

From Mount Kilimajaro to Uganda: My Two Tanzanian “Sons” by Dolph L. Hatfield, PhD

Dolph L. Hatfield, PhD, is a retired molecular biologist from the National Cancer Institute, National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, MD. He has been active in civil rights issues since the late 1960s and working with the homeless for more than 30 years.

Last December, from my grassy vantage on the grounds of the International Medical and Technological University in Dar Es Saalam, Tanzania, I looked on as Deogratias “Deo” Mtui graduated from medical school. I first met Deo in May 2011, when I attempted to climb Kilimanjaro for the fourth time. Deo was working as a porter on the mountain, where he was responsible for carrying my gear. Shortly after we started the climb, I noticed Deo having trouble with his feet and back. “What is wrong?” I asked him repeatedly. He simply replied, “Nothing.”

On the third day, sick from the altitude, I decided to abort the climb. Deo returned down the mountain with me. Once off the mountain, he admitted that his feet and back were hurting him terribly. He said that he could not tell anyone because, if he did, he would not be hired. Deo had been working as a porter for 6 years to save money for medical school.

Over the next four days, the two of us met for lunch. Deo spoke very seriously about completing a six-year program of college and medical school. I told him that if he promised he would stay off the mountain, I would see that his tuition through medical school was covered.

As a result of this agreement, here I was, 6.5 years later, witnessing Deo graduate from medical school, third in his class of 135 students (**Photo 1**). I could not have been more proud of this young man, who called me “father” and I called him “son.”



Photo 1. Deogratias' graduation. Deo is shown with Frank and the author.

I met Frank Mella in a similar way more than two decades earlier. He was a porter on Kilimanjaro in 1993, when my daughter, Sandy, and I attempted our first climb of the mountain. I have been to Tanzania six times since then, and have visited Frank on each trip. In October 2007, Frank served as my guide during a climb of Kilimanjaro that I had arranged to celebrate my 70th birthday. By then he had started developing his own adventure company, Kilele Savane, LTD, and was taking clients to the summits of Kilimanjaro, Mawenzi and Meru, as well as on safari.

The most difficult part of the climb is between Kibo, at 15,420 feet, and Gilman's point, at 18,700 feet, a distance of 5.7 miles. It generally takes experienced climbers four hours to make this climb and slower climbers six hours. It took me much longer. I would take several steps, rest, take another few steps, and again rest. The higher one climbs and the later it becomes, the

harder the wind blows and the colder it gets. Each time I rested, Frank wrapped a portion of his warm, heavy down coat around me, holding me close until I was ready to start climbing again. After 12 hours, we reached Gilman's point. It took another 1.5 hours to reach the camp inside the crater where we spent the night.

At 8:00 AM the next morning, we climbed from the floor of the crater to the rim of the mountain, reaching the summit at 11:07 AM on October 13, 2007. Without Frank, I would never have made it to the top – and so, after this trip, we began addressing each other as “father” and “son,”

After Deo's graduation and a brief visit to the property that Frank had developed as part of his adventure company, the three of us departed Tanzania for Uganda. This was to be a humanitarian trip to visit starving families in the northeastern part of Uganda.

We spent the first night 160 miles from the airport in Mbale Town, half way to Moroto in the Karamoja Region, where the majority of those suffering from starvation in Uganda reside. The next morning, Damba, our driver, took us to purchase 3,300 pounds of cornmeal, used to make ugali, one of the main dishes in East Africa; 1,200 pounds of beans; and 550 pounds of salt. The total cost was only \$750.

As we visited a compound in the hills above Moroto maintained by volunteers, Frank, Deo, and I were greeted by children. We shook the hands of their parents and elders with a traditional handshake: Taking both hands of the person we were greeting with our hands, we would then raise them back and forth over each other's hands several times.

We then began passing out the food. Frank, Deo, and several volunteers dragged 220 pound bags of cornmeal and beans and 110 pound bags of salt as family members lined up,

holding sacks and plastic and metal containers for us to pour food into. Some women held out their skirts.

In the afternoon, we visited the families in a nearby village who were too malnourished to come to the compound. Several were laying on the ground only days from dying (**Photos 2-3**),



Photo 2. Elderly woman near death from starvation.



Photo 3. Another elderly woman near death from starvation.

including a woman in her late 30s (**Photo 4**). Deo and I knelt beside them, lifting their blankets and holding their hands, offering the only consolation we could. Deo had brought some sugar with him. He placed a small amount under their tongues and gave them a sip of water. After examining these critically ill individuals, Deo concluded that they were most likely dying only of starvation. It was heart-wrenching to witness these individuals, whose condition could have been so easily reversed. The feeling of helplessness was devastating.



Photo 4. A volunteer and the author attending a young woman too weak from malnutrition to eat.

During our visit, I shook hands with an elderly gentleman who spit on one of my hands (**Photo 5**), then the other. I was told he had paid me the highest compliment possible. He had not wished me a long life; he had GIVEN me a long life. I later learned that this gentleman was a “culturally important person in the village,” the only elder statesman who could confer such a gift.



Photo 5. The elderly gentleman is spitting on the author's hands. He was not wishing the author a long life, but was giving him a long life (see text).

Deo watched carefully while I was meeting the families. He examined each child I held and several of the people with whom I shook hands, later telling me he was looking for contractible illnesses to be sure I was not being exposed. He did not think I had been and added: “You will not become ill as God is taking care of you.”

I could not have undertaken this tour without Frank and Deo --- the three of us, who love and respect each other deeply as father and sons, who met on the face of Kilimanjaro and traveled together to see the faces of famine in east Africa (**Photo 6**). Our meeting these warm and gentle people and the expressions on their faces will be in our thoughts for the rest of our lives.



Photo 6. Residents of the village who have been given food. Note the similar expressions.