

## **Profile** **Prof Fanson Majani Kidwaro**



At work: Prof Fanson Kidwaro, the chairman of the department of agriculture, University of Central Missouri USA

By Shad Bulimo, Oct 1 2009

Never give up. Never lose hope for Hope is everything. These words from Professor Fanson Majani Kidwaro are a lifeline to millions of Kenyans who have lost hope in their country, leaders and themselves. They are only words of course, but words have the power to change an individual's world in ways that guns or handouts cannot. Restoring hope in a people whose spirit is broken is a gigantic task. For Prof Kidwaro, it is a challenge that he embraces wholeheartedly. He is one of the few people who believe that his people of western Kenya will rise from valley of hopelessness, doom and despair; conquer their fears to claim their rightful place at the top table in Kenya. All they need is hope and a strong sense of self belief.

It is a belief that has propelled this unlikely hero from humble beginnings in the sleepy village of Chavavo in South Maragoli to claim a coveted seat in one of America's top academic institutions. The sixth born in a family of five girls and four boys, Prof Kidwaro was only 13 when his father, Mark Kidwaro a former personnel manager with the ministry of education died in 1981.

Prof Kidwaro, whose hero is former South African President Nelson Mandela, attended Chavavo Primary and Mwhila Secondary schools before moving to the USA in 1983 to pursue further education. He Holds a BS Degree from Truman State University, an MS degree from University of Central Missouri, and a doctorate (PhD) from University of Missouri-Columbia. He is currently the chairman of the Department of Agriculture at the University of Central Missouri where he has been teaching since 2001. Dr. Kidwaro resides in Lees Summit, Missouri with his wife Florence and sons Andrew and Mark Kidwaro. His mother, Jedidah Jumba, is a local businesswoman in Vihiga but is currently living in Missouri with her son and his family.

Prof Kidwaro comes from a strong Christian family and his siblings include, in order of seniority: Michael Mmata, a vet in Maseno; Janet Kavetsa Zintambila of Illinois; Mary Majani, a nurse in South Carolina, Florence Mijinde of Eldoret, Beatrice Mwangi of Chicago, Phoebe Aluda of Nairobi, late Phinimore Kidwaro and Joshua Kibisu of Nairobi.

Like his hero, Nelson Mandela, Prof Kidwaro is a strong believer in the philosophy of leadership by service. He believes individuals are successful only when measured against the community in which they live or come from. As a community leader in Kansas City where he served as president of Organization of Kenyans in Kansas City for two years, Prof Kidwaro had the distinguished honor of representing a strong Kansas City community in the 2003 meeting between President Mwai Kibaki and George Bush at the White House.

“We have hosted Kalonzo Musyoka, the vice president, Hon. William Ruto, the minister for agriculture and the late Kipkalya Kones, Raila Odinga, the prime minister and every year we organize Madaraka Day celebrations - a function that brings all Kenyans in Kansas City together as one people. The community is very united and cherishes the “harambee” spirit which embraces collective responsibility. This spirit has come alive during important community events such as weddings, funerals, and sports. For example when there is a funeral, within a week we raise enough funds to transport the body back home,” says Prof Kidwaro who was last month elected president of Halala Kansas City chapter.

A believer in faith, the soft-spoken Prof Kidwaro belongs to Breakthrough Community Church where he is a Men’s ministry leader. It is one of five Kenyan community churches in Kansas City. Prof Kidwaro plays soccer on the Kansas City Kenyan team. He also enjoys playing golf and tennis. When he is relaxing, he likes to listen to the inspirational music of award-winning Tanzanian gospel singer, Rose Muhando and loves playing with his energetic two boys Andrew and Mark.

It is a far dream for most boys from Mwhila Secondary School. The school is not one of those institutions that one associates with pedigree achievers like say, Alliance High or even Kakamega Boys High School. In fact few people will tell you they know it or have heard about it. It is one of those rural schools that exist on the margins of society and the

only time they come into the news, it is almost always for the wrong reasons like students rioting. Yet, it is here that Prof Kidwaro nurtured his ambition to achieve academic excellence and make something of his life despite his humble environment.

“I went to Mwihila because my brother had gone there and my mother suggested that I go there as well. I also had a few friends schooling there. It was very peaceful and conducive to academic study with little to distract you such as you see in some urban based schools,’ he says of his former alma mater.

After his ‘O’ levels, Prof Kidwaro who likes a meal of chapatti a lot, wanted to go to Kakamega High School for his ‘A’ levels but his sister, Janet Kavetsa Zintambila arranged for him to come to the United States where he enrolled for a Bachelor’s degree at Truman State University. Still armed only with hope, Prof Kidwaro got a soccer scholarship at Truman which helped pay his fees. From here he proceeded to Central Missouri State University for his masters and a PhD at the University of Missouri – Columbia which he received in 1997.

