

LIFE

HEALTH & FITNESS



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Wanadamu Initiative forms countrywide network of donors to save the lives of people they may never even meet

Youth group banks on the gift of blood as accidents take toll

BY CHEGE MUIGAI

On August 23, what started as a happy day for a Kangundo family and their friends ended in tragedy. After day-long merry-making in Mbooni where they had gone to perform the final rite in process of paying bride price that had started decades previously, the family left for home in a hired 41-seater minibus. It was getting dark and not many noticed that the bus was heavily overloaded as it began its meandering path to the highway from the village. As it were, nobody made it to Kangundo that night.

Twenty three people died as the minibus plunged into the Uwaani River. The rest either needed outpatient medical help before being released the next day while many needed extended hospital stay. On September 25, a good number remain at the Machakos Level 5 Hospital, while a much smaller number whose injuries were more serious are at the Kenyatta National Hospital.

That was just one unfortunate disaster in the period between August and September which Kenyans would want to forget in a hurry.

Only last Sunday, the country was horrified to hear that a further 15 people had perished in yet another road accident in Turkana. Other serious accidents have been reported on Mombasa Road, Meru, Isiolo and Gilgil while oil pilfering continues to take toll, killing over 100 people in Sinai and Bungoma. This dark period has led to unimaginable number of deaths of people in the prime of their lives and depriving a cycle of dependants of breadwinners and guardians.

But the pressure this has put on the medical industry has been especially high. Doctors have been recalled from vacation to help deal with a crisis that is unlike anything this country has witnessed in a long time. It is during times of great adversity that heroes are born and these two months have been no different as individual medical workers continue to step forward far and beyond the call of duty to save lives and to comfort the wounded and their families.

Evans Muriu is another unlikely hero who has emerged from obscurity to play his part in supplying what

» The membership

What you need to join

- Wanadamu founded in July 2011.
- It has a membership of 1700 and growing.
- Recruits people over 16 and weighing 50 kgs and above.
- Members can only donate once every three months.
- Members donate within their country networks.



he calls the liquid of life — blood. Through his Wanadamu Initiative, he has created a network of blood donors and kept them on a six-hour notice in all corners of the country. Whenever an urgent need is reported, regardless of the hour and place, Mr Muriu is always ready to do everything he can to help.

"People dying because they cannot get blood is like murder as some of us have blood to spare," says Mr Muriu who adds that when somebody gives blood, they give life and that is what every person of goodwill should aim to do. "You may never know, but you may need the blood you bank a month down the road. I know of cases where people have banked and then benefited from their own effort directly or indirectly."

Mr Muriu's initiative offers critical challenges that demand caution to run successfully. Not only are his volunteers spread out across a wide area offering serious logistical challenges, he also has to deal with critical blood specifics; "We have to be most careful when identifying a blood group and later when recording the same so as not to endanger a patient's life," says Mr Muriu whose other big challenge comes from lopsided blood groupings.

"Blood is what makes a person what they are. Science has linked personality traits and ideologies to blood groups. The most generous people in the world almost invariably have a blood group 'O Positive'. What that means is that we have so many donors on stand-by to

offer this group of blood. Luckily, these type of donors can give blood across all blood groups except 'O Negative,' says Mr Muriu.

Wanadamu runs under the auspices of Kuna Vijana, a youth empowerment NGO that focuses on the development of a positive mentality amongst the young people of Kenya and the donation of blood fits into the overall philosophy, according to Mr Muriu.

"If you want something desperately and you just cannot get it, the reason is always because you have not given anything yourself. We encourage a culture of giving in our society for the better development for all," he says.

Mr Muriu is a graduate of Strathmore University where he studied accountancy. He maintains other business interests and insists his plunge into social work has no financial design; "The Wanadamu Initiative runs on almost zero budget. Our 1,700 members only need co-ordination from this office. Otherwise, they drive themselves to hospital at their cost whenever there is a need for a particular blood type," he says.

Phenomenal growth

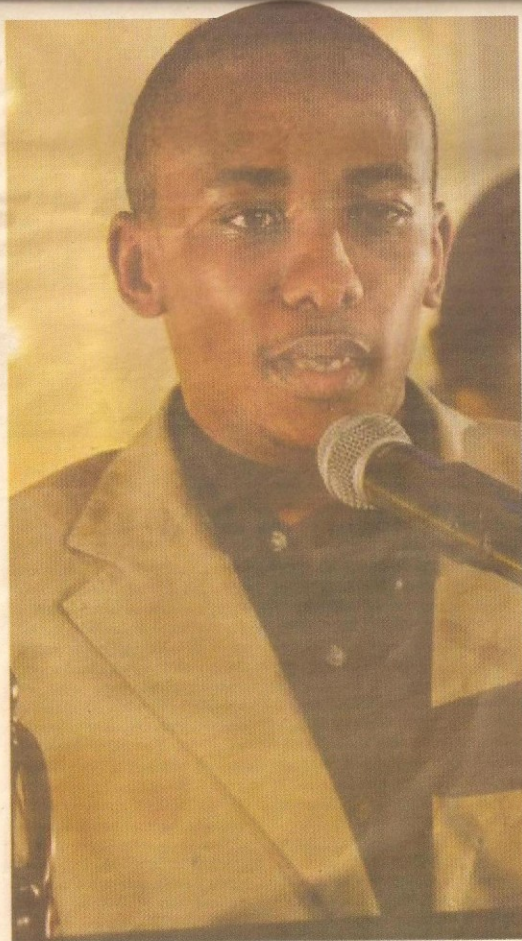
Wanadamu Initiative is not looking for financial donations but wants to grow its network to a minimum of 100,000 members. "1,700 members in two months is a phenomenal achievement for us and if we can touch the 100,000 mark within the year, we would confidently say nobody would die for lack of blood in this country."

"Blood is donated in cycles and one can only give blood once every three months."

And because of the low limit of how much a donor can give, Mr Muriu is urging more people to come forward.

Giving the example of young Adams Kibet, a leukemia patient in Eldoret who needed 25 platelets of blood, the young volunteer says he had to transport people to that area as one donor could only give a platelet. About 25 people were needed to save Kibet who Mr Muriu holds up as the pride of his initiative.

"Kibet is out of hospital now, fully recovered. It is cases like his that add fire to what we are trying to do and pride to all those who participate in saving a life. When you are in the world, there is nothing better you can do than that," he says.



Mr Muriu: He has created a network of blood donors to build a bank and step in in time of need. CORRESPONDENT