

Remembering Jerry Lwanga: A Perspective from His Colleagues

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The untimely death of Dr. Jeremiah Lwanga has cast a pall over the research community of Kibale National Park, Uganda. Jerry was Director of the Makerere University Biological Field Station (MUBFS) in Kibale, and a mentor, role model, and friend to staff, students and colleagues. During the final months of his life, Jerry battled an enigmatic illness before succumbing on August 31, 2015.

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Jerry's death hits close to home. Like us, Jerry had a passion for nature, and this underpinned his career in research and conservation. Jerry's studies of forest ecology and primatology continued a long tradition that helped establish and maintain Kibale as a premier field site. When Jerry was asked to take the position of Director of MUBFS, he accepted out of a sense of duty and the academic's all-too-familiar inability to say "no," but he followed through with dedication and enthusiasm. We recall meeting Jerry at the MUBFS offices or at Makerere University's main campus in Kampala. The conversations usually evolved into friendly gossip about people, politics and science. Jerry's world was our world.

As Director, Jerry transformed MUBFS. Its ailing infrastructure began to show new signs of life soon after he took charge. The forest trail system improved, the roads got smoother, the plumbing started working again, the grass around the buildings no longer grew neck-high, and the staff were reinvigorated with a sense of pride in the station. Word got out. Growing numbers of students, researchers and field courses began to visit MUBFS. The station edged towards financial stability for the first time in a long time. With an eye towards the future, Jerry helped coordinate several important improvement and construction projects, the most recent of which was a new herbarium. The structure is complete, but it lies empty, and its fate is now uncertain.

We often found Jerry at his desk, hidden behind reams of paperwork and harried by constant interruptions of staff, students, and (yes) colleagues. It was no secret, though, that Jerry really longed to be in the forest. When Jerry visited Ngogo, a field site in the middle of Kibale where he maintained a research program, he much preferred to walk the 15 km than to drive. It's a beautiful walk, up and down hills, through forest and grassland, and with a good chance of seeing elephant or buffalo in the clearings, preferably at a distance. Jerry found solace during these hikes; he regularly visited Ngogo not only to continue his work there, but also as a respite from the ever-mounting responsibilities he shouldered.

Jerry's was not an ebullient personality. Rather, he was a quiet, thoughtful, considerate and unassuming man. He was the type to get privately frustrated rather than angry, and to celebrate his successes with a self-effacing smile. He had also refined the classic

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administrator's skill of being somewhere else when things were going well but suddenly appearing at just the right moment if things started to go awry. Like all of us, Jerry strove for that elusive "life-work balance." Jerry dearly loved and supported his extended family, and his children inherited his appreciation for the value of education and research (his youngest son is currently a Ph.D. student in biochemistry at Washington University in the USA). He is survived by his wife Agnes Bukirwa, his children Sam Wasswa, Sarah Nakato, Martin Lukwago, Eva Nanyunja, Ana Nassali and George Katumba, and his adopted nephews and nieces Rhoda Namuddu, Donald Kafeero, and Shannon Kabugo. He also worked passionately to build and support Kakiri Junior School near his hometown, which he founded with his own resources (the school motto, "Ogutateganya," is the stem of a Luganda proverb translating roughly as "There is no gain without pain").

There is a lot of talk these days about "capacity building" in Sub-Saharan Africa. This is the idea that Africans and their institutions need "propping up" by nations with deeper pockets and more advanced technical expertise. Although Jerry certainly benefitted from the collaboration and support of colleagues from abroad, he built his own capacity. He became an excellent scientist as a result of his own resourcefulness and ambition. He became a successful Director because he rose to the task; if he hadn't, someone else might have, but probably not as well, and Jerry knew that. He transformed MUBFS because it was the right thing to do – for him, for us, for Kibale, for Makerere, for Uganda, and for science.

Now, as we reflect on Jerry's life, we have begun to grasp how much we've lost. Yes, we've lost a fine scientist and administrator who represented the best of Uganda and was an example for the rest of Africa. But we've also lost a genuine friend. None of us will see Kibale or our relationship to it in quite the same way again. We will all mourn as we walk the leaf-strewn trails, listen to the cacophony of insects and birds, wonder at the butterflies, gaze in awe at the towering trees and verdant understory, watch the primates or glimpse the occasional duiker, and reflect upon Jerry's abridged life and tragically premature legacy.

Dr. Jeremiah Ssali Lwanga (1960 – 2015). Photo credit: Sholly Gunter.



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