

Victoria Waldoock (friend and partner in SAIDIA)

“A Tribute to Makena”

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This tribute to Makena covers the period of time in Makena’s life when she was finishing up her medical training and deepening her philanthropic work by setting up the non-profit foundation SAIDIA For Children of Africa. It was written by Victoria Waldoock in her capacity as a friend and as a collaborator in SAIDIA activities. The Swahili word “SAIDIA” translates to English as help, aid, approve, assist, defend, favour, promote, protect, sanction, and support.

Every so often in life, you meet someone who rises high above the crowd and whose particular qualities of character influence you in profoundly important, even life-changing ways. Makena was just such an individual, who not only inspired me, but also many other people across the globe stretching from Africa to the USA. I was first introduced to Makena in the early 1990’s when she was working on raising funds for humanitarian programs in Kenya. Little did I know then, the degree to which I would appreciate the company and charisma of Makena throughout the ensuing years, and what a special friend she would become. And little did I know then what a powerhouse of accomplishment, energy and talent Makena already embodied – long before she had even started work as a medical doctor.

At that time, Makena was well into her post-doctoral training at the University of Medicine in Newark. She was completing her general and trauma surgery residency – no small feat in of itself – while simultaneously she was spearheading a number of humanitarian medical projects. This philanthropic work was the culmination of earlier initiatives to help needy children, which had led Makena to co-found (along with Dr. Richard Leakey) an organization called SAIDIA, which was dedicated to providing surgical care to children of Africa. It’s main activities were to fund and organize training workshops for up and coming paediatric surgeons in Africa, to provide scholarships to African surgeons in overseas teaching hospitals, and to provide medical supplies to local African hospitals. Makena felt that supporting the education of local doctors would make a crucial contribution towards long-term solutions for the plight of Africa’s children, who due to poverty and lack of access, were not receiving the medical support they needed. When asked to better explain this viewpoint Makena would often tell the following story about a little boy she once met in Kenya. I quote the story using Makena’s own words, which I have taken from a speech she

gave at one of SAIDIA's fundraising events. She says: "One year when I was still a medical student I visited a small hospital in a remote area in Kenya, and I met a little nine year old boy called Kamau whose plight and untreated medical condition caused me to change the direction of my life. That time when I first met him he was huddled on a bed with his head wrapped in a blanket. He had been badly burned in a fire and due to lack of treatment his muscles had contracted, gluing his chin to his chest, which prevented him from lifting his head. He had been in this state for four years with no hope of change, doomed to live his life in misery and solitude. I just could not ignore his condition and also those of so many others, so I vowed to find a way to help.

Later, I arranged for a group of seven surgeons to come to Kenya and work alongside other African surgeons to operate on Kamau and others who suffered from such burn contractures and other deformities. I had the great joy of seeing Kamau's life transformed. He was able to go back to school, begin an education and embark on the path of a healthy, happy life. On our trip we helped scores of children, but sadly, hundreds were turned away and I realized then that we needed to work toward long term solutions to reinforce and help expand existing local medical training".

Makena devoted an extraordinary amount of energy and creativity into making SAIDIA succeed, and it quickly became a vibrant and productive foundation with two bases— one in Kenya and one in Ghana. Makena not only reached out to doctors in leading hospitals in the US and Africa to contribute their expertise, but she also organised a variety of the fund-raising events in high profile venues in New York. To achieve such successes, Makena had to work superhuman hours, and a quick story here will give you an idea of the many balls she used to juggle at any given time – a characteristic she would exhibit throughout her life. On this particular occasion, Makena had asked me to help her plan an important future fund-raising event, to which I of course happily agreed. However I soon discovered this meant driving in the dead of night from New York City to the main Newark-New Jersey hospital where Makena was on duty in the ER department. Makena's idea was that we could squeeze in planning sessions in-between the arrival of medical emergencies! Effectively, that night Makena oscillated between saving a few lives, making long-distance SAIDIA-related calls to Kenya and Ghana, and planning the logistics of a major New York event, all in a days work between midnight and 6am. After her night shift she would then grab a few hours sleep before studying all day long, only to begin the night shift again.

A quick mention of some of the details of Makena's SAIDIA work will give you an idea of the rich texture of Makena's life at that time. The Kenya SAIDIA operation worked closely with Professor

Julius Kyambi, Chairman of Paediatric Surgery at the University of Nairobi's Medical School. For example, in 1992 over 120 physicians from African countries attended an Advanced Paediatric Life Support Course, given by visiting US paediatric surgeons from The Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. The course taught state-of-the-art techniques in managing critically injured children that could be done out in the field. Medical supplies worth over \$500,000 including specialised surgical equipment to continue with the course techniques were donated to Kenyatta Hospital. Other workshops were conducted in Ghana at the Korle Bu hospital in collaboration with Professor Archampong, Dean of the Ghana Medical School, US physicians and Carlene Sharples, SAIDIA's Executive Director. These collaborative projects were deliberately designed to be self-perpetuating so as part of this scheme SAIDIA sponsored exchanges between paediatric surgeons in Kenya, Ghana and beyond.

The energetic and financial input into such initiatives were considerable, and Makena organized impressive and unique fund-raising events to underwrite the projects. Makena organized annual high profile Africa-themed events at the United Nations that assembled a star spangled roster of celebrity artists and performers to entertain ambassadors, politicians, policy makers and business people alike. To the delight of guests, Makena twice organised for the Executive Chef of Nairobi's famed Norfolk hotel to fly to New York to specially prepare a gourmet Kenyan dinner. While these events were always dazzling for their entertainment value, serious humanitarian issues were addressed, endorsing Makena's role as a SAIDIA delegate in key assemblies such as UNICEF's 1990 World Summit for Children, and the 1991 African/African American Summit in Abidjan.

In her SAIDIA work and other projects, Makena often mentioned how much she appreciated the support she received from her family and friends. It was a proud moment for all when Makena received the F. Edward Johnson Outstanding Achievement in Service to Children Award from the African Development Foundation in Washington, D.C., in 1993.

This small 'window' into a particular period in Makena's life is aimed at shining the spotlight on some of the wonderful characteristics that made up Makena's unique and special persona. She went on after this to achieve a dizzying array of accomplishments, but she always held on to her compassionate, caring side and always found a way to express her creative flare. It is these qualities together with so many others that made Makena such a charismatic person whose influence will be felt and valued always.