



Sylvia McNair is a two-time Grammy Award winner and Regional Emmy winner in her third decade as a professional singer. With more than 70 recordings to her credit, she has performed often with the world's leading symphony orchestras and opera companies from New York, Chicago, and San Francisco to Berlin, London, and Vienna. In recent years, she has chosen to focus more on performing from the Great American Songbook repertory, including adding musical theater productions to her schedule. She is on the faculty of IU Jacobs School of Music.



Sylvia McNair with some of the young friends she made during her month-long visit.

IU Medical School Giving Hope & Saving Lives in Kenya

A Personal Journey BY
Sylvia McNair

AS TOLD TO **Elisabeth Andrews**
PHOTOGRAPHY BY **Tyagan Miller**

To say Kenya is a world away is the understatement of the century. The country has 40 percent unemployment, crushing amounts of disease, unimaginable poverty, vast political corruption, and tribal unrest. Yet Kenya bears the weight of it all and the people still smile. One reason they can go on is the amazing work of Indiana University. Its health care program there might save the lives of an entire generation of Kenyans. And that just rocks my world.

When I tell people I've just returned from visiting IU's medical center in Kenya, I get blank stares. "IU has a medical center in Kenya?" they ask me, dumbfounded. I didn't know about the program myself until two years ago. But now that I've been there, I can't believe everyone isn't talking about it.

(opposite page, clockwise from top left)

Dr. Joe Mamlin, field director, attends to a patient.

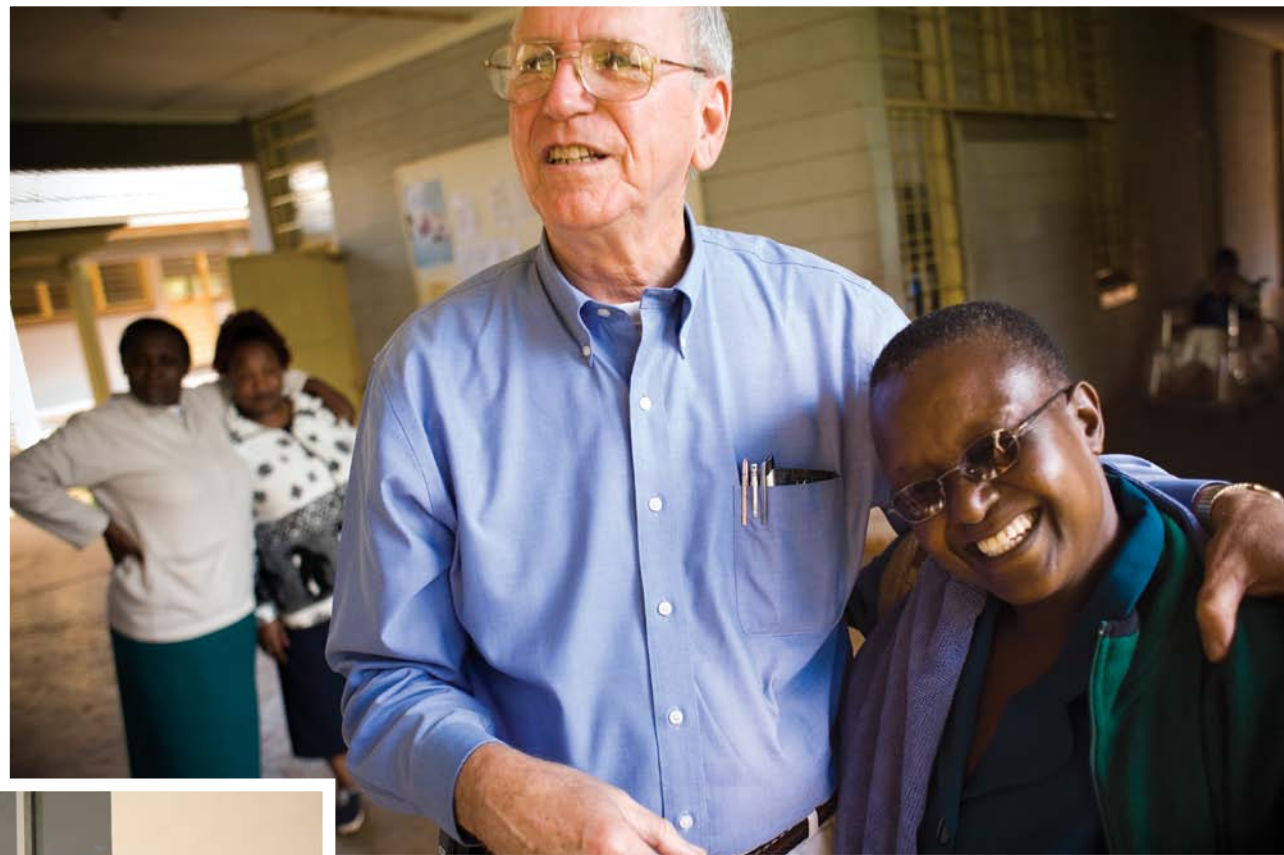
A young patient waits for attention.

