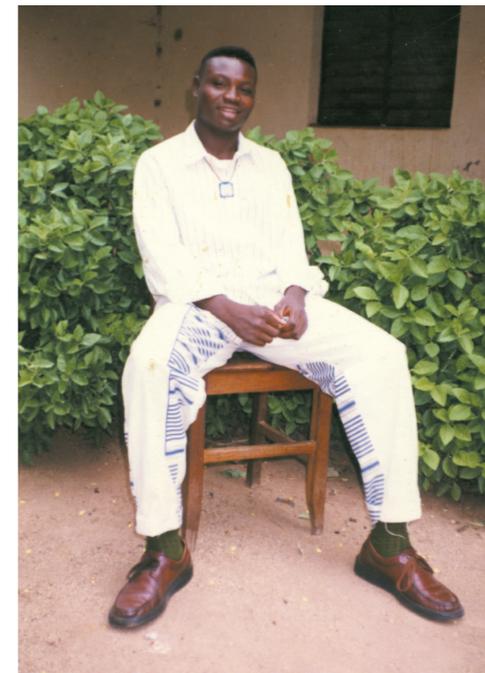


# A FAMILY MATTER

BY JULIE A. JACOB

A LIFE-SAVING SEROLOGY LAB STANDS AS TESTAMENT TO A ROTARIAN'S DETERMINATION TO HONOR A LOVED ONE'S MEMORY.



Last December, a group of American and Togolese Rotarians gathered with nuns, religious leaders, government officials, and a traditional chief in the courtyard of the Yendube Children's Hospital in Dapaong, Togo. They were there for a modest ceremony of speeches and a banquet to mark the official opening of a new serology laboratory dedicated to the memory of Raphael Bilimpo Bomane.

But for Rotarian Charlie Cogan, it was much more than a dedication ceremony; it was the culmination of seven years of hard work and persistence to make good on a promise. The young man pictured in the photographs hanging directly below the dedication plaque was his brother-in-law, whose death at age 23 due to a misdiagnosed case of hepatitis began a chain of events that saw Cogan become a Rotarian and organize a fundraising drive for a modern blood-testing lab for the hospital.

A nation of five million people on the coast of West Africa, Togo is halfway around the world from Cogan's hometown of Kirksville, Mo., USA, but it is close to his heart. The soft-spoken Midwesterner with a gentle sense of humor first came to Togo in 1983 as a Peace Corps volunteer. Serving others comes naturally to him. His parents, both teachers, taught him the value of community service.

Cogan quickly fell in love with Togo. He also fell in love with Nalongue Bomane, a gracious young woman who worked at a local hospital during her summer breaks from college. Soon, they were married in a

traditional ceremony and moved back to the United States after his Peace Corps stint ended in 1986.

In 1989 the couple returned to Togo with their infant son, John Woodard Yendukua, after Cogan received a Fulbright scholarship to study there. Raphael, Nalongue's younger brother, lived with them during their stay. Nalongue was particularly close to the bright, studious youth whom she had raised after the death of their mother, and Cogan still talks about how excited the teenager was to see the ocean on his first trip to Lomé, the capital.

Cogan and Nalongue returned to the United States in 1991. Cogan taught at a college in Vermont, but soon the family settled in Evanston, Ill. Nalongue studied nursing, while Cogan taught African history at several area colleges and universities, including Northwestern University, where he also worked as assistant director of admissions for five years. They kept in constant touch with Raphael, who mailed them handmade holiday cards and letters filled with family news.

In the summer of 1996, the couple received a troubling letter from Raphael. He felt chronically tired, he told them, and his eyes had a yellow cast. Cogan and Nalongue quickly sent him money to see a doctor in Dapaong. Although the majority of health professionals in Togo are well-trained, Cogan says, most hospitals have little money for equipment or supplies. Patients typically must pay for bandages, gloves, and antiseptics, and relatives often bring food and cook their meals.

