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Student seeks funds for Nigerian hospital

GEANCO to build health center for poor

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At a time when many graduate students are studying to become doctors, third-year law student Afram Onyema is working to build a hospital.

“I have never, never doubted that we will build the best hospital in sub-Saharan Africa that is open to the very sick and the very poor,” Onyema said.

The hospital has been a long-time dream for the law student’s family. Onyema’s father, Dr. Godwin Onyema, emigrated from Nigeria to America in 1974 for his medical residency but never forgot his home country.

“He always planned to go back and use his skills to serve his community and his family,” Onyema said of his father.

In 2005, the elder Onyema organized the non-profit GEANCO Foundation. Named from a collection of family initials, the organization is dedicated to improving health conditions and medical services in Nigeria.

The foundation’s preliminary focus is to oversee and ensure the planning and construction of Augustine Memorial Hospital, named for Onyema’s late grandfather, in Anambra, Nigeria.

To this end, the GEANCO Foundation officially commenced its fundraising campaign this summer with a series of benefits held in major cities around the United States, including Palo Alto. Later this month, members of the organization will travel to Nigeria to host a similar benefit there.

A total of 80 law and business students, local doctors, attorneys, professors and business executives attended the Palo Alto event held at the Sheraton on Sat., Oct. 21.

GEANCO advisory board members hailed the event as a success, but tempered their optimism with the knowledge that the organization's goals cannot be met overnight.

"This is a long process — to generate awareness of GEANCO and to raise funds — and the Palo Alto event was an important first step in getting people in this area on board," said law student and GEANCO advisory board member Patrick Heller.

"I think that a lot of people were exposed for the first time to the seriousness facing specific communities in West Africa, and a clear way they can help," added Jake Kraft, another advisory board member and law student.

The need for a hospital in the area is unequivocal. According to the World Health Organization, Nigeria is one of the 20 poorest countries in the world. Consequently, many Nigerians cannot afford to pay for their own healthcare. Additionally, the country is now home to the highest number of HIV/AIDS-infected adults in West Africa.

Currently, GEANCO has raised \$80,000, but Onyema and others hope to reach \$500,000 by the end of the year.

"This will allow us to conduct the feasibility studies and needs assessments that are necessary before the hospital can be built," Onyema explained.

He estimates that the construction and maintenance of the hospital will cost \$22 million, with an additional \$2 million per year to run the facilities and cover the costs of patients who cannot pay for their care.

"Since I've been here at Stanford Law, I've spent every day, literally every day, doing something for the foundation," Onyema said. "It is what gets me up in the morning and keeps me joyfully motivated during the day."

Initially, finding sponsors proved to be difficult.

"Back then our business plan was little more than a few paragraphs, long on passion and short on details," Onyema said.

The organization has also had to combat media coverage of scandals and frauds associated with the Nigerian government. However, Onyema said he is proud of the reputation GEANCO has created.

“We knew that we had to build an organization strong enough and honest enough to fight both disease and doubt,” he said.

To that end, GEANCO has sought to ensure fiscal responsibility by working with the accounting partnership Ernst & Young and the law firm Mayer, Brown, Rowe, and Maw. Both firms are working pro bono for the nonprofit.

Despite the setbacks associated with building an organization from the ground up, Onyema has never once doubted that his and his father’s dream would become a reality.

“The healthcare crisis in Africa is the great need of our time,” Onyema said, “but there is power enough here at Stanford to help meet that need, if only all hands and hearts join in the effort.”

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