

GREATER NEW YORK HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION

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KATE BASTINELLI, HOST:

Welcome to *Perspectives*. I'm Kate Bastinelli from the Greater New York Hospital Association. I'm joined by GNYHA's Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative and Financial Officer, Lee Perlman, who will be interviewing Danielle Butin, founder of the Afya Foundation. Afya was born in 2007 with a goal to connect an abundance of unused medical goods from the United States with clinics in Africa in need of the most basic of medical supplies.

Over the past 15 years, Afya has delivered nearly \$58 million of life-saving supplies across the world and has become GNYHA's humanitarian logistics partner. Today, we'll discuss Danielle's new book, *Wild Hope Now*, about how Afya has grown from operating out of a New York City apartment to responding to calls for medical supplies in crises worldwide.

Let's get started.

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LEE PERLMAN:

Thank you, Danielle, for being here. We're so excited to be with you. You know, I became familiar with Afya all the way back in 2010, which makes me old or makes you old, after the first Haiti earthquake. And we've been a proud partner since then. But for our listeners out in podcast land who were new to the life-changing work of Afya, can you give us a little bit of a history lesson? How did Afya begin?

DANIELLE BUTIN:

So Afya got its wings about 17 years ago. I was working in healthcare. I'm an occupational therapist doing a lot of teaching at Columbia and NYU. And I left this position, and I went to Africa on a vacation. And there in the Serengeti Plains of Tanzania, I saw a woman crying alone hysterically in a tent one night. And I sat down next to her and said, "Are you alright?" And she said, "No, I'm not all right. I am the women's health physician in London. I came here to do medical mission work. I can't do anything here. There are no medical supplies in any of the clinics where I'm working." And she just put her head on the table and sobbed.

And it was a moment where, and we all have these huge compassionate moments where someone's story compelled me to act. And so, I came home. I walked through many of the tunnels of the most extraordinary health institutions of New York, and I did a needs assessment. And I learned a lot about regs and requirements around waste. And in those tunnels and after that trip, I launched Afya, which means health in the Kiswahili language. It is a way of honoring the land that whispered this work with the intention of rescuing supplies before they are ever discarded, that can go on and have an impactful second life.



GNYHA is a dynamic, constantly evolving center for health care advocacy and expertise, but our core mission—helping hospitals deliver the finest patient care in the most cost-effective way—never changes.

PERLMAN:

Well, it was the beginning of a miracle story. And you know, you decided to chronicle all this in a book called *Wild Hope Now* that talks about the 15 years of the organization, the first 15 years. From the initial idea that you just talked about to the current organization that shipped over 12,000,000 lbs of supplies to 80 nations and 23 U.S. states, what was your inspiration for chronicling your journey with Afya in this book, besides being able to say nice things about me?

BUTIN:

I definitely wanted to say nice things about you. For years, people have been saying to me, “You need to write a book about these stories.” And I think there is a universality of impact that our supply donors and our financial donors and our volunteers can read these stories and journey with us to these sites that have been impacted. And I also believe deeply in honoring and capturing stories, because storytelling is such a vital part of many of the sites that we serve. And it also, I hope, inspires people to just start. It is not about perfection. It is about doing something, and it is one story after another that invites the doer to action.

PERLMAN:

I think it's so interesting, the use of the word imperfection, because imperfection gets you very far sometimes. And one of the things that I think is important is talking about this bridge-building between surplus and need, which is really what Afya is all about. Tell us about some of the supplies that we've been able to repurpose from New York hospitals.

BUTIN:

So, let's talk about the latest, which was the beginning of the Ukraine War. Within a week, the main hospital in Kyiv was sending us lists of supplies of what they needed urgently. Amputation kits, wound care, trauma kits for missiles exploding. And the hospitals of New York and Greater New York Hospital Association came forward in extraordinary force. And it allowed us to start sending everything from surgical amputation kits to OR supplies to mobile units, and these supplies saved lives. These supplies saved thousands of lives in Ukraine by matching what the hospitals were giving us to what the needs were from the ground.

PERLMAN:

When you started the journey, which was funneling through the undergrounds of our hospitals looking for supplies on your own, it really didn't start with a real organizational construct. How did you think this was all going to happen and how many supplies have you ended up collecting to date?

