

A tribute to Dr. Amos Kibata Githeko, an Eye Health Hero



Dr. Amos Kibata Githeko

A tribute is an act or statement that shows gratitude, respect or admiration. Dr. Amos Kibata Githeko who passed into eternity on Tuesday afternoon September 17th, 2024 evoked all these in life and in death. There are many, young and old who were grateful for his numerous acts of kindness and admired his courageous yet humble approach. Those who did not know of his works got to hear them in written and spoken tributes and the reactions were the same as those who knew him in life. The ophthalmology community and thousands of patients have lost an icon.

When did Dr. Kibata become an ophthalmologist, and what a great one he was? According to the medical board it was the day he earned his specialist registration. In this article I opine that he became what he is earlier than we thought. How did he become so great? What can we learn from his life? The answers depend on who you ask. I will delve into this question as you read along. It is said that success has many fathers and failure is an orphan. Many would therefore wish to claim to be a part in his success. I say this because it is hard to tell the story of Dr. Kibata in isolation. There was a host of people sent his way to make him who he was.

The beginning if this is defined as a birthday, was on February 3, 1970, at Tumutumu Mission Hospital in Nyeri while his parents the late Daniel Githeko and the late Neriah Wamuyu Githeko lived in Kagochi farm near Ragati Tea Factory where his father worked as a leaf officer. Did they know that the little bundle of joy they held in their hands was going to turn out to be an eye health hero? Did they know that their struggles with cancer and diabetes would shape his dream to be a great doctor? Did his brothers Dr. Andrew Karanja, a PhD medical researcher in KEMRI; Prof. Jason Munyiri, a computer science Professor; Dr. James Thoithi a medical imaging physician or Peter Mwangi, a science teacher know who their last-born brother was going to be? If we knew who was in our midst, we would be more careful to nurture and appreciate.

Dr. Kibata attended Kanjuri Nursery School, then Kanjuri Primary School till class 3, before moving to the famous Nyeri Primary School where he was a day scholar in his early years. Most other pupils were boarders. A teacher by the name Mr. Mutahi drove Dr. Kibata and a few children to school from Karatina and back every day thereby building a bond with his pupil. Who puts such a heart in a teacher going out of his way for children who are not his? School teachers in this country are largely unappreciated and underpaid today unlike the teachers of old. In our villages it was a great sign of respect to be called "Mwalimu". Look at the generations of great men and women they brought forth. We owe them at least honour and respect. Dr. Kibata scored straight As (36 points) in the Certificate for Primary Education (CPE) examination thus earning a place in the prestigious Lenana School, Nairobi, to join some of his older brothers. He played hockey and ended up Head of Kibaki House in his 6th Form. He did very well in his 4th Form O-levels, Kenya Certificate of Education (KCE) earning a place in the A-levels at the same school and 6th Form Kenya Advanced Certificate of Education (KACE) which earned him a place at the University of Nairobi medical school.

I first met Dr. Kibata while he was a medical student through his friendship with my younger brother. He became like one of our family and my parents loved him. Many people thought he was my brother. When I was a medical officer, I remember lending him my direct ophthalmoscope for his final year exam, not realizing that this pointed to the beginning of a future together in ophthalmology. We shared a love for music, hockey and surgery. It was while he was a medical student that the tragedy of watching his father go blind from diabetic retinopathy cemented his decision to go into ophthalmology and focus on this blinding condition. We can use the barriers in our lives as stepping stones. He graduated in 1994 and went on to do internship at the PCEA Chogoria Hospital. I visited him there.

While working at Chogoria he got married in 1996 to the love of his life, Dr. Thitu Kibata, a pharmacist and they were blessed with three children, a daughter called Wamuyu and two sons named Mithamo and Muriithi. By 1998 he joined the University of Nairobi MMed Ophthalmology program to pursue the earlier stated dream and graduated in 2001. He was an industrious resident. He and Dr. Matende were the ICT champions helping to set up a Local Area Network (LAN) while the internet was it's infancy in the Department of Ophthalmology. During his final year I had the pleasure of giving him practice vivas and short cases while I was at

PCEA Kikuyu Eye Unit to help him prepare for his finals, the same way one Dr. David Yorston had done for me while I was a resident. He then went to Sabatia Eye Hospital to begin working as an ophthalmologist and lived in Kisumu then later at the hospital.

