

NOVA Testimonial - Prodeencia Mbanwei



Prodeencia Mbanwei (Cameroon, Northern Virginia Community College – Annandale, Applied Health, 2011-12)

Prodeencia Mbanwei studied at NOVA between 2011-12 during her exchange year with the CCI Program. With a background in health and her experiences in rural communities of Cameroon, Prodeencia decided to study Applied Health during her year in the U.S. She knew that the skills she would learn at NOVA would allow her to help her community and contribute to the global efforts of health promotion, disease prevention, and communication for development.

Tell us a little about yourself and your background (your interests, education, and professional experience):

I am an interdisciplinary and a multi-skills health professional with over 15 years of experience serving diverse populations at the operational and regional level of the Cameroon health system. Currently, I work as the Regional Chief of Bureau for Partnership and Training of Health Personnel at the Regional Delegation of Public Health in the Southwest region of Cameroon. Professionally, I hold a state registered

nursing diploma, a bachelor's degree in health sciences with a focus in nursing sciences, a master's degree in international relations with a focus in humanitarian action and sustainable development, as well as other certifications in leadership, health, and nutrition.

I am the third daughter in a family of seven and the only one in my family to have seen the four walls of a secondary school. I was born and raised by poor peasant farmers in a village called Mbunjei in Batibo Sub-division, Momo division of the northwest region of Cameroon. Despite my father's wish to see me attain a tertiary level of education as a 'promising child', he didn't live to see his dreams come true. Yes, he died of poverty. He was sick but didn't have access to the quality of healthcare services where and when he needed it the most because of financial hardship. This was the beginning of my motivation to take up a career in health to help my family and my community.

When I received my advanced level in 1999, it was clear that a career in medicine or nursing was a beautiful choice for me. However, I couldn't continue that same year because of finances. I joined my mother's effort on the farm to raise money for two years.

In 2002, I wrote and succeeded the government entrance examination into the Training School for Health Personnel in Bamenda, Northwest region of Cameroon. I was proud to be among the first few on a list of 30 successful candidates.

I began my professional studies as a state registered nurse on November 4th, 2002. Putting on a nurse's uniform on the first day of school for me was a dream come true. The training that took three years was punctuated with clinical internships in hospitals, integrated health centers, and the community health component where we did a community diagnosis of public health sensitive issues such as water, hygiene and sanitation, nutrition and feeding practices as well as healthcare seeking behaviors.

Upon graduation in 2005, I immediately secured a volunteering position as a state registered nurse at St. John of God Hospital in Batibo, my hometown. In fact, this was in line with my baseline career objectives. I had promised myself to start my career serving my people before moving out to other communities. St. John of God is an international religious missionary organization present in about 51 countries of the world. Their mission is to cater to the sick, poor, and needy. In Cameroon they are present in Nguti (Southwest region), Batibo (Northwest region) and Douala (Littoral region). It is run by the Hospitaller Brothers of St. John of God. I first met with the Superior/Director (Rev Brother Terence Ndong) in 2004 while I was in my second year of training. He came to purchase medication from the Northwest Regional Fund for Health Promotion which was near my school.

I began my career at St. John of God Hospital in Batibo in September of 2005. After serving for a month, the director approached and told me they had been in search of somebody to send for in-service training in anesthesia. This was another opportunity for me to develop specialized skills without having to pay fees, and I did not hesitate to accept the offer.

The in-service, on-the-job training in anesthesia took place in St. Martin de Pores General Hospital in Njinikom, Boyo division of the Northwest region. The training lasted for one year, and I completed with an attestation to practice safe anesthesia.

After working for a couple of months in this role, I was surprisingly appointed to nurse coordinator. It was a huge challenge for me at the beginning of my career, but through a participative leadership approach and counsel from my director who insisted that I could do the job, I was able to exceed expectations and

increase patient turnover and customer satisfaction in this humanitarian institution where I served for four years.

In 2010, for curiosity's sake to experience another culture, I left for Maroua in the far north region of Cameroon where I served at the Meri District Health Service. There, I worked in close collaboration with the Chief of Health District to implement, supervise, and report on public health interventions at the district and regional levels. I equally contributed to the surveillance of diseases of epidemic potential and responded to cholera epidemic outbreaks in the district. The good news was that we succeeded in saving the lives of the victims through the maximum support of our developmental partners.

Why did you decide to study applied health?

There are many reasons: my passion for the health and well-being of the entire population. While serving at St John of God previously and at the Meri District Health Service, I encountered many challenges related to access to quality health care services, health information, malnutrition, and other conditions of public health concern. I started exploring opportunities to build my capacity in the domain of public health. Like a stitch in time, I got information about the Community College Initiative Program from a former colleague from St. John of God Hospital, Batibo. His name is Walters Feh Takwe, and he is a beneficiary of the program. That was the beginning of my career breakthrough. I will forever remain grateful to the U.S. government and the Department of State.

