

Franklin (Frank) Cumberbatch

Vice President of Engagement, Bader Philanthropies Inc.
Member Since 2002



If there are angels on Earth, Frank Cumberbatch has encountered a few.

His third-grade teacher who discreetly kept a daily supply of clean shirts for him in the classroom closet because Franklin owned only one. The neighbor who invited him to join the track club. His high school math teacher who made him come in every Saturday until he caught up with and then surpassed his classmates. The athletic director who took him under his wing and taught him about America and how to drive a car. And the Milwaukee leaders who recognized his potential and believed in him.

These people impacted Frank's life but it was his own determination and discipline that lifted him from a life of poverty in Trinidad to an existence in the U.S. he could only dream about as a profoundly shy, severely asthmatic boy.

Frank presiding at his daughter's wedding

"I was raised in a shack without electricity or plumbing. My parents were functionally illiterate. But as an avid reader, I knew there was so much more to the world. I didn't want to spend my life as public works employee like my dad making \$2 an hour, so I promised my mom that if she signed me up for private school, I would get our family out of poverty. I didn't know what I was talking about, but something was guiding me."

Frank missed a lot of school due to his asthma and failed the entry exam for the better education opportunity of public school, but he was on a mission to uplift his family. And the track club changed everything. As he trained, his asthma improved. His shyness dissipated. He was accepted and befriended. Most of all, he felt a sense of purpose.

"It was school, track practice, shower, bed. I studied from 2-6 a.m. then walked two miles to get water before school. But I did it with a smile on my face because I now had a purpose."

When Frank won his first medal—third place in the 200-meter run (among only three competitors), he brought home a small bronze medal that his mom proudly showed to every single neighbor.

"I thought, if this is such a joy to her, I will double down. I will lift weights. I will do everything I can to be better. *This* is how I will lift my family out of poverty."

And it was.

Frank was awarded an academic scholarship to the University of Wisconsin—Oshkosh and as he adjusted to life in America, he flourished as a student and a runner. In 1981, he set school-record times of 48.11 seconds in the indoor 440-yard run, which he held until the event was discontinued in 1989, and 47.55 seconds in the outdoor 400 meters, a mark that finally fell in 2019 after 38 years. Coincidentally, that was the year Frank was inducted into the UW-O Athletic Hall of Fame.



Frank with his son, Nathan

After earning his bachelor's degree in business administration, Frank worked in the technology field followed by stints at a few startups and even took a major leap into politics when he ran for mayor of Milwaukee.

"I lost, but it turned out to be good because the mayor asked me to join his staff and I learned the inner workings of government, which was fascinating."

Currently, Frank is vice president of engagement at Bader Philanthropies, a job and an organization he loves.

"The work I do has positively impacted people in Milwaukee, throughout the state and across the world. I'm really proud of that," said Frank, who has served underrepresented communities through various organizations since moving to Milwaukee in 1985.



Frank his daughter, Sadie

As retirement looms, Frank has one more big goal: The Opportunity Center, a state-of-the-art athletic complex that will offer sports, health and wellness programs as well as mentoring, financial literacy and job prep to a diverse population. Frank is co-leading the project with Damien Buchman, of The Ability Center, a disability-focused nonprofit.

"This country has been so good to me. I was able to help my family (his mom and six siblings all live on the same block in Baltimore) and now I want to give back. I know the best way is by giving people a sense of purpose through running or sports and a place where everyone has an equal chance to succeed."

One of Frank's greatest joys in life was coaching, but his face really lights up when talk turns to his kids. He has a daughter from his first marriage and a daughter and son with his wife Andrea, a registered nurse. Rachel has her doctorate in veterinary medicine. Sadie, a sophomore at West Point, will be an army officer. Nathan, a high school senior, is talented academically and ranked in the top five in the nation in 800-meter run.*

"Just one generation away from severe poverty, my children are thriving. Yes, life is good."



Renting out Jabari Parker's house with family

* At the recent WIAA State Track & Field Championships, Nathan Cumberbatch placed first in the 400 in 47:83, first in the 800 in 1:54:48 and anchored Shorewood's 4x400 relay team that placed first.

Editor's Note: *Rotary People of Action is a bi-monthly series written by a group of Rotarians. This feature was written by Mary Bolich.*