Left: Rotarian Charlie Cogan and his wife, Nalongue, with their children (from left), Raphaela, John, and Pascal. Above: Nalongue's deceased younger brother, Raphael Bilimpo Bomane, in whose memory a new serology lab in Dapaong, Togo, is dedicated.

Because the hospital had no equipment to test blood samples, Raphael's doctor made a diagnosis of malaria based on the young man's symptoms and prescribed a standard malaria medication. However, Raphael's condition quickly worsened, and he died on 22 September 1996. An autopsy revealed that

of course, as a result, the diagnosis is bound to be more uncertain."

Cogan realized that he would need sponsors for his project. He knew little about Rotary but was aware that RI World Headquarters was just blocks from the Northwestern campus, so he

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— ROTARIAN DONALD ZEIGLER

Raphael had had hepatitis, says Cogan, and the malaria medicine had probably been toxic to his weakened liver.



Cogan dealt with his grief by making a commitment to himself and his family. Somehow, some way, he would raise money for a serology laboratory to keep Raphael's memory alive.

"There was so much at stake," says Cogan. "You can't do anything for the people who have already died, but if you don't do *something*, in a way you've forgotten about them."

His decision and determination didn't surprise his wife. "Charlie likes to help people," says Nalongue. "When he sets himself to do something, he does it 100 percent."

Blood-borne diseases, such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, and the various forms of hepatitis are prevalent throughout sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, modern serology labs are in short supply. "The need for small, well-functioning labs with capacity for serology and basic hematology is enormous across the African continent," says malaria expert Dr. Andreas Heddini, coordinator of the Multilateral Initiative on Malaria at the Wenner-Gren Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. "Often, small dispensaries and clinics do not have access to any laboratory facilities at all; and

decided to start there. He first spoke to Rotarian Larry Shawver, a member of the Fund Development staff of The Rotary Foundation of RI. Shawver told him about the Matching Grants program, which Rotary clubs often tap to fund comparable international service projects. Cogan next picked the brains of virology researchers at Northwestern, who told him that a serology lab for the Yendube Children's Hospital could be set up for about \$35,000.

Armed with this information, Cogan gave an impassioned presentation to Shawver's club, the Rotary Club of Evanston Lighthouse. The members decided to support the project, and they invited Cogan to join the club.

Evanston Lighthouse Rotarian Donald Zeigler, past chair of the club's International Service committee, says Cogan was a spark plug from day one. "Charlie is quite a passionate person, very idealistic," Zeigler says.

In 1997, Cogan and Nalongue returned to Togo for a visit. They met with Past District Governor Bawa Mankoubi, a longtime member of the Rotary Club of Lomé and now vice chair of the African Regional PolioPlus Committee. Mankoubi, a staunch supporter of Cogan's push for a serology lab, helped establish the Rotary



Club of Dapaong, which became the Togo partner for the project after receiving its charter in 2001.

In 2000, Cogan accepted a position as director of international recruitment for his alma mater, Carleton College, in Northfield, Minn., where he joined the Rotary Club of Northfield. Not surprisingly, the club was soon on board with the laboratory project and, in fact, became the principal U.S. partner.

Cogan's arrival put a personal face on the concept of international service, says Northfield Rotarian Patrick O'Neill, a past club president. "With other international community projects, you get feedback, but with this one we were actually helping a community that includes Charlie's family," explains O'Neill. "The satisfaction was very warm."

Slowly but steadily, Cogan was able to nail down the funding commitments needed to apply for a Matching Grant. The Northfield club led



with a \$12,000 contribution, while Evanston Lighthouse kicked in \$2,000. Two other Minnesota clubs, Faribault and Farmington, donated \$1,000 and \$500, respectively. Rotary districts 5960 (parts of Minnesota and Wisconsin) and 6440 (Illinois) provided a combined \$5,500. A Rotary Foundation Matching Grant would complete the funding effort, if only Cogan could meet the approaching application deadline.