Tell us about your experience at NOVA (friends you made, professors you liked,

My American dream journey finally started in June 2011, when I travelled to the U.S. and to Northern Virginia. There, I immediately enrolled at Northern Virginia Community College.

Besides academic work, I had many leadership training courses. In the CCI Program, I visited places such as the Pentagon, the White House, the Library of Congress, the United States Botanical Garden, and more. I also attended professional conferences at the United Nations headquarters in New York and the World Bank in Washington, DC.

During my time at NOVA, I received a volunteer service award from Volunteer Fairfax, was voted into the National Society of Collegiate Scholars based on leadership and academic performance, and I was selected as the NOVA student ambassador during our final dinner and certificate ceremony to present a testimonial of my transformation.

I completed my program with a certificate of completion and a volunteer award from the Department of State for putting in 105 hours of community service while studying. All these experiences had a great impact on my personality, improved my level of confidence and communication as well as my leadership skills. In fact, I love American culture and I will forever be indebted to the American people for this huge transformation.

What classes did you take at NOVA?

In August 2011, I enrolled in Health Information Management System Technology courses (online) and subsequently Emergency Medical Technology Basics courses at the Medical Education Campus of the NVCC. Within these two programs I took courses in EMS. I also had a wonderful internship at the INOVA hospital systems' emergency department and with the Volunteer Fire Squad-Ambulance Ride-along.

What was your favorite part about attending NOVA?

I loved the leadership, mentorship and coaching, and community service aspects of the CCI Program. Former director of international education Syedur Rahman always said, "Having the eyes to see and beginning with an end in mind". It was a blend of learning, service, and fun.

What would you tell a student coming to study at NOVA?

NOVA is the place to be. It has excellent educational facilities and resources to support students during and after their education. There are many post-educational opportunities to further career development.

What career pursuits did you explore/have you explored after NOVA?

Upon my return to Cameroon in 2012, I was so motivated by the experience that I enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in health sciences with the Catholic University of Central Africa. At the same time, I got involved in community service, and I completed a one-year program in November of 2013, after which I returned to my duty post at Meri District Health Service in the Far North Region of Cameroon.

With my new skills and experience, I was made the District Focal Point for Nutrition and Communication. There, I received additional training on Community Management of Acute Malnutrition/Integrated Management of Acute Malnutrition (CMAM/IMAM) and Communication for Development (C4D) organized by the Ministry of Public Health in collaboration with UNICEF and the French Red Cross.

In my new role, I worked as a trainer and supervisor in responding to the nutrition crisis that started in the region in 2010. I worked collaboratively with nurses, volunteers, community health workers, and community mobilizers in all 8 outpatient nutrition centers and 1 stabilization center at the district hospital. I initiated the first Integrated communication plan for the fight against malnutrition in the district. Supervision, conjoint supervision, advocacy, data collection, synthesis and transmission to the regional structures constituted my weekly and monthly activities among others.

In 2015, after working in this region and facing a lot of humanitarian challenges and vulnerability, I decided to take up a master's program in International Relations: International Cooperation, Humanitarian Action, and Sustainable Development at the International Relations Institute of Cameroon (IRIC). So, I applied and was selected for the 2015/2016 academic year.

In considering this master's degree program, I wanted to get a good understanding of international relations and global health security. I equally wanted to blend my health background with diplomacy skills for a global impact.

Why did you decide to participate in an international exchange program?

To me, this was a huge opportunity to get an excellent education, experience U.S. culture, and meet new people. In fact, it's an excellent way to acquire knowledge, skills, and experiences especially for underprivileged and vulnerable people.

Did it have a positive impact on you?

Yes, profoundly. It completely changed my mindset, my perception of life and the world. I feel more confident and resilient to help my family and my community. I have assisted in educating my nieces and nephews whose parents never had the opportunity to be educated as myself. I have mentored and

coached hundreds of nurses and medico-sanitary personnel. I now work with hundreds of international and community-based organizations as well as with training schools for health personnel under the banner of the Ministry of Public Health in the Southwest region as the Regional Chief of Bureau for Partnership and Training of Health personnel. With all this, I am immensely grateful.

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The CCI Program is a one-year, non-degree academic program designed to build participants' technical skills, enhance leadership capabilities, and strengthen English language proficiency. The program also provides opportunities for professional internships, service learning and community engagement activities to build relationships between U.S. citizens and other countries. Northern Virginia Community College administers this U.S. Department of State program in cooperation with the NOVA-led Community College Consortium. For further information, please contact CCI Program Director Leeza Fernand at lfernand@nvcc.edu and/or the NOVA CCI Team at CCCIP@nvcc.edu and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs at eca-press@state.gov.