

The Value of Meetings from the perspective of community partners

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Many of us are reluctant to travel to yet another far-off meeting, facing inconvenient air travel, interrupted email access, and having to reschedule our subscription theatre tickets. But Margaret Nakitiyo and Richard Aliwaali have a very different perspective.

Margaret and Richard are members of a district-based NGO, the Mukono AIDS Support Association (MASA), located an hour's drive from Kampala, Uganda. As leaders of the MASA 'post-test' club, they are active in spreading clear, upbeat musical messages about HIV prevention and services and providing support to community AIDS initiatives. These and other activities carried out by MASA across Mukono District have been supported through the Uganda AIDS Control Project, also known as the Uganda MAP. Both Richard and Margaret are powerful examples of how to live positively with HIV.

As part of the community response to HIV/AIDS in Uganda, Margaret and Richard had long wanted the opportunity to participate in a meeting outside their district, to learn from and share with others who dedicate their lives to preventing new HIV infections and providing support services to those already living with the virus. As HIV-positive people, they also dreamed of meeting others from beyond their own community, to learn first-hand that they are not alone in facing the daily challenges of HIV.

The chance to attend such a meeting, though, did not present itself in the form of an official invitation. Rather, it came about most indirectly through the desire, ingenuity, perseverance and personal sacrifice of Margaret Nakitiyo and Richard Aliwaali themselves.

Hearing that the World Bank's Global HIV/AIDS Program was organizing a regional meeting in Kigali, Rwanda to launch a book on the results of the Multi-Country AIDS Program (MAP) – in which MASA was featured – Richard and Margaret decided that they wanted to be part of the event. However, although the director of their organization, Ruth Kaweesa, had been invited to represent MASA, her colleagues were not included in the invitation. Undeterred, Margaret and Richard decided to come to Kigali on their own, in the hope of realizing their dream of participating in an international meeting on AIDS and helping to launch the MAP book that meant so much to them.

They started their journey early on the morning of June 12, traveling by taxi from Mukono town to Kampala, in order to catch the bus that would take them to Kigali. Loaded down with handicrafts made by MASA post-test club members that they hoped to sell at the conference, they arrived twelve hours later in the Rwandan capital. Here began a series of encounters with strangers that demonstrated the ingenuity and perseverance of Margaret and Richard and the kindness of the Rwandese people whom they encountered along the way.

The first priority was to find their colleague Ruth Kaweesa, whom they knew to be staying at the Gorillas Hotel. To this end, Richard suggested that they approach the police post at the Kigali bus station to get directions. On meeting the Ugandan 'visitors', the police officers on duty explained that they did not know of the Gorillas Hotel. However, as night had already fallen, the police suggested that they wait till morning to search for Ruth, and in the meantime

offered to help Margaret and Richard find an inexpensive and safe place to stay. They also offered to keep the boxes of handicrafts overnight in their office, to lighten the Ugandans' load. With two police officers as guides, they tried several places until they finally found decent, affordable accommodation for the night. The officers then gave Margaret and Richard their phone number, just in case they encountered any problems during the night. In Margaret's words, "The officers showed kindness and cooperation", which Richard and Margaret greatly appreciated.

The next morning, Richard went back to the police post while Margaret set out for Gorillas Hotel by taxi. Although she managed to find the place, on arrival there she learned that Ruth had moved to another hotel. The hotel staff did not know where Ruth had gone, but knew that the AIDS conference was being held at the Serena Hotel and suggested looking for her there. Armed with this new information, Margaret returned to the police post, where she and Richard bid farewell to their new friends and then set out by taxi for the Serena Hotel.

On arrival, Richard waited outside with their belongings while Margaret approached the hotel management to ask how to find the conference participants. Directed to the meeting room, she waited until the tea break, where she found a fellow Ugandan whom she hoped could lead her to Ruth. Unfortunately he could only confirm that Ruth was not in the meeting at the Serena, but told her that there was a World Bank AIDS meeting taking place elsewhere in Kigali, though he did not know where.

Margaret quickly returned to the Serena Hotel conference manager to ask for directions to the other AIDS meeting. The conference manager confirmed that another meeting was taking place at the Hotel des Milles Collines, and provided directions to Margaret and Richard. Once again they set out – this time on foot – to find their colleague Ruth. They walked for about a mile, until they realized they must have overshot the Mille Collines, and so stopped a taxi driver to ask for assistance. When the driver initially asked for too much money, Richard and Margaret explained that they were they were visitors to the country and did not have the money he was asking for. On hearing this, the taxi driver broke into a broad smile, laughed and happily drove them back to the Milles Collines.

Again, as Richard waited patiently outside with their boxes and bags, Margaret made her way to the hotel management for information about Ruth Kaweesa and the location of the AIDS meeting. The gentleman at reception had not heard of Ruth, but confirmed that an AIDS meeting was indeed going on, and provided Margaret with an escort to help her find the meeting and look for her colleague. This time the timing was perfect, as she arrived just as the meeting participants were breaking for tea.

Finally reunited with Ruth, and present at the meeting they had so longed to attend, Margaret and Richard were welcomed by the Bank organizers and invited to join the proceedings. They spent the next two days living out the dream they had held for so long, to participate in a major AIDS meeting, to meet other positive people from different countries, and to be present at the launch of the book of which they feel so much a part.

During the course of the meeting they joined the Uganda delegation at the Marketplace, where MAP project teams displayed posters of the work they had undertaken with World Bank support. Posters were judged on the basis of results and innovation. The Uganda team – including Margaret and Richard – was thrilled to be among the winners for the excellent

results achieved by the MAP's Community HIV/AIDS Initiatives (CHAI) component – in which Richard, Margaret and Ruth were directly involved.

With support from the meeting organizers, Richard and Margaret also set up a table at the Marketplace in front of the Uganda poster, on which they displayed the handicrafts that they had brought with them from Mukono. The funds raised will be used to provide some additional support to members of the MASA post-test club.

Margaret and Richard asked that this story end with a message: It is important for everyone of us to know our HIV status, to take a test and – on the basis of the result – make a 'life plan'. If the test result is negative, the plan needs to ensure that you remain negative and not to take any chances of exposing yourself to the virus. And if the test result is positive, it is an opportunity to work out in very concrete ways how to live positively, healthfully and productively with the virus. While Richard and Margaret continue to hope for a cure, they are showing the world everyday how to live positively with HIV.



Photos: Margaret, Richard and Ruth in front of their table of handicrafts.



Margaret and Richard displaying the award won by UACP for results