

## THE PEGASUS SCHOLARSHIP - UGANDA

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**An article on life in Kampala on the Pegasus Scholarship. The Ugandan judicial system is an old book, being torn up and re-written at an astonishing pace. The Pegasus Trust and the Bar of England and Wales are helping reform, rewrite and implement far-reaching reforms in Uganda.**

Most mornings, I weaved in and out of traffic on the back of a *Boda-Boda* (motorbike taxi) on my way to work at the High Court of Uganda, situated atop an enduringly sunny hill in Kampala. The *Bodas* are not for the faint-hearted, incessant numbers pouring through Kampala's notorious traffic at speed, like water flowing between stones. This was life in Kampala on the Pegasus Scholarship.

I shared a desk at the High Court with the Technical Adviser to the Judiciary – Mr Andrew Khaukha. We spent May through to August working on reform projects spanning from land evictions to the “state brief” (legal aid) scheme, and from mediations to “plea bargaining”.

Plea bargaining – the process by which a remand prisoner offers pleas or bases of pleas in exchange for the Prosecutor recommending to a Court a lesser sentence – was a mainstay of my time in Uganda. The process was introduced as a means of combatting the sizeable backlog of cases in the court system. I toured throughout Uganda, visiting several prisons – Mbale, Jinja, Masindi, Gulu and others. I even was given a journey to the source of the Nile on a Police speed boat, sirens blaring as we tore across the River Nile. I was accompanied by Senior Prosecutors, Ugandan Judges and three District Attorneys from Los Angeles, all of whom were dedicated to the improvement of the system. We were reviewing, helping and learning from plea bargaining. I conducted cases myself, both as defence and prosecution. I understood the breadth of the problem of sexual violence in Uganda and the success of plea bargaining in clearing the backlog of cases.

The journey across Ugandan prisons brought me into contact with witchdoctors, cannibals, war survivors and war soldiers. I worked with law students, including Samuel, who was himself a survivor of kidnap by the Lord's Resistance Army and Joseph Kony. Many in North Uganda remember the war, and most still bear the psychological and physical scars of the conflict.

My work in plea bargaining culminated in a review of around 3,500 plea-bargained and non-plea bargained cases. I was tasked with considering the trends, the flaws and the successes. Did you know the most common sentence for murder is around 12 years? The most common sentence for

aggravated robbery is around the same at 10 years. My analysis of these cases is now being fed into the reform of Uganda's sentencing policy and processes.

Back in Kampala, the work was never done. The Ugandan Judiciary – with Andrew Khaukha as a pioneering whirlwind – is reforming anything and everything it can. It is introducing technology into court rooms, working with sexual violence survivors and grappling with access to justice problems. The judiciary is filled with trail-blazing individuals – Justice Abodo, Justice Bamwine (Principal Judge) and the Chief Justice, to name but a few. The Judges are presently working on new rules to help disabled and less able-bodied individuals engage properly with the Court process and give evidence. This was something that the Bar in England and Wales has only recently grappled with. I was able to provide to the Justices my practical knowledge of how our system has tackled this issue. I even held a starring role as an appeal judge – in intricately woven red judicial gowns – at a judicial conference. A picture of me with a piece on the conference found its way into the next day's newspaper.

Overall, it seems the Ugandan judicial system is an old book, being torn up and re-written at an astonishing pace. The Pegasus Scholars are helping edit the new chapters.

I must thank the Pegasus Trust for enabling me to work with the Uganda Judiciary in what was an electrifying adventure. My Pegasus Scholarship took me to the farthest reaches of rural Uganda, rainforests with wild mountain gorillas and even on an adventure through the Democratic Republic of Congo to climb a live volcano. I forged links between the Bar, Africa and America which will endure. I am forever grateful to the Chief Justice of Uganda, the Principal Judge, Justice Abodo and, above all, Andrew Khaukha for working with me and continuing to work with the Pegasus Trust.

