

Siraje Musiitwa, R.N. RN Supervisor WOBURN REHABILITATION & NURSING CENTER

In Uganda, nurses live in poverty, work endless hours and have little opportunity for career advancement so when Siraje Musiitwa immigrated to Massachusetts from his native Uganda in 1999 in search of the American Dream, he wasn't exactly thrilled at the prospect of switching careers from a respectable high school teacher to nurse. As he learned more about healthcare in America and grew excited about the idea of taking care of someone, he decided to pursue a career in nursing, joining thousands of Ugandan nurses in the Bay State who are among the more than 10,000 who call Massachusetts home.

Since President John F. Kennedy created scholarships for African students to study here in the 1960s, Massachusetts has welcomed many Ugandan immigrants, a good number ended up at Harvard and other universities and stayed after they got their degrees. Then, during Idi Amin's bloody dictatorship in the 1970s, more Ugandans fled the country with many landing in Waltham and Boston.

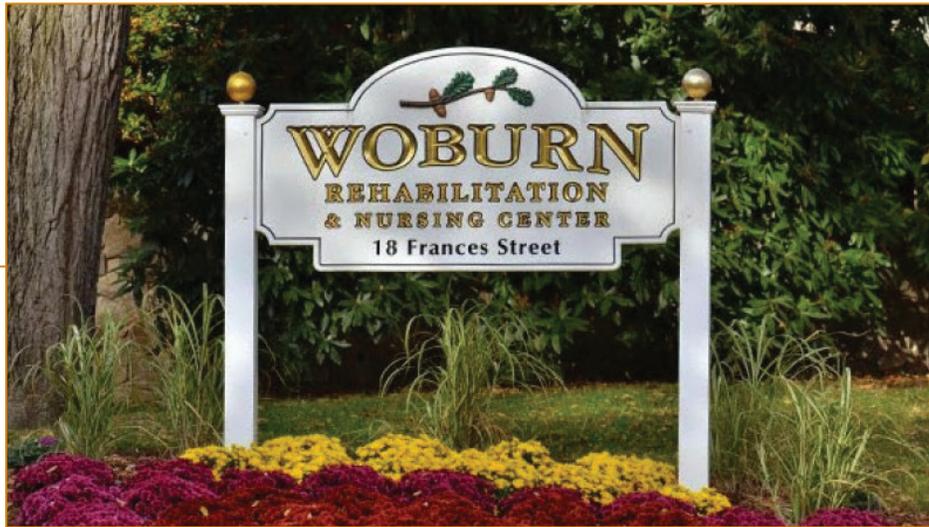
"My mother died when she was only 45 following a sudden, brief illness when I was in college," said Musiitwa. "I didn't get to see her before she passed and in the culture in Uganda, there is no explanation as to why someone is taken away from you. I wanted to be able to help others avoid some of the pain and suffering I had endured."

In 2001, Musiitwa became certified as a CNA thanks to the American Red Cross chapter in Lowell and, shortly thereafter, came to work for Salter HealthCare's Woburn Rehabilitation & Nursing Center upon the recommendation from a friend. Having no family in Massachusetts, in 2003, he was thrilled to be able to bring his wife, and two children, ages 10 and 4 years old, to the United States. In 2004, his wife following in his footsteps, completed the Red Cross CNA program and also joined the Woburn community.

For 4 years, Musiitwa excelled at patient care, growing more and more passionate about the contributions he was making and wanting to do more. "I am a nurse and I need to do a good job, I need to give people good care. They come to me to get the care that they deserve. In Uganda, we take care of our elders", he said.

In 2005, with the help of Salter, he enrolled at the St. Joseph's Hospital School of Nursing in Nashua, NH, where he later graduated with his LPN in 2006.

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“I was still transitioning from being a teacher, so it was really difficult to learn so many new things, especially while working full-time, but I got through it,” said Musiitwa.

After graduation from L.P.N. school, he felt the calling to do more and began to take classes at Bunker Hill Community College toward becoming an R.N., credits he later transferred to Salem State University. In 2015, he graduated with his B.S. in Nursing from Salem State and became RN Supervisor for the entire Woburn Rehabilitation & Nursing Center facility.

“Salter was very flexible in accommodating my school schedule. Whatever schedule I needed, I was given. They could not have been more supportive,” said Musiitwa.

Today, as RN Supervisor, his role entails communicating with patient’s families, supervising all the nurses on his shift, ensuring new admissions are prepared for and well taken care of, and hospitals are accommodated.

He is also very proud of his family of five and that he was recently able to purchase a home in Dracut. His eldest daughter is already well on her way to following in her father’s footsteps having received her CNA license before graduating from high school. She received multiple scholarships towards her tuition at Salem State where she is currently studying nursing.

While many immigrants find workplace assimilation difficult, the transition for Musiitwa at Salter has been easy. “Salter evaluates you based on your skills and your work, not your skin color. It is a place for every one and every culture. Today we have 32 team members from Uganda as well as many from Nigeria, China and other parts of Asia. We are one big blended family.”

Walking down the halls of Woburn Rehabilitation & Nursing Center with Musiitwa is almost like walking with a celebrity. From staff to patients, he is clearly a favorite amongst the team for his outgoing personality and big smile. With plans to become a Director of Nursing and eventually, Executive Director, he is already evaluating Master’s programs and there is no doubt he will succeed.