BUTIN:

I had no idea how this was going to happen. That's part of this book. I had to start. And I had faith in my ability to lead. I had a big history of leadership in healthcare, so I knew. I knew how to lead. I knew how

to inspire. And I knew how to authentically show up. So, I brought that forward, and I hoped. I had wild hope that it would work and that it would build over time. And it is built in ways that I never could have anticipated or imagined, and lead to your perfect point about imperfection. You can't begin with the goal of perfection. There are so many starts and stops and so many mistakes that we learned from along the way. But it was about helping people, and you're going to stumble and trip and fall and get up again. But we have to be the voice of people who are ignored and not listened to. They need everyone's help.

PERLMAN:

You know, for years we've had kind of an informal partnership between Greater New York and Afya. A lot of it's between you and me. But most recently we've tried to formalize this partnership. And what do you imagine that partnership's going to look like?

BUTIN:

We are on the cusp of a movement. And a vision that you and I have talked about at length is we believe that New York City can be the one site in the United States where all health institutions are committed to this effort. Of surplus and unused supplies going on to have a second life abroad and using Afya as the center of that wheel. And I believe that we are about to start a coalition that will be wildly impactful, that will change and save millions of lives. And it's going to be New York strong, and we're all going to come together to make this a reality.

PERLMAN:

One of the things that really differentiates Afya is the fact that we're not just in the business of delivering supplies and leaving them there. And I think one of the most important sets of stories is focusing on how you're keeping the people being helped as the owners of their truth. Being able to say what they need and how they need it, and listening to what is needed without bias. This is a completely differentiated charitable strategy. So, tell us how that came about.

BUTIN:

So, I'm an occupational therapist, and we ask people what they need, and we let them drive their care and their recovery. So, I'd love to tell a story that involves you here. And it was about cholera during the early days, post-earthquake in Haiti after 2010. And I went to Sean Penn's camp, JPHRO, where 75,000 people were living on a golf course. And they had a blackboard there, and the board listed all the supplies they needed. And a huge handwritten note was there saying we need body bags. And cholera had just hit. And I remember thinking, and this is the philosophy of practice of Afya, "What can we do to prevent the body bags? What are the supplies that are needed so they don't need body bags?"

And I remember calling you and saying, "I need as much lactated ringer and IV starter kits as we can possibly get here." And I was mildly hysterical because I couldn't believe what I was seeing. And you made possible the donation of two containers full of the supply. We got it to Haiti fast. And then Sean Penn's team and the military, the US military, airlifted this into the Central Plateau and it saved 20,000 people's

lives. And it is about the best of everyone coming together as a community, one. And two, what are the supplies that would make the catalytic difference here? There was no way we were going to get body bags when instead we could save lives and get IV solutions.

PERLMAN:

I think one of the things that's always been most interesting to me is that the people who are receiving the supplies in these countries are not the most obvious people. Very often they're out in the countryside, they're not in the big institutions. It's not about just bringing things to hospitals and other countries. Tell us about how we've really worked on working with community-based organizations who have true meaningful distribution mechanisms.

BUTIN:

So, one of our partners in Cape Town is this organization called Ikamva Labantu. And they work with elders. Many of them are Apartheid survivors. And they are in bed, and they are frail, and there's no money and there are no resources to get them wheelchairs, walkers, commodes. None of this. And so, one of Afya's collections is end-of-life supplies. And we trust Ikamva to send us a list of what is needed that is collected by their community health workers. So, we send containers of the supplies so that their community nurses and their visiting healthcare workers can deliver these supplies. Help these elders who survived Apartheid and are now frail, to be able to come out of their home and sit in community and get to the hospital when they need it. But it is about what do you need and how can we support your distribution on the ground, one home at a time.

PERLMAN:

And it gives our donors the feeling that their supplies are getting where they're supposed to. I think so much charity over the last years is about collecting supplies and sending them to places around the world, and they end up on boats and barges and they never distribute. And I think one of the things that is very important for our donors, the Afya donors, is they're knowing that their supplies are getting somewhere specific. That there's a receiver and that the supplies are not going to be wasted. And I think that is maybe the most compelling case to our donors.

BUTIN:

I agree with you. We're tenacious about that. We are not partnering with folks who do not have integrity, number one. And number two, they are doing the lion's share of the work on the ground. And they are going to clear, they're going to give us reports, and they're going to send photographs of the work in action.

PERLMAN:

And it's very exciting when you see the logos, and the logos actually getting into the hands of people. Tell us, when the pandemic hit, how did that change the business model of Afya?

