

# Good works across the globe

by Debra Gelbart



Wilfred Smallwood

“God is mysterious,” says Wilfred Smallwood, a 38-year-old native of Liberia who credits the Almighty with bringing him to Barrow Neurological Institute just when he most needed help.

Since the beginning of the Liberian Civil War in 1990, Wilfred lived in a refugee camp in Ghana. In 2003, he volunteered to go to the tiny African nation of Sierra Leone to serve as a missionary for the Baha’i faith.

He had been in Sierra Leone for about a year when one day, “I fell onto the floor and felt very weak and dizzy. I was sent back to Ghana because I wasn’t feeling well. Then, one morning in 2005, I had to be rushed to a hospital.”

There, he was diagnosed with an extremely large benign brain tumor called a meningioma. He underwent a nine-hour surgery in Ghana, but only a small portion of the tumor was removed.

Wilfred’s symptoms of dizziness, weakness, vomiting, paralyzing headaches and visual disturbances persisted. About a month after his surgery, resettlement personnel arranged for him to travel to the United States for further treatment.

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Nicholas Bambakidis, MD

## Baseball-sized tumor

In September 2005, Wilfred traveled more than 7,200 miles to St. Joseph’s and Barrow.

“His tumor had grown so large that it was life-threatening,” says Barrow neurosurgeon Nicholas Bambakidis, MD, of the baseball-sized lesion. “A more typical meningioma is about half the size of his. His tumor was located close to the base of his skull and basically took up the entire right side of his brain and temporal lobe. Thankfully, we were able to completely remove the tumor.”

Wilfred spent the next two weeks in the hospital, “recovering slowly,” says Dr. Bambakidis, who specializes in spinal and skull-base disorders. Wilfred’s only complication was hydrocephalus.

“Because of the location of the tumor,” says Dr. Bambakidis, “he was suffering from an abnormal circulation of cerebrospinal fluid, so we inserted a shunt in his brain to normalize the situation.”

## A nearly perfect recovery

Wilfred was discharged to an inpatient rehabilitation facility, where he spent another three weeks. “Today he has virtually no residual problems,” Dr. Bambakidis says.

“I have no more weakness and no pain,” says Wilfred. “I’m strong and I have lots and lots of energy. I’m sure God brought me here to Phoenix for a spiritual purpose.”

Wilfred’s only problem is his left eye. The vision in that eye is “about 75 percent of what it should be,” he

says. Although his vision may not improve significantly, this limitation doesn’t seem to interfere with his life.

In May, Wilfred took a job with a food concessionaire at Sky Harbor Airport. “I work in the warehouse, sometimes 11 or 12 hours a day and sometimes lifting boxes that weigh 200 pounds. But I feel great.”

He lives in an apartment in central Phoenix with two roommates, one Sudanese and one Liberian. Now that he has recovered from his medical ordeal, Wilfred expects his 14-year-old son Oliver to move in with him soon. Oliver, whose mother died in 1999, came to Phoenix with his father and was in foster care while Wilfred underwent surgery, rehabilitation and recovery.

## Helping refugees like Wilfred

Wilfred’s continuing adjustment to life in the United States is facilitated by Catholic Charities, which has managed many of the non-medical aspects of his life—such as finding housing—since his arrival in Phoenix.

“We attend to refugees’ needs with regard to adjustment, acculturation and language services,” says Barbara Klimek, director of refugee programs for Catholic Charities in Phoenix. Catholic Charities operates under the auspices of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

“It’s so rewarding to be able to help someone like Mr. Smallwood,” Dr. Bambakidis says, “especially given the kind of situation he came

from. It makes me especially appreciate the access to advanced medical care and technology that we have in this country. In Ghana, there’s a lack of advanced technology and even basic equipment. We can be so grateful for what we have here compared to the developing world.”

“I have a burning desire to serve God and humanity, and now I’ll be able to continue to do that,” Wilfred says. “I feel like Dr. Bambakidis and all of the other doctors and nurses who helped me are all chosen by God to do special work.”

## Global responsibilities

“Our responsibilities as doctors go beyond our borders,” says Dr. Bambakidis. “As we continue to develop technological advancements and sharpen our skills, we have an obligation to share those whenever possible.”

“There is a saying in my tradition,” Wilfred says. “Put your trust in God and God will send you relief.” ■



Nicholas Bambakidis, MD