

Missionaries of justice

American lawyers partner with African judges on much-needed legal reforms

BY JENNY ROUGH

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American and Ugandan lawyers partner up on a prison project to work out a plea bargain for a remandee.

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When Lauryn Eason arrived at Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Uganda last year, she believed God had answered her prayers. She was 25, about to graduate from Regent University School of Law, and ready to serve as a criminal defense attorney. She moved to Uganda in March 2024 to work in international human rights.

“I wanted boots on the ground,” she recalls.

Luzira sits outside Uganda’s capital, Kampala. The prison, opened in 1927, has a capacity for 600 inmates. But at times it houses over 3,000. Eason could hardly believe her eyes when she stepped off the bus. All she could see was “a sea of yellow.” Prisoners awaiting trial wear yellow shirts and yellow shorts. For a moment, Eason lost heart. Too many people needed help. She knew not all of them would get justice—at least not right away.

The inmates in yellow are called “remandees.” (Convicts typically wear orange.) Remandees have been arrested for a crime but haven’t yet had a trial to determine their guilt or innocence. Uganda doesn’t have a traditional public defender system, so it’s unlikely a lawyer has looked at their cases. Some remandees don’t even know the charges brought against them. The country has no workable bail system either, in part because it’s too difficult to keep track of remandees outside police custody. Many live in villages without proper addresses. So the remandees languish in pretrial detention, waiting for their day in court. That wait can last years, even for petty crimes like the theft of clothing.

Eason was part of a team of lawyers that had come to Luzira to change all that. For the past 15 years, the Sudreau Global Justice Institute, founded at Pepperdine University Caruso School of Law, has partnered with the Ugandan judiciary to bring legal reforms to the country—most notably, plea bargaining. The institute’s founders say the reforms reflect the heart of God, who is just and promotes justice on earth. A healthy legal system opens the door to flourishing for not only individuals but also a culture, a community, a nation, a continent. The movement in Uganda has been so successful that over a dozen other African countries have joined the effort.

On Eason’s second day at Luzira, she was assigned a case involving a female prisoner. The papers in the file were handwritten and difficult to decipher. But from what she could tell, it seemed like a simple case. The prisoner, Rose, had been hired to work as a maid, and her boss had accused her of stealing clothes and money. Rose had signed a confession. (To protect her identity, WORLD agreed not to use her last name.)

Eason’s job that day was to work out a plea bargain—a tool commonly used in Western legal systems but rarely utilized in Africa.

In the United States, plea bargaining keeps the criminal justice system moving. Television shows make it seem like every case goes to trial, but almost no cases actually do. According to the U.S. Sentencing Commission’s 2021 Annual Report, 98% of federal criminal cases are resolved through plea bargaining. The Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates 95% of state criminal cases are resolved this way. But Uganda has a shortage of judges and doesn’t have the resources to hold court every day. So the Ugandan judiciary partnered with the Sudreau Global Justice Institute to adopt a different approach: prison projects.

The projects essentially create a special court session inside a prison, says Cameron McCollum, who directs the institute and organizes the projects. Each includes a mix of Ugandan and American prosecutors, defense attorneys,



Attorneys on a prison project wait outside Luzira Maximum Security Prison in Uganda.

judges, and law students who travel together from location to location by bus. When they arrive at a prison, the group sets up tables and tents in the courtyard. One table is dedicated to prosecutors, the second to defense attorneys, and the third to judges. Everything is done on the spot. McCollum says that approach allows for a cross-cultural, mutual-learning experience.

Ugandan and American lawyers pair up to serve as the defense team. Once they have a grasp of the facts, they walk 20 yards over to the prosecutor’s table and start negotiations. Both sides review the seriousness of the crime, the strength

and weakness of the evidence, and how much time the accused has already served. If all parties agree on a sentence, the lawyers bring the case to the judge’s table for review and approval.

After reading Rose’s file, Eason called her for an interview. It was the first time a lawyer had listened to Rose’s side of the story. As soon as she saw Rose, Eason’s red flag detector went off. *She looks really young*, Eason thought.

