



Opening Doors for People With Autism:

Anderson Center International

Within seconds of meeting Ruvimbo Zimunya, her joyful spirit is evident. Originally from Zimbabwe, the young woman has clearly tapped into a sense of purpose that some people spend an entire lifetime trying to uncover. Zimunya's smile is radiant as she discusses her life's work, centered around educating, empowering, and caring for people with autism. Her quest to support this population recently prompted her to make an exciting move far away from her family, traveling from Malawi (Southern Africa) to the Hudson Valley region of New York State on a J-1 Visa for a yearlong training program at Anderson Center for Autism.

**By Marybeth
G. Cale**

Co-President,
Cale Communications
and Co-Publisher,
*Living Rhinebeck
Magazine*

Located about 80 miles north of New York City, Anderson has long provided comprehensive



educational, vocational, and residential services for children and adults with autism spectrum disorder. Rooted in the use of applied behavior analysis and other evidence-based practices, the nonprofit helps children and adults communicate, advocate for themselves, and acquire independent living skills. The organization is also steadfastly committed to educating parents, siblings, and community members on how to best support those on the spectrum. And this commitment to giving people with autism myriad opportunities to enjoy full, productive lives goes far beyond the Center's waterfront campus and adjacent communities. The impact extends to all corners of the globe through their unique and visionary program, Anderson Center International (ACI).

With a mission of facilitating improvements to the quality of life for individuals with autism throughout the world in a systematic, sustainable, and culturally significant way, ACI has been training professional and student fellows for a decade from countries as far away as Bhutan, the Philippines, India, Germany, and the Czech Republic. Trainees like Zimunya receive a stipend and get step-by-step support through the entire process—from application to arrival, including accommodations, transportation, and health insurance.

70 million people around the world are on the autism spectrum.

85% live in developing countries.

While at Anderson, fellows receive hands-on learning experiences focused on building aptitude in applied behavior analysis, positive behavioral outcomes, classroom instruction, behavior management, communication strategies, and data management. They are offered opportunities to pursue certifications and specializations, and enjoy meaningful interactions with residents, students, colleagues, families, and the community at large. The intent is for ACI fellows to leave

the program with the tools and knowledge needed to develop programs and services in their home countries, many of which have never before had any infrastructure in place for people on the autism spectrum. The relationship does not end there; trainees have access to ACI as a resource for years after they have completed the program.

Zimunya reports that she's confident ACI will provide the breadth and depth of knowledge needed to "develop curriculums specifically designed for individuals with autism, in schools and in their natural environments," allowing her to start a humanitarian movement in a country that, like many others, has not been able to provide sufficient support for a population she treasures.

"Africa is slowly becoming more aware of what autism is all about. We are graduating from the native cultural mindset of it being a 'curse' as people are finally beginning to comprehend mental health issues and illnesses. However, the gap is still huge. We lack enough trained personnel and have very few mental health facilities. The knowledge gap in schools and communities needed to identify such children or individuals is high. Stigmatization and misconceptions on what this developmental disability is really inhibits people from understanding and truly accepting the condition," said Zimunya.

She continued,

"We have schools for children with special needs or a special needs class is set up in a school. However, the majority of the students have other learning disabilities; no major focus has been put on the student with autism. Most individuals with autism are not in school. Where I come from, autism is not spoken about much. It's culturally regarded as being 'taboo.' People cannot afford to get a proper diagnosis



or any medication that could assist these individuals, so most individuals are at home. They cannot work, and parents and guardians have no idea on how to help them. When you look at the history of autism in America, we are (in Africa) where you were in America in the 1940s. We have a long way to go.”

At Anderson, Zimunya’s emerging confidence, a direct result of ACI training, will be a game-changer for everyone. Zimunya continued,

“In participating in the training program at Anderson, I am advancing my knowledge on setting individual-centered goals, learning approaches and strategies to achieve the set goals, and how to evaluate the achievements or failures, while keeping in mind and ensuring a multidisciplinary approach for people with autism who are both verbal and non-verbal. I am learning about theories and policies that are put in place in accepting and supporting individuals living with autism. I am gaining knowledge on educating, supporting, engaging and

involving parents or guardians that are taking care of individuals living with autism (a holistic approach), in order to engage them in real-life activities, by teaching them skills and concepts that are more flexible and not complex (activity breakdown), which may take them through adulthood (if they are children) and provide independence. Drawing from the approaches used at Anderson Center for Autism, I will be able to add on skills and knowledge of behavior identification and analysis, as well as management strategies on how to deal with appropriate and unaccepted behaviors and how it can be continued at home or outside school.”

