

Man with a Plan

LIKE MANY GRADUATES of high-powered colleges and law schools, Afam Onyema '01 has friends who drive BMWs, wear Rolexes, and excel in fast-paced jobs. Onyema has only the latter: a job that he wakes up “hungry” to pursue, that has become the passion of his life. He is chief operating officer of GEANCO (www.geanco.org), the nonprofit he and his father have been building for more than five years with the goal of founding a world-class hospital in Nigeria.

Godwin Onyema, an obstetrician who immigrated to Chicago in 1974, first envisioned the hospital as a way to help his native state, Anambra, in southeastern Nigeria. “It was his dream, it wasn’t mine,” the son says, even though he once planned to become a doctor himself, and visited Anambra in the eighth grade. Not until rock star-philanthropist Bono gave the Class Day speech in 2001 did Afam Onyema begin to consider the hospital project his, too. Bono, he explains, “really challenged my class to...realize that because of our privileges, more was expected of us.”

Onyema had decided against medical school his senior year and instead took a job in the marketing department of Chicago law firm Mayer Brown. He and his father began making plans for the hospital on napkins in restaurants, or while watching football together, but the project took a more definite shape when he got the chance to meet with Mayer Brown’s then chairman, Tyrone Fahner, and describe the gravity of the health crisis in Nigeria. Fahner offered the firm’s pro-bono legal help, spurring the creation of the GEANCO Foundation. (The name combines the first letters of the Onyema family’s first names.)

Onyema enrolled at Stanford Law in 2004 to be better equipped to launch GEANCO. “There are long days, definitely, when you’re a full-time law student and also trying to pull together an organization from the ground up,” he says, “but I never felt frustrated or angry.”

Last February, he made only his third trip to Nigeria. Hearing about his extended family’s fears of infectious diseases like malaria made the project “acutely personal,” he says, and underscored the importance of building the hospital. Because it can serve both to educate Nigerian doctors and to provide technology not readily available elsewhere, one landmark hospital, he explains, can make a greater healthcare difference than several small clinics. “I see it as a launching pad. It’s changing what people expect from healthcare and giving peo-



Afam Onyema (left) with classmate Michael Green, GEANCO’s treasurer, board member Charity Azih, lead architect S.A. Alabi, and Dr. Godwin Onyema

COURTESY OF GEANCO FOUNDATION

ple a higher standard.” The Nigerian government donated a 200-acre lot for the hospital, but Onyema is wary of accepting any more assistance, so GEANCO can preserve its autonomy.

Hoping to break ground by 2009, he has recently spent much time fundraising in his Los Angeles office, a donation from Mayer Brown, and has collected \$300,000 of the estimated \$2 million it would take to begin construction. (Several philanthropists have committed to sizeable donations once the first \$2 million is in hand.) Today, Onyema is the only salaried member of GEANCO, his paycheck donated by one of his former law-school professors and his debts waived by Stanford’s loan-forgiveness program. He says he’s grateful to have well-to-do friends he can convince to make donations. He recalls the time a friend picked him up in a BMW convertible and then asked for advice on which high-end watch she should buy. Onyema was mostly amused. “Sometimes you see the lifestyle and it can be tempting,” he says, “but I have absolutely no regrets.”

When he looks to the future, he sees more of the same, and is elated by the prospect. He hopes to continue building world-class hospitals—and libraries, computer labs, and athletic fields—in places that need them. “I didn’t initially think I would do this as a career,” he says. “I thought I would help my father’s dream come true and then move on to the next challenge. But to me this is the next challenge.” ~LIZ GOODWIN