From here he left to go to the Kilimanjaro Christian Medical Center (KCMC) in Moshi, Tanzania for his vitreo-retinal fellowship under Dr. Anthony Hall. In between he got an award to do Paediatric Ophthalmology and Strabismus at the Red Cross Hospital in Cape Town. I have never heard of anyone being given the chance to take such a break and return. Dr. Hall was exceptionally gracious and supportive. I also don't know anyone else here who has 2 combined fellowship qualifications. Dr. Kibata was a stickler for high standards. In this period, he also sat for the International Council of Ophthalmology (ICO) basic science and clinical sciences papers and further went on to sit and pass the Fellow of the College of Surgeons in Edinburg. He clearly had no intention to go abroad but wanted to pace himself with the top world standards. It cost him a lot of money to register for the exam and travel to the nearest examination center in India. Armed with his wide training he returned to Kenya to work at PCEA Kikuyu Eye Unit as a vitreo-retinal surgeon. At that time there were only two in Kenya, he and Dr. Patrick Nyaga.

His huge ambitions for a vitreo-retinal service in Kenya made it necessary to start a private practice called the Upperhill Eye and Laser Center at the Upperhill Medical Center which grew in leaps and bounds. He got investors to inject capital and renamed it the City Eye Hospital acquiring the property on Ngong Road, opposite the Nairobi Area Traffic Headquarters. This also grew and now has a branch in Nyeri where a lot of his patients used to travel from. We met regularly for breakfast at the Java in Upperhill Medical Center for very many years discussing not just business but sharing dreams of the future. We prayed about work, our families and the profession. It's amazing how much came to fruition that you all see today. God answers prayer. As iron sharpens iron, each man sharpened the other.

He was a skilled vitreo-retinal surgeon and phaco surgeon too but Dr. Kibata was not only an expert surgeon. He was an ardent advocate for eye health in the Ophthalmological Society of Kenya (OSK) and Vitreo-retinal Society of Kenya both of which he chaired. He also presented about diabetic retinopathy on television, radio and churches. His well-spoken Kikuyu came to play on the Kikuyu vernacular radio stations where he regularly spoke in Q&A programs. Describing the macula or laser treatment in Kikuyu is not on everyday basic language menu. He built quite a following from the audiences. His patients loved him. When many of them heard of his passing, they shed tears. You can imagine

running a clinic of his patients and each patient crying before finally explaining what their problem was (besides epiphora).

Finally, it would not be authentic to describe Dr. Kibata without talking about his faith in God. It was the essence of all he was and did. He believed that he was God's handiwork created to do good works which God prepared in advance (before he was born). To revert back to our earlier question, that is when he became an ophthalmologist. Dr. Kibata came to faith in God while he was a student at Lenana School after a near disaster made him re-evaluate his life. His 3 major values and those of City Eye Hospital were value for God, people and excellence. He paid for the education of so many young people among his staff and beyond. If you heard the numerous tributes of his generosity, you would think he was a billionaire to have given so much. Someone remarked at his funeral that you would have thought he was 80 years old when you heard all that he had accomplished. Dr. Kibata was a man of impeccable integrity, brilliant and hard-working. He held himself to a very high standard and expected the same from the rest. He had big ideas. Nothing seemed impossible. Indeed, Dr. Jeremie Agre, a colleague from Cote d'Ivoire, remarked that nothing could stop Dr. Kibata, only death. Early in 2024 he was diagnosed with cancer and he faced it bravely. I visited him many times in hospital, and he never once wavered. He was his usual robust, smiling and energetic self. Once on a clinic review visit, he was working on his laptop at the reception and when the nurse called out she asked him where the patient was, thinking that he must have been accompanying someone else.

What lessons can we draw from this story of our hero? I suggest a few dos and don'ts.

1. Let us pursue excellence. Each of us was born with a gift that speaks greatness. Serve it to the world before you leave.
2. Do not judge a book by the cover. Could you tell from the pictures of his youth what each of those young men and women would become in future? Do they look like what you now know them to have become and done? Give room and time for young people in your life. Reach out and encourage them. Be a step in their upward journey.
3. Do not wait till things are perfect before you act. Amos faced challenges head-on and did not bury his head in the sand or allow himself to be cowed into silence. If something needed doing, he got on it immediately.
4. Do not wait to be a millionaire before you start giving. Give what you have, and you will always have something to give. Amos believed you should give everyone who asks of you (Luke 6:30). He had a giving heart. Become a channel of blessing, not a dam.

5. Do not wait till death to complement, visit, give a gift or send flowers. Say all the things you say in tributes while the recipient can still see, hear, feel and smell. Perhaps on someone's birthday we can write or do something that says "Happy Birthday, I am grateful you were born because..." It would enrich our lives.

I feel most honoured to have been asked to write this tribute to Dr. Amos Kibata Githeko, my brother and friend. May his legacy live on.

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