Eason had grown up in the Dominican Republic as a missionary kid, in a region known for sex tourism and trafficking. She’d been trained to spot signs of trafficking and had done ministry work in the area. Regent further equipped her through its advocacy work.

Rose had been in prison for three months and had just turned 18. She was

eager to take a plea. Rose admitted she stole money from her boss to buy a bus ticket home. Police arrested her at the bus station. But Eason got the sense that there was more to the story. Eason gently explained she was there to help and needed Rose to be honest.

“I really believe this was the Holy Spirit,” Eason says. “I just felt compelled to ask Rose, ‘How do you know your boss?’”

Rose said her dad had died a year earlier. Her family needed income. A neighbor told Rose that he could get her a job as a maid. The boss, an older woman, was strict, but the money would be good. The job was five hours away from Rose’s village. Eason asked Rose how much the boss paid her. Rose said she was only paid for one week of work. After that, Rose said the woman forced her to clean without pay and wouldn’t

allow her to leave. Textbook domestic labor trafficking, Eason says.

Now Eason faced another legal hurdle. Plea bargaining isn't designed for innocent victims. It's designed for those who are truly guilty. But the thought of leaving Rose in prison until trial so she could prove her innocence was unthinkable. Although the legal reforms had cleared enough case backlog to drop the wait from over five years to about one, it still wasn't fair. Eason gathered with others on the defense team and prayed for Rose. "My emotions were high," Eason recalls. "I thought, I'm the attorney on this case. If this girl doesn't get taken care of, I'm going to lose my mind!"

Danny DeWalt is the executive director of the Sudreau Global Justice Institute and the vice president of Pepperdine University. He's worked with the Ugandan judiciary on promoting access to justice since the early days of the partnership. In many ways, the changes sweeping through Uganda date back to 1999. At the time, DeWalt ran a construction defect law firm in Gig Harbor, Wash. One morning he attended a fundraising event for the International Justice Mission and its efforts to protect impoverished children from slavery. DeWalt immediately knew he wanted to get involved.

His work with IJM led him to Uganda. On one trip, DeWalt visited the northern city of Gulu and learned the courthouse had been shuttered. He began work with the judiciary to reopen it. At the time, DeWalt also served as an adjunct professor at Pepperdine law school, a Christian university about 30 miles west of Los Angeles. During his lectures, he often told his students, "You can do more than just sit in an office. As an American lawyer, you can be engaged in the world!"

Inspired, students soon joined him on trips to Africa to participate in judicial clerkships, and a few of those students brought up plea bargaining. Soon after, Uganda asked Pepperdine to train its brightest legal minds in the art of plea bargaining. It resulted in the founding of the Sudreau Global Justice Institute, and



LEFT: Ugandan remandees awaiting their day in court. RIGHT: Lauryn Eason escorts Rose upon Rose's release from prison.

the partnership with Uganda's government grew from there.

DeWalt says the goal has always been to come alongside Uganda and help its judiciary build capacity where needed. "We don't come in and tell them what to do. We say, 'We have some expertise and perspective, and would love to partner with you, but you know your country and your culture better than we do.'"

DeWalt has visited Uganda's prisons many times, and his heart has always gone out to the remandees in the yellow prison uniforms. "You know they haven't seen justice yet," DeWalt says. "And where justice is missing, people are going to suffer." Certainly, some remandees have committed serious crimes, such as sexual assault, rape, or murder. But DeWalt says it's not uncommon for a fight to break out in the streets, after which the police arrest the whole crowd, including witnesses.

"Imagine if you're falsely accused of something, how badly you would want someone to fight for you," DeWalt says. Remandees who have committed nonviolent crimes, like the theft of a *boda boda* (motorcycle) or vandalism of personal property, are also denied meaningful access to justice.

DeWalt says a healthy justice system gives every person an equal shake, or as we call it in the United States, due process.

Plea bargaining is one way to do that. It's not a perfect solution, and it can carry a stigma. "When you think about bargaining for justice, that doesn't sit right with any of us," DeWalt says. But plea bargaining gets cases into the hands of people who can bring justice faster,



and it gives a guilty person the chance to come clean. "If somebody's guilty, and willing to plead guilty, why would they wait for trial?" DeWalt asks. Instead of wasting time and money, they are incentivized to get mercy and grace on their punishment by an admission.