BUTIN:

Instantly, our supply donors, the hospitals of New York, became the recipients. We had stockpiled some PPE. We learned our lesson from Ebola, that we needed to have some PPE in house for any disaster. And we helped the hospitals of New York for a while. The whole time was shocking and terrifying. And then, Lee, you and I spoke, and I said to you where we needed the most. And you said you've got to go to the community. The community is in big trouble. And we went to the federally qualified health centers, and we went to the food pantries that couldn't open because they didn't have PPE. And all of a sudden, we're part of the community-based thread of New York. And all of these agencies were calling us and we were able to support them.

And one of my favorite moments was Harlem United, a federally qualified health center, thought proactively. And when we called them and said, "What do you need? How can we help you?" They said not only do we need PPE, but if you can get us crutches, walkers, wheelchairs, then our clients will not fall and they won't be in a COVID ER if they don't fall. And it was such a beautiful way of seeing, while we were all living in terror, for you to guide us to the community. And we've stayed there.

PERLMAN:

I think the other thing that's been very important is during all of these challenges, whether they're international or domestic, we have so many politicians and communities who all want to jump on board. They all want to do good, and they all want to take credit for doing good, and God bless them, let them take credit for doing good. But what I think Afya has done, and done like nobody else, has created an organizational construct around charity. So that people know that if they're giving, it's actually giving to the right people, the right place, the right timing. And if a politician is involved, then God bless politicians who are pushing this type of stuff. They can feel some length of pride that what they are pushing for is actually being accomplished. So, that has happened.

And you know what? The other thing that happened during the pandemic is that we truly became an international organization. It was an international organization that had the United States as the domestic organization giving internationally, and it now became a truly international organization during the pandemic. And I think that's great. So now, as Afya is racing to this next generation of work, and it certainly has a great proud legacy, where do you see the next 10 years, next 20 years? Where do you see the expansion? And, by the way, if you just said to me you're going to keep doing what you're doing, that is God's work. But that's not good enough for you. So, tell us a little bit more of what your vision is for the future.

BUTIN:

So, our vision is that we will be working with every healthcare institution on the recovery and donation of supplies in New York. And this will become a program and a center of excellence in this effort in the United States, that's one. Two is that we are going to deeply strengthen our health system strengthening efforts in the Caribbean and in sub-Saharan Africa, where there's a crisis every single day. People don't have the supplies they need to provide basic primary care, and we want to change that and have a flow of inventory

going to support daily care needs. The third is that we are committed to supporting and growing our local handprint. You know, community agencies have stayed with us in New York. We are supporting their needs. They turn to us constantly. That has not changed since COVID, and that is growing, and we are a place to turn for disasters. We do beautiful work during a time of disaster. We support the healthcare infrastructure. And we stay, Lee, we're still in Ukraine. We are still their go-to for many teams and for many sites of hospital-based care. We're not leaving. We're needed and I think that we are going to deepen our efforts in each of these areas. But it begins with us deepening our connections and our donations from New York so the rest can grow.

PERLMAN:

So, somebody listening to this podcast, how can they get involved? How can they reach out to Afya if they're working in a hospital? If they're a community-based organization, what's the best way of getting in touch?

BUTIN:

The best way of getting in touch to begin is probably through info at afyafoundation.org. We will make sure that the correct point of contact for the question receives the inquiry. We are eager to expand our donation efforts of supplies and we need financial support to grow in the way that we plan. Shipping is expensive, air and sea, and it is worth every moment of effort. The impact we have on 1.5 million lives every year, us working together, is impacting people we will never know. And I don't think there's any better form of giving than that.

PERLMAN:

We should give some credit to some of the real wealthy people of New York. People who actually own planes, who have access to planes through our friends at UJA-Federation, who have really stepped up over the last years to bring big shipments without asking for any compensation or credit. And I think that's been, you know, very, very positive. I for one am very proud of our relationship with Afya, proud of our relationship with you, and I think this is one of the more meaningful things that Greater New York can do. And one of the more meaningful things our hospitals can do. So, on to the next generation, on to the next book. But for anybody who is listening to this podcast, I hope this energized you to actually take some action. There's a piece of action that every one of us can take to help people around the world. So, thank you for listening.

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BASTINELLI:

As one of Afya's dedicated staff members says in *Wild Hope Now*, the future is bright orange. Visit afyafoundation.org to purchase a copy of *Wild Hope Now* or learn more about how to get involved with Afya's mission. Until next time, this has been *Perspectives*.