



Dr. Majaliwa Mzombwe
enjoying an afternoon walk at
Alton Baker Park with his new
puppy, Kelele Nakupenda.

I've Got Your Back

Dr. Majaliwa Mzombwe reflects on how his global roots, mentors, and path in medicine led to local impact.

BY STEVIE DAVISSON

FOR LANE COUNTY MEDICAL SOCIETY

Dr. Majaliwa Mzombwe, MD, always knew he would be a doctor. “My life goal was to be a sports medicine physician at the World Cup and be on the sidelines with an African team.” With the influence of his parents, who molded him to pursue the field of medicine, Mzombwe began his medical studies younger than most, and his journey from World Cup hopeful to practicing Interventional Pain Medicine and Sports Medicine (IPM) in Eugene is just as fascinating as the man himself.

Born in Bujumbura, Burundi, to physician parents, Mzombwe's youth was marked by change. Forced to flee Burundi due to ethnic conflict, Mzombwe's family first immigrated to Toronto, Ontario, then again when he was in second grade, this time to Mississippi. “It was quite the cultural whiplash...it was hard to understand people's accents,” he admits.

Early Days of Medicine

Mzombwe got a head start on his medical career by attending the Mississippi School for Mathematics and Science, a boarding school with accelerated classes and college credit. His hard work led him to early acceptance at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, but Mzombwe ultimately chose Vanderbilt University instead.

“What really attracted me to that program was that they had a focus on global health,” he says. This was a concept Mzombwe was familiar with from a very young age due to his parents’ work with organizations like the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

“Vanderbilt actually had the Fogarty Fulbright Fellowship, which is a notable, federally-sponsored, global health initiative to expand global health access and research abroad,” he says. He applied to the program, was accepted with a scholarship, and as a consequence spent eleven months in Tanzania, doing noncommunicable disease research.

He was eager to collaborate with organizations like the National Institutes of Health (NIH), which contributed to the work he was able to do there. He describes his time there as formative, and his interest in global health was further encouraged while studying hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular risk factors and how they can interplay in the populations in Tanzania.

Mzombwe’s time at the Bugando Medical Center has remained close to his heart. “The work I was doing was housed within a program supported by United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which we know has since been cut,” he says. Having seen the effects of those programs, Mzombwe believes that their absence will have life-changing consequences

for folks around the world.

After graduating from medical school, Mzombwe asked himself, “What kind of physician do I want to be at the end of all this?” The appeal of orthopedic surgery and sports medicine led Mzombwe to realize he did not want that lifestyle. Instead, he was looking for a specialty that still involved hands-on skills where he could use his technical skills.

During his surgical rotation, he became interested in the IPM department nearby at the VA, where he met one of his first mentors in the field of medicine and physical health, Dr. Gina Walton. Dr. Walton is the Vice President of Medical Diversity & Inclusion and Associate Designated Institutional Official for Graduate Medical Education at Sinai Chicago. “[She] was one of my main anchors who showed me how I could combine my interest in global health and interventions with IPM,” he says.

Graduating Class of COVID-19

Soon after, Mzombwe matched at the University of Miami (U of M) for IPM, and began his career as a physician with an intern year in Brooklyn and NYC at Maimonides Medical Center.

“I was in the graduating class of 2019, so I was on the frontlines of COVID starting in early 2020,” he recalls. He spent four months treating COVID patients, and the emotional toll was enormous as his hospital was one of the first to necessitate trucks with freezer capability because of the amount of bodies that were coming through.

He describes the pandemic as another affirmation of the importance of global health. “The failure of [the] worldwide systematic intervention to prevent the spread of, and mitigate the effects of COVID were the reason why we had a lot of morbidity...not just in this country, but around the world. [We]

also couldn’t only take care of ourselves while ignoring [others]—it simply isn’t the way healthcare works,” he explains. “We all get affected.”

He continued his education at U of M and found that IPM suited him and described it as a very good encapsulation of some of the health trends in the U.S.

“The typical path is through the anesthesia route [which] emphasizes pharmacologic management with use of opioids, which did not appeal to me,” he adds.

Rather, he was interested in path number two, which focused more on holistic rehabilitation and intervention. He decided to go a non-ACGME route for his IPM training and applied broadly, being accepted at Pacific Sports and Spine, where he completed a fellowship in Interventional Spine and Musculoskeletal Medicine in 2024.

Pacific Sports and Spine appealed to Mzombwe because it was a hybrid program, with instructors of a similar background to his in IPM. “They subspecialized in pain medicine, while having that rehab perspective, rather than the anesthesia perspective,” he explains. “That intrigued me.”

After completing his fellowship, Mzombwe decided to stay on at Pacific Sports and Spine. “I was pleasantly surprised by what I found in Eugene. It made me want to stay for the first few years of my medical career. The rural nature of the population isn’t anything new to me. There is a lot more in common with Oregonians and Mississippians than I was expecting,” he laughs.

Cross-Continental Care Model

Mzombwe brings his global experiences into the workplace with him, using the biopsychosocial model for pain treatment. “I follow the principle of trying to meet the complete patient,” he explains. “The mind and

body are not two separate things. If you can help one aspect, you're in fact helping both."

Mzombwe's approach to patient care is also uniquely affected by his background as an immigrant and his work abroad; he is acutely aware of the biases physicians can bring into an exam room and urges other practitioners to take the time to examine how they're approaching their patients. "Everyone has both conscious and unconscious biases that are driving a lot of their decisions... acknowledging this is a step towards greater patient care," Mzombwe says.

"The next step is to put yourself in uncomfortable situations, and get a sense of the discomfort and alienation that many patients experience in their lives. Developing that genuine empathy is key," Mzombwe explains. "It's easy

to attend a seminar and not change your behavior, but having that sharp discomfort of being alienated can be a helpful eye-opener."

Mzombwe's global health experiences have given him practice in meeting folks where they are. Even if he's not familiar with their specific background, his baseline is to treat patients with a certain approach of compassion, understanding, and respect. He always has their backs.

He views this not just as a mindset, but as a reflection of himself. "[I am] the product of two physicians who were practicing in Burundi, but left because of war. [They] were still passionate about medicine and wanted to impart that to their children...I happen to have that passion... Ultimately, it doesn't matter if you're in Burundi or if you're in Eugene, there

are essential tenets to healthcare that will be helpful in each circumstance," he mentions.

Future Goals—Literally

As a new member of LCMS and a recent newcomer to Eugene, Mzombwe is ready to embrace the Pacific Northwest, describing himself as interested in all the granola activities. He recently adopted a puppy, Kelele Nakupenda, to accompany him while chasing waterfalls and hiking in the rain.

"I am excited to be a greater part of the community and look forward to hearing what other members of LCMS think regarding the importance of global health and cultural competency in a global context," he says. And as for his World Cup dreams? "That's still a goal of mine," he adds. ♦

Photos provided by Angel Montes



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