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Vision of Mutombo, Patel brings hope to light

Dave Solomon
09/22/2005

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NEW HAVEN — They met for the first time Wednesday morning, the NBA star and the second-year medical student from the Yale School of Medicine, to speak the common language of idealism.

DAVE SOLOMON



One confers with world leaders about the rampant disease and alarming death rate among the people of his native Democratic Republic of Congo; the other, of Indian heritage, fights the seemingly endless battle against sex trafficking of minors in the brothels of Calcutta and Bombay. But they both speak the common language of hope.

Dikembe Mutombo, 7 feet 2 inches of humanitarian, and Anup Patel, a 23-year-old student with a global conscience, met in New Haven to make a difference.

"I think if you have the will, (good) can happen," Patel said. "Some people say it's idealistic, but if you don't have it, you won't have a dream about it."

Eight years ago, when Mutombo first talked about building a state-of-the-art hospital in his country — the first in 40 years — people viewed him with indifference.

"In 1997, when I issued a press release to the world that I was going to devote the rest of my life to improve the living conditions in my country and build a hospital, there was a lot of hesitation," Mutombo said. "They didn't know how to react. What's a basketball player got to do with building a hospital?"

Add "vision" to the common denominators shared between Mutombo and Patel Wednesday.

Patel, founder of the charity Cents of Relief with friend Rina Patel, was the prime mover behind the all-day visit and keynote address given by Mutombo at Battell Chapel Wednesday. The idea originated with a discussion late last year between Anup and family friend Brendan Suhr, the New York Knicks' director of player personnel. Suhr told Patel about Mutombo's humanitarian mission and Patel took it from there, imploring the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation and the members of the Yale administration to make this day happen.

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Idealism carried the day Wednesday because without that, we'd be left with a montage of hopelessness and despair over the human condition in other parts of the world.

"I don't want to spend my life saying, 'Oh well, I really can't help them,' because that's just the way the world spins," Patel said.

Patel, who went to India this summer on a Downs Fellowship, said the deplorable conditions in the country's red light districts would take your breath away. It's a vicious cycle of sex trafficking of women and children, with AIDS being epidemic.

Mutombo, using the pulpit of his NBA stardom — he's a four-time NBA Defensive Player of the Year out of Georgetown and a seven-time NBA All-Star, currently with the Houston Rockets — said that 8,000 people die every day in his country from the ravages of AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria. Polio, all but eradicated in this country, and measles still remain prominent killers in his country.

"This epidemic is destroying the fabric of society, not just in Africa. It's worldwide," he said.

Picture the conditions of hurricane-ravaged New Orleans as the daily living conditions of people in other parts of the world. That alone ought to answer any question why this is a discourse for the sports pages this morning.

"The goal, by 2015, is to prevent this catastrophe," said Mutombo, who says he now gets the red-carpet treatment as a speaker in world health organizations around the world.

"More than half of the children in Africa who are under the age of 15 have contracted HIV. I know what it's like to be poor. My father made \$37 a month with 10 children. That's why Anup is one of the best examples of what we can do to make a difference. Despite our poverty, despite our problems in society, there's always hope for the future. He helps show us there's always the light at the end of the tunnel.

"It's always important to have a vision, to think for the future and how we want this world to be. Anup has devotion to help people. When there's a problem affecting one part of the world, it should be a concern of every human being in society."

Mutombo delivered that message to the Yale community throughout the day Wednesday, with Anup by his side.

Together, they spoke the common language of hope.

Dave Solomon, the Register sports columnist, can be reached at dsolomon@nhregister.com

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