

Kenyan woman excels in a foreign land

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By Nicholas Asego and Lucianne Limo

At 30, Jakki Opollo is head above her peers though she does not think so. Overcoming the initial culture shock and integration into the American way of life, she has achieved what many would only dream of in a lifetime.

Opollo, a registered Nurse in the Cardiovascular Intensive Care Unit at Dallas Fort Worth Hospital council (DFWHC) in America is an ordinary woman doing extraordinary work but with a lot of passion and dedication. It's a passion and dedication that saw her bag two prestigious awards.



Jakki with colleagues during the Employee of the year award ceremony.

She was named the '2007 Employee of the Year' by DWF Hospital Council beating the other 75,000 employees. She was also the recipient of the First Humanitarian Award, the highest honour Medical City Dallas Hospital can bestow on an employee. In all humility, she sees these as fitting rewards. "It's a good return for all the years of loneliness, missing friends and relatives," says Opollo who migrated to America in 1996.

She vividly recalls the life changing call and letter notifying her of the awards. "It was the last thing on my mind and it took me by surprise. I work with a phenomenal team of health care workers and for them to deem me worthy of this award was very humbling," she said.

The amazing fact is that nursing was really not her first career choice. "I started off as an Accounting major but realised that I wanted to do something that fostered human interactions," she says. Nursing for her fitted the bill perfectly. "It allows you to touch one emotionally, physically and even spiritually," she adds.

Endearing values

The seventh born in a family of eight, Opollo owes a lot to her parents who mentored her. "I am blessed to have a mother whose caring spirit, warmth and resilience was a source of inspiration," she says. She nevertheless reserves her highest praise for her father. "My late father Phillip Opollo made it clear to all of us, that no matter what one does or where one goes, he/she must always strive for excellence and then... when excellence comes, one should never ever forget where they came from," she recalls. These words have taught her the values of ambition, confidence, passion and persistence in all that she does.

These values have not only made her excel in her career as a nurse but also in her studies. "I am about to complete my double masters degrees (Master of Science Nursing Administration from the University of Texas at Arlington and a Master of

Public Health Policy and Management from the University of North Texas Health Sciences Center," says the former student of Moi Nairobi Girls.

To her, nursing is more than a profession, it is a calling far removed from the public's perception of only washing patients and changing their diapers.

"Nursing is a service profession and the only reason for our existence is to be of service to others," she says. "It is part of our job to make sure our patients' basic needs are met, there is nothing better than having your patient's mood brighten up because you took the time to bath them, comb their hair and make them smell good before their loved ones come in to visit them or before they take a walk around the unit. This is the human side of nursing. A caring spirit not only calls for kindness, compassion, empathy and patience but also loyalty and commitment. Without these qualities then the true meaning of nursing is missing," she asserts.

It's these attributes that she has expounded to her colleagues and those aspiring to be nurses. In 2005 she was the keynote speaker at the Nairobi University Nursing Students Association presentation on Nursing: One Career, a thousand choices. In 2006 she was part of a delegation that went to South Africa through the International Scholar Laureate Programme Delegation on Nursing. "We were to take a comprehensive look at South Africa's health care system and learn the innovative ways the health care givers were using to cope with challenges of HIV/Aids," she recalls.

She was recently in Uganda, conducting a needs assessment with the North Texas Health Africa Initiative seeking to understand reasons behind Uganda's widely acclaimed success and seeking to identify gaps in their efforts to fight HIV/Aids. "I also gave a presentation on Human Resource Management in HIV/Aids Environments: Challenges and Opportunities, she says.

Home is best

While many in her position would consider settling in the United States, Opollo's heart and roots are deep in her motherland. "When all is said and done, I must return home and help strengthen the health care facilities. My heart is in Africa. I believe that home gives you something that no other place can give you; that is your history," she says philosophically. "Being cognisant of my history has allowed me to see where I have been, it allows me to reflect on where I am at present and perhaps allows me to see where I can go into the future," she says.

On her marital status, Opollo believes her future is in God's hands. "I am currently in a steady and solid relationship with a wonderful guy who is supportive of my dreams and ambitions. Since marriage is ordained by God I believe God will make it possible in his perfect timing," she confesses. Her ultimate goal in life is to be a powerful and influential voice for African health systems by working for organizations such as World Health Organisation (WHO). "Through the WHO and its affiliates we will improve international health issues not only in my country Kenya but in other African countries and developing nations as well," she says.

On the current trend where many health care givers are migrating to the West, Opollo believes the blame lies squarely at the government's feet. "This is a crucial

issue for governments and both the private and public organisations to seek ways to retain our healthcare workers. This is a human resource crisis that needs to be addressed. Although I believe that every human being should have a right to immigrate in search of greener pastures, I believe that if governments and employers provided nurses in Africa with decent pay and benefits, many people would prefer to stay in their countries with their family and friends contributing to where there is the most need."

To many of her colleagues, Opollo remains the epitome and the embodiment of the caring, and patient. The true spirit of the nursing profession.