After just eight months as part of Anderson’s intensive study program, Zimunya feels more competent than ever before.

“There are a lot of things that I have learned already at Anderson. I have learned that when working with individuals with autism, it is important to consult other professionals, such as teachers, speech therapists, physical therapists, occupational therapists, and behavior specialists. Their services bring about the ultimate outcome and progress in an individual. Through observing these specialists, I have noticed the use and importance of behavior support plans. Each individual has a support plan in place. Each



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individual has an education plan and goal specifically catered for them.”

She continued,

“I’m still learning applied behavior analysis on a daily basis. Behavior analysis helps us understand how behavior works, and why people we work with behave the way they do. By knowing the function of behavior being displayed, it becomes easier to communicate with the individual, thus enhancing their communication skills, social skills, academic success, and also decreasing problem behaviors.”

Inspired by the Anderson team, who she described as “so welcoming, and eager to learn from me too,” Zimunya is enthusiastic about returning home and the infinite possibilities for making an impact.

“After this training, I want to go back home and start making changes within the communities. There is a need for the

community to be aware of what autism is all about—for parents with individuals with autism to come out and speak out about it as we address the challenges they face on a daily basis. I also want to work with the teachers in the schools so they’re more aware of autism, too. Eventually, I want a central place [that caters to] people with autism . . . so we can have services and programs like teaching them activities of daily living, organic outcomes, vocational trainings, and work to integrate them into the community.”

Zimunya hopes to promote the vocational skills needed for individuals with autism to “be involved and productive in their communities, focusing on developing their unique skills and talents.”

“We will be able to advocate for the employment of individuals with autism, either in rehabilitation centers or any other places, after they have gained their independence, in order for them to make their own living just like any other person.

Being at Anderson has really opened up my eyes. It's no longer an idea in my head that someone with autism can actually achieve more than I grew up believing. I have seen it with my own eyes. Having autism doesn't make one incapable! . . .

My first 6 months at Anderson I worked in a female residence with girls as young as 7. I remember not knowing what to do the first week, it was so overwhelming. I was, after all, just a stranger in their home. A month down the line, if anybody would walk in and see me sitting on a mat in the lounge, they could tell there was a difference in my smile and most importantly in how they were all so comfortable with me there. One was dancing around me, happy that I was around; I mattered to that person. Another was sitting opposite me and we had sensory materials between us, using PECS and sign language to communicate. On another day, you could find me with two ladies offloading the dishwasher and putting the dishes away or doing our weekly baking. In our quietness, we understood one another; we found humor and life lessons in following routine, stopping once in a while because they love the feel of an electric whisk on their arms.

Once you get to know someone better, it becomes easier to understand each other. My eyes were opened wider because of them.”

Zimunya's radiant smile is no doubt a direct result of her work as part of Anderson Center International, where she has seen first-hand that these human-to-human connections are what life is all about—and that autism can actually open doors to new ways of connecting with people and with life as a whole.

She reflected on her favorite quote, by Dr. Colin Zimbleman, Ph.D: “Autism . . . offers a chance for us to glimpse an awe-filled vision of the world that might otherwise pass us by.” And for Zimunya . . . a sense of purpose that inspires.

Anderson Center International is part of Anderson Center for Autism. Learn more at andersoncenterforautism.org. Contact: EGardinierFrasch@Andersoncares.org

Anderson Center International Brochure:
<https://andersoncenterforautism.org/ACI-brochure>

Video: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay4ikxAe7ek&feature=youtu.be

On Video



Doing Things for Others Doesn't Help

Molly Ola Pinney

Molly Ola Pinney is the founder and Chief Executive Officer of the Global Autism Project, which works to support a world where people with autism have access to services that enable them to reach their potential by increasing the capacity of local individuals working with children with autism worldwide. She started the organization after moving to Ghana in 2003 with a family who had a child with autism. She was struck by the lack of awareness and services provided there when families started showing up at her house looking for the woman who knew what autism was. The Global Autism Project has grown to an organization that has served 10 countries so far and is well on its way to achieving its goal of establishing centers of excellence in 20 countries by 2020. Listen to her TEDx talk at www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-OfxQWzulk