Now in the labor market, Prof Kidwaro who belongs to the Avasali clan first got a teaching job at Metropolitan Community College in Kansas City but in 1999 he was hired as an adjunct professor at the University of Central Missouri and two years later his positive mien turned hope into a dream job as a full time professor at the same university where he has risen to become head of the department of agriculture. So how did he do it?

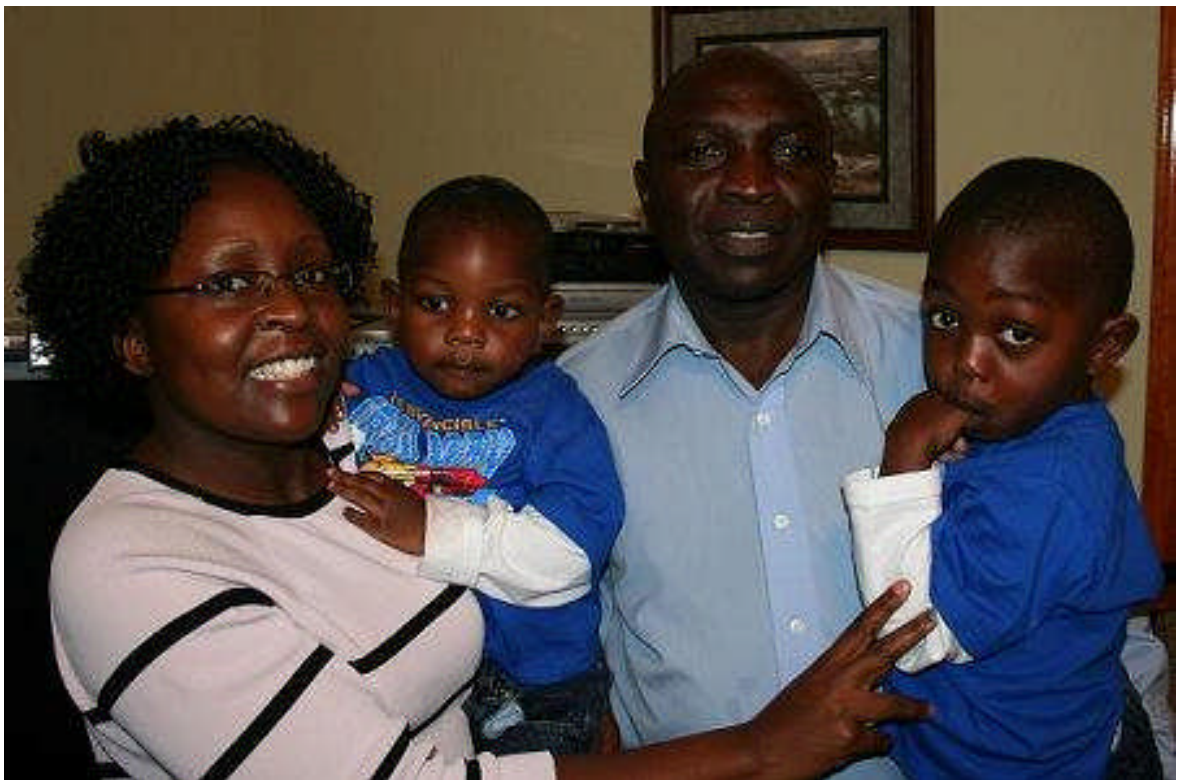
Growing up in the village, there was little else to widen the scope of imagination of a young lad. But what little there was, Prof Kidwaro made use of it. The smallholder tea farming plots in Chavavo village inspired Prof Kidwaro to want a career in agriculture so that he could be employed by top companies in Kenya. “I wanted to be employed by either Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) or Kenya Breweries to work in their barley research unit. They were the best employers then,” he says.

Although coming to the USA changed the direction of things, the ambition to achieve is still burning in Prof Kidwaro who is deeply involved in various research projects. He is currently conducting research in cereal crops (wheat), forage crops and switch grass at the university agronomy farm to be used in the production of cellulosic ethanol and biogas as part of the Centre for Alternative Fuels and Environmental Systems (CAFE) program. The keen football enthusiast is excited about the research opportunities for students at the new Prussing Research Farm funded by 20 companies in the first research of its kind. Some of his research papers have been published in the respected Journal of Plant Nutrition and Missouri Academy of Science Proceedings Journal. He has presented papers at Agronomy and Crop Science Societies of America.

Prof Kidwaro’s appetite for research shows no signs of diminishing. Ever so hopeful, he will shortly begin research into a variety of rye grass which is reportedly yielding plenty of animal feed for farmers in the southern states of Oklahoma and Tennessee. Preparatory to the impending research, his department has hired a new Animal Science professor who will collaborate with him on feeding trials. He is also working on development of a new

forage crop legend II Lespedeza funded by a local seed company, Cutting Edge Technologies.