Another busy day for IU School of Medicine physician Dr. Hao Tran.

Patients in the ward sleep head-to-toe, two to three to a bed.

AMPATH

The program is called the Academic Model Providing Access to Health Care (AMPATH).



(top) Dr. Joe Mamlin with one of AMPATH's first patients. She is now fully recovered and working.



(bottom) The AMPATH Center.

Ampath is a partnership between Indiana University and Kenya's Moi University and was started more than 20 years ago by a group of IU physicians. One of them was the visionary Dr. Joe Mamlin, who is now field director of the program. He strikes me as the Don Quixote of Kenya, because he's the dreamer who sees possibilities where no one else can. He was involved with the initial effort to care for HIV/AIDS patients, and he has shepherded the program as it's grown to encompass nearly every aspect of health care and disease prevention.



Sarah Ellen Mamlin and friend. She is "AMPATH's best ambassador."



A street scene in Eldoret, Kenya's fifth largest city.

I was introduced to AMPATH in Spain, of all places. In 2008, I served on a committee there to help select students for private scholarships that could be used at IU. Medical School Dean Craig Brater and his wife Stephanie were also part of that effort and had come to Spain on their way back from Kenya. The more they talked about AMPATH, the more interested I became. I kept thinking about it after I returned from Spain, and finally, this year, I found the time and the means to go to Kenya.

I've done a lot of traveling in my 30 years as a performer, but this was a very different experience. For one thing, I didn't have a travel director coordinating my trip. It was a bit of shift having to figure out what vaccinations I'd need and to arrange my lodging. I also self-financed the visit. But the biggest change was the setting. I'd never been to a developing country before and I had no idea what to expect.

Just getting to AMPATH's headquarters in Eldoret, a burgeoning town in western Kenya, was an eye-opening experience. Cars share the road with people, cows, and bicycles going every which way. There are no traffic signals. Most Kenyans don't have cars, so to get around they hire a matatu, which I would define as a vehicle driven by an insane person crammed with three times as many passengers as it was designed to carry.

I stayed at the home of Joe Mamlin and his wife Sarah Ellen, who put together my itinerary. Joe is AMPATH's Grand Master and she's Mrs. Grand Master. She's AMPATH's best ambassador, the prime outreach person, and a wonderful guide. I told her, "I want to see as much and learn as much as I can in a month," and she made it happen.

Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital

My first visit was to the Moi Teaching and Referral Hospital. I thought I knew what to expect, but what I saw there shocked me. I wasn't prepared for the overwhelming need. There just isn't enough space for so many sick people. The wards are cramped, with six or eight beds in each bay and two or three people on each bed.

In America, some people can be puritanical about HIV/AIDS. There's a faction that dismisses the disease as "God's punishment" for "deviant behavior." In Kenya, HIV/AIDS is primarily a heterosexual disease; most men have multiple partners and are unwilling to practice safe sex, rape is not prosecuted, and marital rape is not illegal.

The disease is so widespread that until recently, ten percent of Kenyans had the virus. AMPATH's work has helped reduce that rate to six percent, but it's still a shockingly high number. AMPATH is committed to reaching everyone who needs their care—more than 100,000 patients in and around Eldoret.

