

## Projects for Peace grant winners to help expand voter turnout in Liberia

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Friends and classmates Emmanuel Gweamee '20 (R) and Aime Laurent Twizerimana '20 (L) have been awarded a Davis Projects for Peace grant to help expand voting for vulnerable populations in Liberia. (University photo: Jim Mandelaro)

Emmanuel Gweamee '20 was 9 years old when he began having sharp pains in his legs. Soon, it was difficult even to walk. But there was little his parents could do. It was 2003, and their country, Liberia, was recovering from 14 years of civil war.

“People thought I had polio,” Gweamee says. “But my family was displaced, and we had no means to visit a hospital.”

Gweamee’s parents eventually found a cane for their son, and he used it until he was able to switch to crutches in 2012. Last fall, 13 years after his pains began, he visited his first real hospital—the University of Rochester’s Strong Memorial Hospital.

“They took a lot of x-rays and said I might have had infections in my legs that caused damage to the bone,” Gweamee says. “I have difficulty moving my right leg, and it doesn’t function as well as my left does. I feel pain when I’ve walked a long distance.”

Gweamee’s condition inspired him to join with classmate Aime Laurent Twizerimana '20 to launch “Hope Restoration Initiative: Disabled Liberian Youth, Civic Education, and Political Participation.” The project was chosen by a University committee for national consideration and has been awarded a [Davis Projects for Peace](#) grant worth \$10,000.

For one week in July, Gweamee and Twizerimana, a native of Rwanda, will visit the Liberian capital of Monrovia to teach voting-age young people with disabilities about their civic responsibilities and the process for the nation's general elections in October. They also will create a plan to transport the youths to voting sites on election day.

According to a census conducted in 2008, 16 percent of the Liberian population had some form of disability.

"The main purpose is to make them understand their civic responsibilities," Gweamee says of the youths. "Many times, disabled people in general are excluded in major decision making activities." The upcoming election is an opportunity for them "to raise their voices and create awareness."

Gweamee notes that political participation among young voters is especially important. "We want disabled youth to participate in the developmental process and the peace building initiative of Liberia, a country that is still recovering from the impact of the civil war," he says.

Gweamee is a dual major in environmental science and international relations, and Twizerimana studies chemical engineering. They plan to use the \$10,000 grant to pay for equipment for their workshop and to fund transportation on the day of the elections.

"We hope we can organize a system to drive these people to and from the voting booths," Twizerimana says. "We'll have a team on the ground organizing it."

Ellen Johnson Sirleaf is completing her second six-year term as president of Liberia, and a new president will be elected October 10, along with members of the House of Representatives.

Gweamee plans to share his personal story.

"There are so many young people who feel their disability is holding them back," he says.

Gweamee and Twizerimana met last year while both were enrolled in the Bridge2Rwanda Scholar Program, a 16-month intensive course that prepares African students to apply for scholarships at universities across the globe. They were thrilled to discover both shared a love of philanthropy—and both were headed to Rochester.

"We became friends right away," Twizerimana says.

Gweamee lived in Liberia during the 2005 and 2011 general elections and voted in a senatorial election in 2014. He noticed each time that it was challenging to motivate disabled youths to vote.

"Many disabled people lack the passion to vote because they feel that they're abandoned after the elections process," says Gweamee, a [MasterCard Foundation Scholar](#). "Our goal is to make them feel empowered, that they can make a difference."