So how can Prof Kidwaro's research skills be harvested to benefit his homeland? "A lot of the research that I do can be replicated in Kenya. Napier grass for instance can be researched to develop a variety that grows faster and plenty. KARI has the capacity to do so but they always complain they have no money," he says. The problem in Kenya is a cultural one, he says. "For instance goat milk is just as nutritious as cow milk but people are reluctant to use this milk although they are happy to eat goat meat. It is important that a cultural shift occurs to ensure we have a variety of food products. Small ruminants like goats do not need much space and food to breed like cows."



Family man: Prof Fanson Kidwaro with his wife, Florence and sons Andrew (left) and Mark Kidwaro (named after his late father).

Talking to Prof Kidwaro, one comes across a self assured, confident and sociable individual. Although he has lived in the United States for the last quarter century, he is deeply attached to his roots. "Before I got married, I used to go home twice a year. Now I go once a year," he says. He is not all about academics though. Of course his world view is shaped by his socio-cultural orientation and he seems to see opportunities where others may see problems. Around Kansas City and Missouri, he is something of a hero primarily as a result of his community leadership skills. He is unassuming and welcoming of strangers. His interest in leaving the world a better place than he found it finds expression not only in community initiatives but also, performance, politics. He takes up the story:

**Luhya unity:** Even though we have 18 sub tribes, if you ask all of them to list their problems, chances are they'll come up with a similar list. So whether you are a Kabras or Tiriki, all Luhya are facing the same problem. We need to exploit cultural components such as language and aesthetics that bind us together in order to achieve unity in diversity. A political structure is another cultural component that we as Luhya don't seem to appreciate. The culture of poverty makes us gullible so that whoever comes and gives us something, we follow them and in the process, compromise our integrity and our values.

We need to mobilize people in Nairobi and other urban areas and the Diaspora to push the agenda for development in Western. For instance, Halala has come up with the idea of a mobile clinic. This is a timely idea. At the moment, people do not seek medical help if they appear sick; they have to be almost comatose for anyone to wheel barrow them to a hospital.

People like Masinde Muliro, Moses Mudavadi, Martin Shikuku, Silas Jirongo and Fred Gumo have tried to unite Luhya. Their efforts need to be complimented by all Luhya by shunning petty differences. The late Moses Budamba Mudavadi was exemplary in offering service leadership. He was the kind of leader who would actually serve you tea personally where other leaders want to be served and hero-worshipped as *mheshimiwa*. That kind of service leadership is lacking in our leaders. Masinde Muliro earned the respect of most Luhya and Shikuku's outspokenness highlighted the issues facing the poor of which Luhya are a majority. Jirongo, on the other hand, seems to seek Luhya unity to get him votes to become the president. He commissioned a report which I presented to him that identified the issues that needed attention and a definite road map to achieve targets. He promised to follow them through but I never heard from him again. He seems to be surrounded by *wakora* (conmen).

**Politics:** In 2007, I embarked on a learning journey to test the waters in politics. I started off by visiting schools and talking to teachers and several community groups about development issues across the board. What I discovered was that politicians in Kenya are a jealous lot. The moment they realize you are making inroads, they seek ways of putting your head on the chopping board. In my Vihiga constituency, the then incumbent Andrew Ligale saw me as a threat even though we are friends. So I decided I won't seek nomination from ODM like him but use another party out of respect. I settled on Jirongo's KADDU.

However, when it came to nominations, the process was nothing but a big joke. The ballot boxes could not arrive on time for some reason and the party leader said we use any means so long as we gave him a candidate. In the meantime, my main opponent, Tom Kisia, the secretary of Knut, Vihiga branch had intimidated all the teachers whom I had earlier talked to. I went with Alice Kirambi who was also contesting the Sabatia Parliamentary seat on a KADDU ticket to Nairobi to see Jirongo and lay our frustration at his door only to find out that the process was nothing but political business at work.

When that too proved shambolic, Ligale called me for a meeting at Kenya United Club and said he'll talk to Uhuru Kenyatta for me to join Kanu and get the party's nomination. Even parties like Chama cha Wakulima and UDM called me to say that I should go for their certificate to be their candidate in Vihiga, but I realized that when people are hungry, visionary leadership is a pipe dream. I therefore decided to postpone my political aspirations and concentrate on my career first.

While politics has taken a back seat, Prof. Kidwaro has concentrated his efforts in serving his community. In August this year, he was elected interim president of Halala Kansas City chapter during the annual convention in Maryland where he was invited as a key note speaker. Halala USA is the umbrella organization of the Luhya community in the United States. It now has five branches. With leaders like him who never give up, it is only a matter of time before all Luhya people worldwide speak with one voice.