People don't die from HIV/AIDS, though. They die from opportunistic diseases that take advantage of their weakened immune systems. AMPATH distributes free antiretroviral drugs throughout western Kenya, but they don't stop there. They take a holistic approach that considers every aspect of health.

(clockwise from top)

A patient in the ward. "People don't die from HIV/AIDS. They die from opportunistic diseases..."



'I wasn't prepared for the overwhelming need. There just isn't enough space for so many sick people.'



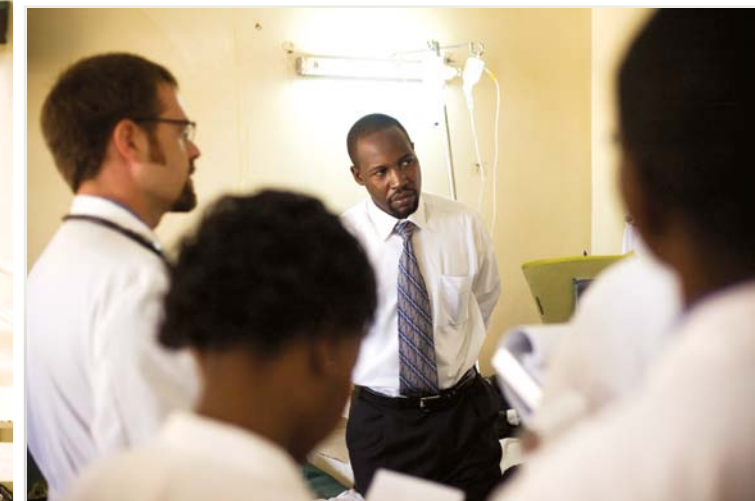
IU physician Dr. Robert Blount conducting tests on a patient.

Kenyan physician Dr. A.M. Siika on rounds with IU and Kenyan doctors and students.

Boys in the pediatric ward.

Dr. Mamlin examining a young patient with his Kenyan colleagues.

IU and University of Moi physicians collaborate on treatment for a patient.





Orphans and Vulnerable Children Program

Children in the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Program.

I got to see AMPATH's reach up close when I spent a day with Elizabeth Chester, the director of the Orphans and Vulnerable Children Program. We drove out to the Rift Valley, into what Elizabeth calls "the bush." I've never experienced such masterful driving. She navigated her Toyota around cows, sheep, children, deep potholes, huge boulders, and every other type of car buster you can think of, but eventually we had to stop the Toyota and climb on foot. All this to reach the home of Salina, a single mother with five kids and no income.

The family lives in a tiny grass hut they share with their goats. Above the goat pen is a sleeping space no bigger than my breakfast table. Elizabeth was determined to figure out how AMPATH could realistically help the family. She asked questions about the nearest water source and where the children went to school, and even deduced that there might be

some assets left by Salina's late husband that AMPATH could help free up.

We visited several more families in areas just as remote. It seems that AMPATH will stop at nothing to find ways to help people in need. On a separate occasion, I was in Joe Mamlin's office when a patient was brought in by his wife and mother. They all—mama, son and wife, and four children—live in one room. The social worker was asked what was needed to make the housing situation better. Joe had his wallet out before she even finished talking. They were total strangers to Joe, and yet he gave them money to build a second room onto their house. I saw this happen several times during my one-month stay, so you can be sure he's done this hundreds of times since the program started.



Producing Food, Jobs, and Money

Other projects I saw were the Riley Mother and Baby Hospital, which has the first neonatal intensive care unit in East Africa, and the AMPATH work programs—a farm, a restaurant, and a clothing/craft workshop. These workplaces empower patients with HIV/AIDS to be gainfully employed and live positive, productive lives.

The farm, called the HAART (for highly active antiretroviral therapy) and Harvest Initiative (HHI), addresses the problem of food insecurity for HIV/AIDS patients. Along with World Food Program (WFP), this program provides food assistance to 30,000 people each day. A closely related program called the Family Preservation Initiative (FPI) also teaches patients about subsistence farming and proper nutrition, so they stay well. FPI has been so successful that it's spinning off programs generating revenue as AMPATH farmers sell their passion fruit to an AMPATH juice factory that already sells its pulp to Del Monte!

