



Doors Swinging Open

By **FRANK BRUNI**

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Like many college freshmen, Energy Maburutse is adjusting to a new world. For him it's not merely strange. More like wondrous.

That ceaselessly humming appliance in his dorm-room window? In Zimbabwe he had never seen an air-conditioner. That sweet treat in the student cafeteria? Frozen yogurt is another first — and one reason he has almost gained his freshman 15 already. He now weighs about 80 pounds.

Most amazing to him is the electric wheelchair in which he spends his waking hours. It's nicer by far than any from his past. Because of it and the ramps and automatic doors at [Lynn University](#) here, he can move his hunched, twisted body from place to place without constantly asking for help. That, too, is a revelation.

"I can't stop smiling," he told me. "I'm free."

To meet him is to get a crucial reference point for what we in America call hardship and an example of how profoundly a life can be changed by the right intervention and the right determination. His is a miserable story that became a miraculous one.

He was born 21 years ago in a rural village in Zimbabwe that still doesn't have electricity or plumbing. Crippled, he never walked, so his mother would carry him four hours to the nearest medical clinic. It was a trip they made often, because his bones kept breaking.

The clinic's workers berated and even slapped her, certain she was being negligent. In reality Energy had [osteogenesis imperfecta](#), known as brittle bone disease, but it wasn't diagnosed until he was 5.

He didn't know there was such a thing as a wheelchair until he got one two years later at a school for disabled children where his mother, intent on his education, managed to place him. The school was far from home. Saying goodbye, his mother told him: "Make me proud."

He was at another such school, [King George VI](#), in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, when my friend [Elinor Burkett](#), an American journalist, happened to meet him in 2006. The school's band, Liyana, caught her attention

and deeply touched her, and she got to know its members, including three disabled boys who played marimba — Energy, Goodwell and Honest.

They confessed a fantasy: college in America. It was like “an ant dreaming of becoming King of the jungle,” Energy wrote in a recent class assignment. Burkett connected them with the [United States Achievers Program](#), administered by embassies. It helps disadvantaged foreigners apply to, and get scholarships from, American universities.

Each boy was admitted to a school, and Burkett lobbied each school for as much aid as possible. She hit up friends, strangers and foundations for the additional thousands necessary for the boys’ living expenses, a process she’ll repeat until all three have diplomas.

People are generous when faced with concrete situations rather than abstract causes. At Lynn University faculty members and students made sure Energy got a television and a mini-fridge. One of Burkett’s friends pays for his iPhone. His wheelchair was donated by [UCP Wheels for Humanity](#); United Parcel Service delivered it free. His Kindle he won in a card game.

Around campus almost everyone greets him by name. He stands out, given the big chair and tiny body in it. His legs are stuck in a lotuslike position; he can’t straighten them all the way. He has no idea how tall he is.

Over the years his spine has curved badly. Some of his vital organs are compressed. With painful corrective surgery he could live a long life, and he hopes to get an operation this summer, from a doctor at Johns Hopkins Medical Center whom Burkett took him to see. Now that he has medical insurance through school, it just might happen.

He studies hard and frets all the time. He can’t fail, not if he wants to realize his goal of a job as a human rights advocate — maybe with the United Nations, maybe with Unicef — and of some sort of arrangement by which he can live in America or anywhere but Zimbabwe, where there are no ramps, astronomical unemployment and unfathomable poverty.

He told me that he’s surprised by the casual work habits of many of his fellow students. “Americans are so relaxed,” he told me. “So rich.”

He pointed to a mop leaning against his room wall. Like most mops in this country, it can be wrung by a sliding mechanism on the handle. He thinks that’s hysterical — absurd. In Zimbabwe everyone wrings mops with their hands.

He had just returned from a class in which he’d given a presentation on global warming, a phenomenon he hasn’t thought much about. In Zimbabwe other issues, like hunger, crowd it out.

I asked him if anything about his new life disappointed him. He stared blankly at me. To him, the question made no sense whatsoever. •