

Mutombo's Mission

An Interview with Dikembe Mutombo,
Chairman and President, Dikembe Mutombo Foundation, Inc., Atlanta



Dikembe Mutombo signs an autograph for fellow AIDS activist Kimberly Canady

EDITORS' NOTE *Dikembe Mutombo emigrated to the United States from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in 1987 to attend Georgetown University. Since graduating, he has played professional basketball for the Denver Nuggets, the Atlanta Hawks, the Philadelphia 76ers, the New Jersey Nets, the New York Knicks, and the Houston Rockets. He is a four-time NBA Defensive Player of the Year who ranks first in NBA rebounds per game. He is also the recipient of numerous humanitarian awards, including the Young Global Leader Award from the World Economic Forum, the NAACP Phoenix Award, the President's Service Award, and the J. Walter Kennedy Citizenship Award from the NBA.*

ORGANIZATION BRIEF *The Dikembe Mutombo Foundation was established in 1997 with the primary goal of bringing world-class health care to the Congo. This summer, the foundation dedicated the new Biamba Marie Mutombo Hospital in the capital city of Kinshasa.*

Why did you establish the Dikembe Mutombo Foundation?

I am a child of the Congo; I was born and raised there. And I have come to this wonderful country of the United States of America and have made my own money, from my own sweat, by working very hard, playing a game that I love. And when I go back to the continent to do something, I am very well received there, which helps me accomplish certain goals. And after traveling in Africa for many years, I just got sick and tired of seeing people dying. I fi-

nally decided that it was time to start making a difference. When my mom died, health care in Africa became my top priority.

How vital has the NBA been to the success of your foundation?

If I walk away from the game today, I think I'll be remembered as a great basketball player, a great defender, a great shot blocker, and great rebounder. But I hope people will recognize me more for what I have given back. And the NBA plays a large role in that legacy, because if I didn't get a chance

to play this game, I would not have been able to accomplish as much as I have helping people. The NBA has always been a strong ally in everything I've wanted to do. They have led to much of my success on and off the court.

How important is it to maintain a global perspective?

We don't just play basketball in America; we really carry the world's flag. We represent all of the youth who are following us globally, and who are dreaming of one day playing professional basketball. So we are trying to reach out to those kids. It doesn't matter where they are. It's up to us to go to them and do what we can to help them succeed, not just with basketball, but with everything in life.

When you visit Africa, are you noticing that much of the humanitarian efforts are paying off?

Let me put it this way: A train is leaving New York to go to Washington, DC. But before it reaches DC, it has to stop in Newark, and Philadelphia, and Baltimore, and a few other places. Somewhere in your life, there are always steps that you have to go through to get where you want to go. But when it comes to Africa, it seems that the problems are insurmountable, that no steps that you can take could ever solve all of their problems. The entire continent is riddled with tuberculosis, malaria, and HIV/AIDS. And even though 25 million people have died from HIV/AIDS, more than 30 million people have died already from malaria. A child dies every 30 seconds from malaria in Sub-Saharan Africa. And this means that our history continues

to die, because when parents and grandparents die, their kids are left with no history of the village, and have no idea where they came from. The tribes are dying because they don't have anybody to represent and lead them, or to build up the foundation of that particular tribe. When the chief of the village has died from AIDS, and all of his wives have died from AIDS, and the aide of the chief of the village has also died from AIDS, the tribe is lost.

So even though our foundation serves the purpose of building a hospital, and reaching out to build a school, and trying to find a way to build a basketball recreation center, which will be like a gymnasium or a YMCA, there is still so much more that needs to be done. And for an organization like ours, it might seem that all we can really do is take it one step at a time. But while we're building the hospital in Congo, we can also be working on building homes. And at the same time, we can reach out to all of the international organizations, and to all of our partners, to come together and spread the word, and show the world all the problems that Africa has. Africa is dying, and dying rapidly, at a pace that nobody has even seen.

With so many challenges and needs, are you able to be optimistic for the future?

The UN and UNICEF are working to reach the millennium goals for 2015, which is partly to reduce the toll of HIV/AIDS and malaria deaths on the African continent. And while I don't know if we will be able to reach it, we have seen some positive results in Uganda with HIV/AIDS infection, where there has been a decrease of close to 45 to 50 percent. And we've seen the results of the efforts in Botswana, where AIDS is down almost 40 percent. But much of the continent is still hurting, and there are new areas where AIDS had not hit before but is now attacking populations at a high rate. Unfortunately, sometimes there is progress in one way and not in another. When the civil war in the Congo was over, and people were allowed to travel, and go from village to village and city to city, AIDS spread more rapidly. AIDS has reached almost 11 percent of the population in the Congo. More roads have been opened, but AIDS has also increased. So there are a lot of challenges that we're still facing, and I'm glad I'm putting myself in the history book to be among those people who are trying to fix the problems that are affecting the continent of Africa. ●