FPI also established the Cool Stream Restaurant, which is right onsite behind the AMPATH clinic. It's both a restaurant and a catering facility that provides more local employment opportunities. The cooks there are very good. I'm going to have to try making myself some sukuma wiki, a vegetable dish made with collards and kale. Yum, yum, yum.

What I really loved was the Imani Workshop, a factory and shop that employs single, HIV-positive women who make clothes, accessories, and other crafts. I came back loaded down with beautiful things. And these ladies, let me tell you, they're feisty. They're strong. In many parts of the world, HIV is a death sentence, but it's not if you have this type of support.



(clockwise from top)

Patients needing nutrition support receive food from AMPATH farms and the World Food Program.

Workers plant crops on an AMPATH farm.

An AMPATH production farm.



Children at the Sally Test Pediatric Center.

The Sally Test Pediatric Center

The most amazing place of all is the Sally Test Pediatric Center. Although the name sounds like a medical ward, it's actually a daycare where children who are being treated at the hospital can have playtime, story time, lunch and snacks, English lessons, and dance class. A lot of what I saw in Kenya was hard to take, but the Sally Test Center is where the joy resides.

The doctors and nurses at the hospital go there to renew themselves during a long day of

working with severely ill patients. One doctor said to me during his rounds, "I need a break. I'm going to go play with babies." But before they go in, they have to hang up their white coats. A white coat to a sick child means scary things, like needles, so there are no white coats allowed!

Most of these children are enormously disadvantaged. A brother and sister, Kevin and Winnie Rose, were recovering from third-degree burns after their father set their



(top) Children being treated at the hospital have playtime at the Sally Test Pediatric Center.

(inset) A moment of solace.

(bottom left) The woman pictured here was near death at the time this photo was taken by Tyagan Miller. She is now in full health thanks to AMPATH.

(bottom right) This grandmother is raising the children of her daughter and son-in-law, both of whom died from AIDS.



house on fire with them in it. Ronnie, a sweet 4-year-old, died from leukemia during my visit. And 13-year-old Esther, who stole my heart, is living in a displaced-persons camp with her grandmother. Yet at the Sally Test Center, they all play and laugh and dance and sing. It's such a great joy to see them smile.

One day I took Esther with me to an event at a children's shelter where there was music, dancing, speeches, and a photo exhibit. Afterwards, we went to lunch at a lovely hotel. We sat by the pool and had a huge platter of meat, vegetables, ugali (cornmeal), French fries, and fruit for dessert. Before we left, she looked at me with her big brown eyes, and said, "I will remember this day always. It is such a good day. Even when I am an adult, I will remember today."

I wrote in my journal that night, "Dear God, please let my heart grow bigger and stronger so I can love Esther better."

The Plight of Women

My visit coincided with the Kenyan national elections on August 4. The previous election, two and a half years ago, resulted in widespread violence with at least a thousand people dead and hundreds of thousands displaced. Everyone remembers seeing people's heads on poles. To be safe, we were on lockdown for the 36 hours surrounding the election.

This time, though, everything went smoothly. A new constitution was adopted, the first written by Kenyans for Kenyans. It was a

true rebirth for the country and very exciting to witness.

One of the things that President Mwai Kibaki promises to do is expand the rights of women. There is such a long way to go in this area I can hardly begin to describe it. In Kenya, domestic abuse and rape are normal behavior and completely accepted.

The women are the beasts of burden in Kenya. They are the ones who care for the children and the homestead. They are so strong and they work so hard. But don't get me started on deadbeat Kenyan men. Many do nothing all day but drink and then come home and beat or rape their wives.

I'm amazed that even the good men don't seem to see what I see in the women. I gave a singing lesson one day to a group that included men and women from the local Catholic chapel. I made a statement that I seem to be making a lot lately: "I can't wait for the day that Kenyan women run the world!" Father Pious just stood there with his mouth opening and closing, saying, "Oh, oh, oh."

