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From Suburban New Jersey to West Africa, Professor Travels to Give Back to Homeland

Newswise — Two or three times a year, Dr. Michael Ba Banutu-Gomez treks home, traveling roughly 4,000 miles, crossing an ocean, flying anywhere from seven to 14 hours to reach The Gambia, the West African coastal country where he was born and raised.

He has family in the nation — the smallest country in Africa, one that is practically surrounded by Senegal — and that’s part of the draw, of course.

But there’s more.

Banutu-Gomez, 42, a professor of management in Rowan University’s Rohrer College of Business, Glassboro, N.J., is committed to bettering his homeland, even while he is a well-respected professional, husband and father living in a middle-class community in Washington Township, N.J.

The land of his youth — where, according to the CIA, life expectancy at birth in the largely agrarian country is around 55 years — is a far cry from South Jersey, but it is a place he holds dear.

“I still see The Gambia as my home, but I also see America as my home as well,” said the father of one, who — along with his daughter, Nyima, 4, holds citizenship in both countries.

That love for his first home is what regularly propels him into another world and will spur him back this May through August to once again assist leaders from the government, military, police, religious organizations, financial institutions, the private sector and non-government organizations. This spring and summer, he’ll train 40 to 50 Africans on leadership and management, including tribal chiefs in their local language. His wife, Shandra, a health educator, trainer and professor, will accompany him, along with their daughter. And during June, Rowan business professor Dr. Berhe Habte-Giorgis will join Banutu-Gomez in training people in **appreciative inquiry**, the process of looking at the good in people as a way to counteract the bad and using that good to help empower people to do better.

Most of the time, Banutu-Gomez said, people only see Africa on a television screen, and what they see is the negative: war, poverty and famine. “We’re looking at evaluating what’s good in society and how to use it to change things for the better,” he said.

Banutu-Gomez also raises funds for his homeland and solicits donations of educational materials for the country’s children. Recently, he sent close to 3,800 books donated by the Rowan community and contacts of his wife and opened one of only a handful of libraries in The Gambia.

Perhaps Banutu-Gomez’s largest contribution can be found in Lamin, a town in which he and his family built a second home about 10 minutes from the Banjul International airport in Yundum. That’s the town in which Banutu-Gomez in 2007 founded the Banutu Business College, with the goal of educating Gambians and other Africans who may have no other chance to obtain a higher education. He serves as chair of the business college, and his wife is academic dean.

The Banutu-Gomez family also created the “I HEAR U (Improving Health, Education and Acquiring Rights for the Underserved)” Foundation to address many social issues and to raise funds and sponsor disadvantaged students to pursue their college education in The Gambia.

“When you provide quality education, you are developing the country,” he said of his initiative. “Having opportunities to have education in our country is a blessing to everybody else.”

“My parents were both teachers, inside of the classroom and outside the classroom, and I saw them both giving back. I believe growing up with that point of reference has influenced me to pursue a career that allows me to give back and to educate. I pray that this legacy of giving and helping those in need extends to our daughter, and she will learn just as I have, that what I have given pales in comparison to what I have received.”

When he returns to The Gambia it’s to mixed reactions. He spends time with old friends, and they pick up where they left off — there is no separation. Younger people, though, show him respect, but more for his age than his education, calling him “Uncle” and “Dad.” Some people perceive him as a “rich American,” but then to many in The Gambia, any American is rich, Banutu-Gomez said.

Banutu-Gomez — Michael is the Christian name he was given at baptism, Ba is the African name given him at his naming ceremony, Banutu is his family name and Gomez comes from Portuguese colonizers who “gave” it to his great-grandparents when they lived in Guinea Bissau, West Africa — looks to his origins for the reasons he gives so much. “I can go back to my parents,” he said. “Both my parents were farmers. My father also took in kids from people unable to care for them, to live with us and raise them as his kids. I grew up in that type of family, helping other people, assisting other people.”

He also attributes where he is today in part to his family. One of 11 children, Banutu-Gomez was born in a village called Bakalarr with no elementary school, and he left home on Sundays to travel 20 miles and board with a family that spoke a different language and lived near his school, St. Michael Elementary School in Njongon. Seven of his siblings also attended school, and in his village that was rare — only one other family sent its offspring to class. He attributes his and his siblings' education to his father, who also worked as an importer and traveled a great deal through Africa, gaining exposure to different ideas.

Banutu-Gomez attended a teachers' training college in The Gambia, and two of his siblings also attended college. He taught elementary and secondary school briefly in his homeland before coming to America at age 20, the first in his family to do so.

Banutu-Gomez, an Eagle Scout who worked in Scouting in The Gambia, left home to work for the Boy Scouts in Connecticut. At the end of his one-year stint there, he returned to school in Connecticut, Boston and Cleveland. He later moved to Chicago to work at Illinois Institute of Technology-Stuart School of Business and also at Robert Morris College, and it was there that he met his wife. In Chicago he helped build the Gambian Association of Chicago, a group that worked with Gambians to discuss development issues here and at home, and did the same when he was in Boston with the Gambian Association of Massachusetts.

He earned a B.A. in sociology and applied social relations from Eastern Connecticut State University, an M.S.W. from Boston University and a Ph.D. in organizational behavior from Case Western Reserve University, and he joined the Rowan faculty in 2000. Today, helping others comes naturally to him.

“It’s not enough having an education,” he said. “Education can only be meaningful when you reach out and share what you have with people who don’t have access to what you had. The best thing I can provide the African people, especially the Gambian people, is sharing my knowledge and experience with them,” he said.

Most of the people in his homeland, he said, will never have the opportunities he had. “I want to give back to the people in The Gambia,” said Banutu-Gomez, who often dresses in native garb.

“It was not even a question of giving back,” he said. “It was a natural instinct.”