



PATHFINDER

FRANCIS SILVER OONYU

# Blind teacher wants to start a special needs university

He became blind at four years following a measles attack but 49-year-old Francis Silver Oonyu, a teacher of History has not let blindness hold back his potential. In fact today, he will be receiving the Sheth International Young Alumni Achievement Award, 2019 in Pennsylvania, the third in the awards he has so far received in recognition for his work.

BY DESIRE MBABAALI  
dmbabaali@ug.nationmedia.com

When Francis Silver Oonyu talks about starting an inclusive university for special needs students in his home village of Opuchete by 2040, one cannot help but join him in envisaging this big dream but he is starting with a few humble steps.

An Information Communication and Technology for the blind trainer and History teacher, Oonyu is also founder and administrator of Silver Memorial Inclusive Learning Education Centre, (SMILE) in Soroti. His personality will also endear you to him. The 49-year-old is welcoming and jolly, with a sharp memory, and has no shame in sharing his life's trials.

"I was born normal and got blind at the age of four following a measles illness that almost took my life," he says, adding that this was because his parents did not know where to take him for treatment.

And because of blindness, while his friends started school, he remained home.

"One day Idi Amin's soldiers held hostage nine of the little sisters of St Francis of Assisi, and they came looking for my grandfather for help," he recalls.

The nuns were refugees and Oonyu and his mother would serve them food. Then 10 years old, the Sisters promised to enrol him in their school when order returned.

## Starting school

Indeed, in June 1979, Oonyu joined Madera School for the Blind. To catch up with the rest, he started in Primary Two, learning braille and writing using a stylus and writing frame. In 1984, he sat PLE emerging the best at the school with Aggregate 11.

For high school, he joined Madera School for the Blind - secondary section and sat O-Level exams

## AWARDS/PLANS

**Awards.** Oonyu is the winner of The Chesler Award of the University of Pittsburgh 2011, has won The Ford International Fellowship Programme Global award, 2019 and was selected for the Sheth International Young Alumni Achievement Award, 2019 which he will be receiving in Pennsylvania today.

**Future plans.** He plans to put up a small health unit to cater for the health needs of special needs children in fact it is already underway. He believes that in the next three-four years, he will have a vocational school, and secondary school for special needs students. He also plans to have a teacher training college for special needs education which he will eventually turn into Opuchete University by 2040.

# 1995

## THE YEAR OONYU STARTED HIS TEACHING CAREER AT AMURIA SECONDARY SCHOOL. HE SAYS FELLOW TEACHERS WOULD HELP HIM MARK THE ASSIGNMENTS

In 1988 despite Alice Lakwena conflict that left the schools in the area without teachers.

"I performed well and was admitted to Iganga Secondary School, Annex for the blind," he says.

Because of school fees, he could not afford joining the school. The fees was Shs45,000.

Earlier while at Madera, Oonyu had met Dr Keith Wardens who was doing charity work at the schools and the two became friends. This was the reason Oonyu contacted him for help through a letter when everything else he tried to get school fees failed. And Dr Wardens came through.

"But I had already missed one year at that time so I just joined Senior Six. I passed with two Principal Passes and joined National Teacher's College, Kuluho. I graduated in 1994 with a Diploma in Education (History and Religious Studies)."

## Teaching

He was posted to Amuria Secondary School in 1995. "School was not what you know today. Then, learning started at 1pm and ended at 3pm. A Shea nut tree was our staffroom and a very old woman was our tea girl,"



Francis Oonyu will spend the next one year in UK studying for a Master of Arts in Special Needs Education. PHOTO BY DESIRE MBABAALI

he says. "The students would sit on stones and at the time, no one had ever seen a blind man teaching; the blind would be at home. It was sad. But since I needed a job, I had no option," Oonyu recalls with a smile.

Luckily, the subjects Oonyu taught were interesting and his strength lay in keeping the students interested in the subject.

"I used to listen to BBC Radio and would update my students on the latest developments in the world before introducing my topic. One of them would help me write on the blackboard. I would braille my notes and do the scheme of work the day before. I would dictate notes, give assignments which my teacher friends would help me mark. Through collective efforts, I was able to teach," says Oonyu.

Unfortunately in 2003, the Lord's Resistance Army struck Soroti leaving the school and Oonyu with nothing. It was then that he asked for a transfer, and was posted to Kamodo Senior Secondary School in Serere District.

## Furthering studies

Between 1999 and 2002, Oonyu studied for a Bachelor's in Education at Makerere University on long distance learning with the help of Ford Foundation.

In 2008, he learned about another opportunity by the Association of Higher Education and Development to further studies and he applied.

He was later selected to join the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in the US for a Master's in Vision Studies for 29 months. He returned in 2012 as a braille specialist.

With this special skill, he was posted to Madera School for the Blind where he taught ICT for the blind, braille and History.

"I was not contented because I knew there were visually impaired people who could not afford this school," He decided to mobilise the community and through that, started SMILE with preschool and a primary section. Without paying any fees, a child can get the braille skills necessary for unlocking knowledge. The school has 12 teachers and 150-200 pupils so far.

## The Chevening scholarship

"My friends encouraged me to apply for the Chevening scholarship. The process was long and involved a lot of writing but I passed all tests all through to the last level," he says.

To search the internet, Oonyu uses the ICT skills he gained during his master's. "I use an audio software on my computer; something like a talking computer. I interface with the computer using my ears just like you do with your eyes. Only a few people can beat me on keyboard skills," he explains.

Oonyu is joining the University of Leeds, UK for a Master of Arts in Special Needs Education.

"I hope to read very hard, develop my research skills because I know that the next course of study is mostly on research. I plan to make many friends and then come back to carry on the dream of realising Opuchete University," the teacher says.