I tried my best to get my message across at any opportunity. At one point I took aside a group of four young women who were Kenyan medical students. I wrapped my arms around them so we were huddled together, and said, "Look, you are part of the group that's going to change life for the women in this country. Go out and have your professional careers, be the best that you can be, and inspire those coming along behind you. You four show the way. Shine the light."



(top left) Happy kids at the Amani Shelter, an orphanage.

(right) An AIDS orphan heads out to play.



A Ball to Play With

One of my most memorable days was when I got to play Santa for the kids at the Amani Shelter, an orphanage. I had visited the day before, and they had asked me, "Could you get us a ball? We would love to have a ball to play with." So I took a trip to the Nakumatt, the Eldoret version of Wal-Mart.

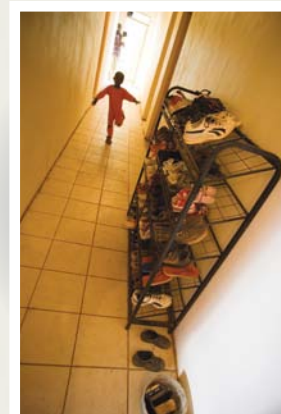
Puma had a great big display there with a sign that read, "Puma balls make all the difference." It struck me that in this instance, the slogan could really be true. I picked up four soccer balls, two basketballs, and a little miniature plastic bowling set.

I decided to bring the gifts out slowly, starting with the bowling set. We probably spent an hour setting up the pins and having one child after another roll the ball to knock them down. Next was basketball, and since I'm on a women's basketball team here in Bloomington, I could show them some moves. We bounced the balls on the grass and mud and practiced passing to each other. I found some real natural athletes.

Then I brought out the soccer ball, and explained, "This one, you can't touch with your hands. You can only kick it with your feet." Once I set it down I realized they didn't need any explanation. Forget the white lady, they know soccer!

What a fabulous day. I taught them bowling and basketball, and they taught me soccer.

It also didn't hurt that I was driven there by the reigning Mr. Kenya. Javan Odinga, who was also runner-up Mr. Africa, happens to work for IU as Sarah Ellen Mamlin's personal assistant.



A Concert for All

I capped off my trip by giving a concert in the AMPATH courtyard. Everyone came out to hear it—doctors, nurses, patients, children, caregivers, administrators. Joe Mamlin said it was first time in the program's 20-year history that everyone involved in AMPATH had been in the same place at the same time, experiencing a moment as one. What a blessing that it could be something as joyful as music bringing them together.

Dressed head to toe in finery made by the women of the Imani Workshop, I started off with several of my favorite selections from the Great American Songbook. I sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow," "Climb Every Mountain," and "The Impossible Dream." I also shared a few songs that I've performed with the Indianapolis Children's Choir, including "Stand Together."

Then I had a surprise for the audience. During my month in Kenya, I took Swahili lessons so that I could sing to them in their native tongue. One of the songs I chose was by Kenya's answer to Michael Bubl , the singer Eric Wainaina. It's called "Daima," and it's about the colors of the Kenyan flag. Black for the color of skin, green for the land, red to represent the blood shed for freedom, and white for peace. It has become the unofficial national anthem, especially after the post-election violence two and a half years ago. I think I had sung about the first five notes when the entire audience, hundreds of people, joined in. It was a huge choir of Kenyans singing along with me.



Dressed in finery made by the women of the Imani Workshop, Sylvia McNair sang for all at AMPATH, including one song in Swahili.

Land of Dreams

What a wonderful way to end the trip of a lifetime. I learned so much, not least of which was just how incredibly lucky we are to be born in the United States. The Kenyans all say, "Oh, you are from the United States, the land of dreams." Who could ask for more than that?

We are so fortunate, and we must give back. We must give back. I'm now sponsoring schooling for two of the children I met in Eldoret, and I hope to do much more.

We also need to recognize the good work that is being done right now. Through the AMPATH program, Indiana University is totally changing health care for a country that desperately needs its help. I just really want this program to get more attention. I want people to be aware that whatever connection they have to IU, they have so much to be proud of in AMPATH. ✨

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