

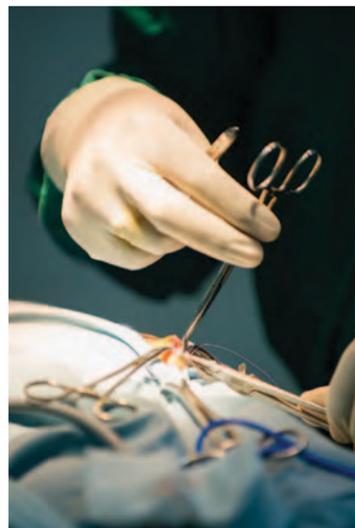


# Easing the burden:

Gift helps Zambian man continue on path to becoming neurosurgeon



MARK BERNSTEIN (SECOND FROM RIGHT) DURING TEACHING MISSION IN LUSAKA, ZAMBIA.



**TOP LEFT:** (FROM L TO R) LASHMI VENKATRAGHAVAN, KACHINGA SICHIZYA, BONIFACE CHANSA AND MARK BERNSTEIN.  
**CENTER:** BEIT CURE HOSPITAL.  
**TOP RIGHT:** KACHINGA SICHIZYA.

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quality of medical care available in Zambia.

It was 7 a.m. The patient needed surgery to remove a brain tumor, but also had multiple medical problems. Chansa, who works as a clinical officer at Beit Cure Hospital in Lusaka, Zambia, had been with the patient all night.

“When I walked into the room, Boniface was there and at first I thought he was a relative of the patient,” Bernstein says.

Bernstein, a neurosurgeon at Toronto Western Hospital, was in Zambia heading a teaching mission to Beit Cure. He holds the Greg Wilkins-Barrick Chair in International Surgery, established in 2011 by a \$5.5 million gift from Barrick and the family of former Barrick CEO, the late Greg Wilkins. Among other things, the funds allow Bernstein to lead several teaching missions each year to developing countries where he provides training and support in surgical treatment of diseases of the brain.

Chansa, 30, works four nights a week at Beit Cure from 6 p.m. to 7 a.m. to pay for medical school, which he attends during the day. Some shifts are slow, and he can sneak off for a catnap.

Most days, though, including the day Bernstein visited, Chansa doesn't sleep at all.

An orphan since the age of nine, Chansa's dream is to become a neurosurgeon like his mentor, Kachinga Sichizya. Sichizya is one of just three neurosurgeons in Zambia, a country of 15 million. He hired Chansa in 2010. Before that, Chansa, who was raised by relatives, earned his clinician's degree from Chainama College in Lusaka and then worked for 2½ years at the Chitokoloki Mission Hospital in northern Zambia. “There were so many patients and so few doctors there that I picked up skills that only doctors had,” Chansa says.

At Beit Cure, the workload isn't any easier. Patients come from all over Zambia to see Sichizya. He sees up to 100 patients a day, many of them children born with spina bifida or hydrocephalus, water on the brain. “We have a lot of pressure that we carry every day of our lives as neurosurgeons here in Zambia,” Sichizya says.

Sichizya's clinical officers typically last one or two months before buckling under the stress of the job. Chansa was different. “Boniface has a unique character,” Sichizya says. “He cares for these kids with all that is inside of him.”

Under Sichizya's tutelage, Chansa's knowledge of neurosurgery grew. He became proficient, for instance, at ventricular-peritoneal shunting, a procedure to drain excess fluid from individuals with hydrocephalus. Sichizya encouraged Chansa to pursue his dream and recommended him for medical school. “Boniface will be the best neurosurgeon in the country,” he says.

Last year, Chansa was accepted to Lusaka Apex Medical

University. Money, however, was tight. In addition to working Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday evenings, Chansa worked the day shift three weekends a month to make ends meet. “At the beginning it was quite difficult,” he says in his quiet, understated way.

It also wasn't enough. Chansa needed money for books, transportation, food, rent and tuition, and was struggling to keep up. The day before he met Bernstein, the university had informed Chansa he was in danger of losing his spot due to late tuition payments.

The next morning, shortly before Chansa's shift ended, Bernstein was doing rounds with Sichizya and Lashmi Venkatraghavan, an anesthetist from Toronto Western Hospital who joined Bernstein on the teaching mission. Chansa updated them on the condition of the patient he'd been observing all night. “He gave us a really informed report that went well beyond the knowledge of a typical first-year medical student,” Bernstein says.

Impressed, Bernstein asked Sichizya later that morning who Chansa was. Sichizya explained Chansa's predicament and background. “I was speechless for almost a minute,” Bernstein says. “I looked at Lashmi and we both almost simultaneously agreed that we've got to help this man.”

Within moments, the two agreed that they would fund Chansa's tuition for the duration of his studies. The Wilkins-Barrick Chair will pay for 90 percent of the estimated \$25,000 in fees, while Venkatraghavan will cover the remaining 10 percent.

When Sichizya realized what his colleagues were planning, he broke down in tears. “I was overwhelmed,” he says. “You don't know how hard we tried to find funding for Boniface, and all the doors were shut in our face. This is a fantastic kid. He has given me hope. Everybody loves him in the hospital. These men from Toronto kept his dream alive.”

Chansa had already left for school that morning, but Sichizya called and told him to come back. Bernstein and Venkatraghavan explained what they were planning. Chansa, recalling the moment, says he had to ask the men to repeat what they had told him. “I was moved,” he says. “I was so very moved. They had lifted the burden for me. I was very excited and grateful, but I also took it as a very big responsibility. I have a lot of work to do to live up to this gift. I have to live up to it for the rest of my life.”

Now it was Bernstein's turn to tear up. The investment in Chansa will have a significant impact, he says. “Boniface could be the next neurosurgeon in Zambia. I feel good about that, but the truth is this gift stems from the generosity of Barrick and the Wilkins family. They gave a wonderful gift to the world by creating the Wilkins-Barrick Chair, and generosity breeds generosity.”

While his tuition is now covered, Chansa still works nights at Beit Cure to cover his living expenses. It is challenging, he says, but adds that he views life's challenges as opportunities to gain strength and wisdom. He has passed his first-year exams. ■