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Kennedy cut red tape for burn victim



By Jessica Fargen

Friday, May 23, 2008 - Updated 1h ago

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A soft-spoken 15-year-old Ugandan burn victim almost didn't make it to Boston's Shriners Hospital for Children last month when, after more than a year of planning, her translator was denied a visa.

But with one call to Sen. Edward M. Kennedy's office, the translator's visa was granted, and young Susan Nabukenya got a new chance at life.

Ironically, Nabukenya and Kennedy finally crossed paths Wednesday when a motorcade carrying the senator from the hospital to Hyannis passed a car taking the teen to her first visit at Shriners.



Nabukenya, who wears a silver cross around her neck, speaks so softly it's hard to hear her, but there is no mistaking that her benefactor's deadly brain tumor diagnosis weighs on her mind.

“(I) am praying to God that the senator gets better so that he can be able to help . . . in the future,” she said, speaking through translator John Kalule at the one-bedroom Medford flat she shares with him and her host mom.

At age 11, Nabukenya was severely scorched on her arms, chest and stomach after kerosene spilled on her dress and caught fire. Nearly four years later, a wound on her right leg persists. Nabukenya, whose skin is leathery and scarred from her shoulders to her feet, no longer goes to school because it's too painful to walk to class.

The eldest of eight children, Nabukenya cares for her paralyzed grandfather back home and digs beans, coffee and plantains in the family's garden. Her mom died when she was 8.

She yearns for more, she said, and hopes one day to return to school. “I am excited because I am going to be healed,” she said.

When her host mother, Jacquelyn Lamont, deputy chief of the victim witness advocate program for Suffolk County District Attorney Dan Conley, heard about Kalule's visa problems, she turned to Conley, who called Kennedy. The next day, Kalule had his visa.

“Everybody was calling and writing, and we still weren't getting answers,” said Lamont's aunt, Theresa Weinman, who got involved in Nabukenya's cause. “It seemed to be the call from Kennedy's office that worked.”

A Kennedy spokesperson said the senator contacted the U.S. Embassy in Uganda and Kalule's visa was granted. She called Nabukenya's story “heartwarming” and one of the many instances that the senator lent a helping hand.

To donate to Team Susan, which is raising money for Nabukenya, visit www.teamsusansstory.blogspot.com. Shriners is covering medical costs, but she needs money for daily needs such as food and clothing.

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Photo by John Wilcox

Susan Nabukenya of Uganda, 15, came to America with the help of John Kalule, director of Uganda's 'Engeye Health Clinic' and Sen. Kennedy.



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By Jessica Fargen

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