But the nuns who ran the Yendube Children's Hospital had been waiting patiently for seven years, and Cogan wasn't about to make them wait any longer. In late 2002, funding commitments in hand, Cogan made a mad scramble to get the signatures needed to complete the paperwork.

Cogan now can laugh at the ordeal that ensued. First, he dashed to the District 5960 midterm conference to get the district governor's signature, then drove back to Northfield so club officers could sign the documents. He then needed the signature of Dapaong club president Arsene Tindame. Fortunately, a Group Study Exchange team was just leaving for Togo, so he handed off the paperwork to them. After the Dapaong club returned the forms via courier, Cogan flew to Chicago and drove straight from the airport at 10:30 p.m. to the home of an assistant governor, who would get the application to the district governor the next day.

Cogan made the application deadline, the grant was approved, and the Dapaong club received the grant money in June 2003. Dapaong Rotarians wasted no time in buying the serology equipment and pitched in to help the hospital staff remodel the lab space and install an air conditioning system. By August 2003 the lab was up and running.

Cogan admits that he sometimes became frustrated by the slow pace of the fundraising, the paper chase, and the challenges the fledgling Dapaong club faced taking on such a major project so early in its existence.

"I've worked on hard projects in Togo before, like getting roads built, but I think in having to stick with this for so long, it was the hardest," says Cogan.

Nalongue cried when she learned the laboratory finally was completed and her brother's legacy assured. "It gives hope to the people of Dapaong," she says. "It will save thousands of lives."



In fact, the serology lab may already have saved the life of Nalongue's younger sister, Yendumam. Soon after the lab opened, Cogan says, she went to the hospital with symptoms similar to Raphael's. The doctor ordered a blood test, which indicated that she was suffering from hepatitis, malaria, anemia, and dysentery.

evolution of the project. "Each of the kids has a Togo connection of some kind," he says. John, the oldest, spent his first two years in Dapaong. Daughter Raphaela Adams Yendube was born in August 1998 during Cogan's first year as a Rotarian and was named in honor of the uncle she would never meet. A second son, Pascal

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— NALONGUE COGAN

"Her doctor said the lab analysis made all the difference because it let him know the order in which he should treat the illnesses to minimize the risks," Cogan says. "It truly was a big relief to see her looking so well at the dedication in December."

For the dedication trip, Cogan put together a team that included Brett Reese, Northfield club president; Northfield Rotarian Jim Pokorney; Clare Janty, of the Rotary Club of Barron County Sunrise, Wis.; and Marlene Gargulak, of the Rotary Club of Rice Lake, Wis. Accompanied by Mankoubi and Tindame, they also volunteered on a polio immunization drive, visited local clubs, and presented uniforms donated by Carleton College to the Dapaong soccer club.

Reflecting on the seven years of toil leading up to the dedication, Cogan notes that he can measure the growth of his own family by the

Bomane, named after his mother's uncle, was born in April 2003, a few weeks after the Matching Grant was approved.

But Cogan insists the challenges he faced leading the project pale when compared with the adversities overcome by his wife's family and his many Togolese friends. "It makes what I've done look like a piece of cake," he says. "There are so many Togolese who have accomplished so much in spite of the obstacles. So I felt that I just couldn't drop the ball on the little bit that I was committed to seeing through." ■

Julie A. Jacob is a Chicago writer and a frequent contributor to *The Rotarian*. She profiled Sylvia Whitlock in the April issue.

To learn more about the Humanitarian Grants Program, go to [www.rotary.org/foundation](http://www.rotary.org/foundation).

Clockwise from left: Cogan (standing, center) with a championship basketball team he formed as a Peace Corps volunteer in Togo in 1984; young patients receive blood tests at the new serology lab; Cogan at a Togo water project in 1986.

Top right: Cogan (kneeling) with a team of District 5960 Rotarians and their Togolese hosts in December 2003, when they attended the lab's dedication and participated in a polio immunization drive. Lower left: Cogan administers oral polio vaccine.