for a year and a half before learning that a law degree could help him in his quest to conquer the NFL.

At Hill & Knowlton, Onyema met Molly Fahner, who introduced him to her father, Tyrone Fahner, who got him started in law as an intern in Mayer Brown's marketing department so he could learn about its clients and what the lawyers do for them.

After getting a taste of big-firm life, Onyema enrolled at Stanford Law School. He performed well, earning summer associate positions at Paul, Hastings, Janofsky & Walker and at Kirkland & Ellis.

Tony Richardson, a partner at Reed Smith in Los Angeles who was previously Kirkland & Ellis' hiring partner, described his first meeting with Onyema as impressive. Richardson was visiting Stanford for on-campus interviews, and even though Onyema wasn't on Kirkland's list, it didn't stop him from approaching the Kirkland partner and getting himself an interview.

"With Afam, it was an automatic yes," Richardson said. "It was like, 'What was it going to take to get him interested in us?' It was clear that he was at the top of the charts in every factor - presence, academic brilliance, passion, knowledge of the firm and vision of his career.

"He was sharp and had an appreciation for things a lot of law students don't," Richardson said. "He had that deep knowledge and maturity."

While in law school, Onyema said he started out focusing on a future career in corporate law. Though he believed in his father's dream, it wasn't his. His plan was to work for a big law firm for about five years, then join the NFL in marketing.

But after learning more about his father's idea, Onyema said he became more and more wedded to it.

"I could see the excitement in his eyes and how much he wanted this to be a reality," Onyema said.

So Onyema started putting out feelers and got his Stanford classmates, and even the school's dean, Larry Kramer, on board with the foundation's purpose.

"It's a pretty compelling cause," Kramer said. "What I love about Stanford's students is that they're entrepreneurial. They do things that other people wouldn't do. It's really impressive because I was a law student, too, and I couldn't do that."

Onyema credits his Stanford classmates for giving him the encouragement that propelled his desire to continue with the foundation's work.

"What really got me involved was not only my family's excitement but the excitement of my classmates at Stanford," he said. "I was nervous [about whether] my classmates would support this and come to the events. It's so outside the legal world. But the response was overwhelmingly positive. It really got to me."

While summering at Kirkland, Onyema became increasingly involved in fundraising and getting more people on board with the project, and he said the firm was nothing but supportive of his efforts.

"It was made clear to him that [the firm thought] the foundation was impressive," Richardson said. "We saw it as something else he brought to the table."

When the time came to make a decision about his future, Onyema found himself drawn to the foundation's mission more than to the law. He had offers from both Paul Hastings and Kirkland but said he was waking up every morning and going to sleep every night thinking about the foundation.

"I thought about the professional opportunities, the salary and the bonuses I'd be giving up, but it didn't compare to the excitement of working on this," he said. "Seeing pregnant mothers saved from death, seeing children saved from malaria, seeing HIV-positive youths getting the treatment they need to live the lives that they deserve - that outweighed the financial incentives of being a lawyer.

"It got to the point where I was the main force behind it and pushed things forward day-to-day," he said. "If I had accepted one of those positions, knowing I wouldn't have the time outside of work as a first-year associate to do this, the process would have withered on the vine."

Onyema has capitalized on his contacts in the legal world to further the foundation's cause. Kirkland has sponsored two fundraising events and raised \$20,000 in cash donations. Other firms also have sponsored events and donated thousands of dollars. Paul Hastings, O'Melveny & Myers and Fulbright & Jaworski, where Onyema's older brother, Gozie Onyema, is an associate in its Washington, D.C. office, all have contributed to the cause.

"It warms my heart to know that the foundation of this hospital is being built by lawyers," Onyema said. "And lawyers are known to be risk-averse, for being careful, for not being too broad in their thinking. But we've discovered it's the absolute opposite."

The Nigerian government has given the foundation 200 acres of land in Anambra, a state in southeastern Nigeria, to build its hospital. So far, Onyema has helped raise \$200,000 of the estimated \$22

million needed to open the hospital.

But his dreams haven't stopped there.

While the hospital was originally his father's goal, Onyema's dream is also to build a library and sports facilities for the area's youth. He has started "Books for Nigeria," a campaign that so far has collected more than 1,000 donated textbooks, novels and other reading materials to stock his future library.

"The hospital is my dad's dream, and it has become mine, but I can't wait for the day when we can put in high-quality sports facilities," he said. "There are all these young students who have nothing to do outside of school. To see these rocky and dirty fields, my heart just breaks. I want to provide my cousins and nieces and nephews with the same opportunities [that I had] academically and athletically."

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