

How will living through a pandemic while gaining an international education help me make a difference in the world?

Wilberforce Twinamatsiko: University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff

“Poverty, the breakdown of humanity,” Mahatma Gandhi. At 8 years old my family survived on one meal a day. Sometimes I would get very hungry and as a child often admired other kids’ life wishing things were different for me. I guess I hated the uncertainty that came with the next day but the harder challenges I went through, this inspired me to work hard. I am now a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff living a life that I never even dreamed of. When my school was shut down due to the pandemic, it reminded me of my childhood; that same feeling of uncertainty and fear of how tomorrow will be.

From the time I was a little boy, I always wanted to be a doctor but my education journey like most children in Uganda was always filled with uncertainty. My inspiration came from an uncle who was always dressed well and always seemed to have money all the time to buy whatever he wanted. My father was drowning in poverty and alcohol like his father before him and I was almost certain I was going down the same road. Every morning, I would beat the sun to milk cows before walking over 5km to school. Even amidst my family’s destitution, education was prioritized before anything else. Perhaps it was my parents’ way of giving me an opportunity or the only way out of poverty they saw they had. We often survived on very little as all the milk was sold for the purpose of school fees. As it was a common practice in our family, I was raised by an aunt who supported me through school, a favor my father requested from her.

My aunt lived in Kampala the capital and was a jack of all trades in order to afford the life of the city. From working in a bakery and selling produce, to picking coffee from the field. I often had to tag along her trips collecting coffee beans or delivering vegetables or bread part time during school.

I remember at school the bursar would come during class with a list of students who have not yet cleared school fees on which I was a regular; then they would read them out and you had to walk out of class and go home until you pay school fees; that long walk of shame as you exit class as other kids giggled was very embarrassing and it lowered my self-esteem and confidence.

From my aunt’s tireless efforts and minimal pay over the years emerged an opportunity for me to complete my final exams and join university. Fortunately, I received a government scholarship to attend Kyambogo University, the best tech university in the country and pursue a bachelor’s degree in Science and Technology in biology. However, I had missed the government scholarship for a medical degree by 0.6; at that time, my dreams had been shattered; my family could not pay

for me to attend university without financial aid. I had to go with what was offered to me, a degree in biotechnology; little did I know that this was a great opportunity in disguise.

On August 23rd, 2019, I was admitted into the United States to attend University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and pursue a master's degree in Agricultural regulations. Until 2020, when the global pandemic struck, I was once again hit with that familiar feeling of uncertainty, but this time, it was different. I witnessed how a pandemic was able to separate and unify people. How it sparked debates that had long been overdue. How it pushed many to overcome struggles in their personal lives, and I learned from it.

The world needs people who are willing to listen. People that can overcome and lead others when they are divided. People who take roadblocks and make lessons of them. In Uganda, I would have never witnessed any of this. Being able to have an international education in the United States, especially during this unprecedented time, has allowed me to be that person. I aim to use my degree to work towards international sustainable development through agriculture to solve the fundamental problems of the world; poverty, world hunger and social exclusion, among others.

'Twinamatsiko', my last name, in English translates to 'we have hope' and I hope to live up to it as I make my mark on the world by using my story to give inspiration and hope to people going through a similar situation. I hope to uplift my people from poverty through the knowledge and experience that I have received.