The implementation of plea bargaining in Uganda has been "a monumental success," according to Supreme Court Chief Justice Alfonse Owiny-Dollo. A prison project alone can resolve between 300 to 400 cases in one week. And with its judiciary now incorporating the practice into court sessions, it's even more. "In its first five years, 35,000 cases were resolved," Owiny-Dollo told me. But the reform wasn't an easy sell. Many Ugandans opposed the idea at first.

"People were full of questions," Owiny-Dollo recalls. "How can you negotiate punishment?" Still, the

judiciary decided to try it, reminding skeptics that other countries used similar systems. Today, Owiny-Dollo says the number of resolved cases exceeds 50,000. But perhaps most importantly, plea bargaining opens the door to reconciliation in a way that a trial doesn't. "An admission of crime is the first step toward healing," Owiny-Dollo says. Once a wrongdoer expresses remorse, it presents an opportunity for that person and the grieved party to go through a process of confession and forgiveness.

Over the years, Ugandan judges and lawyers have visited the United States to watch plea bargaining in action. Michael DiReda is a former prosecutor who now serves as a Utah 2nd District Court judge. In May 2017, Uganda's then-chief justice, Bart Katureebe, shadowed DiReda in his Utah courtroom. "He sat right next to me on the bench," DiReda says. The calendar held a full 70 cases that week, mostly plea bargains. Ugandan judges have visited the U.S. in a similar way more than 20 times, meeting with judges, district attorneys, and public defenders. Armed with knowledge about the logistics, the judges then returned to Africa to continue implementing plea bargaining.

Word has spread. In early 2024, Owiny-Dollo reached out to all African countries to lead an initiative in justice reform. Ghana, Rwanda, and Kenya are three that started to embrace plea bargaining. As of January 2025, 23 African countries have expressed interest in or are currently partnered with Pepperdine for training and implementation strategies.

Legal reforms have also been enthusiastically embraced in civil cases. Last October, supreme court justices, judges, or designees from over a dozen different African countries attended a meeting in Switzerland to mark six months of intensive legal study through Pepperdine's Alternative Dispute Resolution program. ADR resolves civil lawsuits outside court, through mediation, negotiation, and arbitration. Kenya's Chief Justice Martha Koome says ADR in civil cases is as critical as

plea bargaining in criminal cases. It's more affordable and efficient, and it embodies the Biblical principles of peacemaking by empowering the parties to work toward a solution together.

Back in Uganda, Lauryn Eason took Rose's case to the prison project prosecutor and judge. Yes, Rose stole money, Eason said. But she stole money she was owed so she could escape trafficking. However, Rose's boss claimed she had taken much more than she admitted. And that presented a problem. "She could dispute the accusation, but then she'd have to stay in prison and wait for her trial date to present evidence," Eason says.

Rose's case highlights one of the biggest and most frustrating challenges to plea bargaining. Remandees can be tempted to admit to crimes they didn't commit simply to get out of prison. "We need to guard against the process being abused," Owiny-Dollo says, especially in cases where the prosecution doesn't have enough evidence for a conviction. Many remandees lack education or have language barriers or other disadvantages and shouldn't be hurried or pressured to take a deal without an advocate.

A public defender system can combat this problem, and Uganda began testing one in 2019. Until it's ready for widespread use, the country's judiciary continues holding prison projects.

Rose eventually took a plea deal. Her sentence included a stern warning—and release. Even though justice might not have been administered perfectly, Eason felt it was close enough. Rose was safe and soon to be reunited with her family. "It's a reminder that God is the God of justice," Eason says. "We do the best we can on this side of heaven."

The next day, Eason returned to Luzira to personally escort Rose through the prison doors. A taxi sat ready to take her home. "Rose was beaming," Eason says. Before the taxi drove away, Rose rolled down the window, and beckoned Eason over. "I've been praying for months for someone to come and help me," Rose told her. "God sent me an angel." ■