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## **Malawi: Breaking down barriers and opening doors for people with disabilities**

Report from [Jesuit Refugee Service](#)

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Dzaleka, 26 September 2017 - Disability services at Dzaleka Refugee Camp are limited, but Higher Education at the Margins (HEM) alumnus Fidel Musiri is working to fill the gap. In 2011, Fidel was one of the first community members to graduate with a certificate from HEM, an on-site tertiary learning institute jointly implemented by Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL). After graduating from the eight-month Community Service Learning Track (CSLT) in Special Needs, Fidel founded the Umoja People with Disabilities Project and the Respite Care Center, two organizations working toward the betterment of lives for people with disabilities in Dzaleka and its surrounding villages.

Fidel, living with a disability himself, first signed up for the class because he wanted to learn how to eliminate disability discrimination in his community. “We are marginalized in the camp because people don’t understand that we are capable equals,” explains Fidel. Fidel’s classmates, most of whom were parents of children with disabilities, had similar ambitions – to make Dzaleka a more welcoming place for people from all walks of life.

Among other topics, the Special Needs CSLT focused heavily on the rights of people with disabilities, and how to communicate the needs of people with disabilities to the greater community. After graduating, Fidel embarked on a campaign to advocate for the rights of people with disabilities. “My knowledge is certified now. Community members and Implementing Partners take me seriously because of my certificate from HEM,” explains Fidel. With his certificate in hand, Fidel formed Umoja and set out to break down barriers and open doors for people with disabilities.

Umoja is a community-based organization that assists and advocates for people living with disabilities in Dzaleka Refugee Camp and the surrounding Malawian villages. Umoja funds itself by running several income-generating activities, and uses generated funds to assist and support people with disabilities through various projects and services. They run a pig pass-on project, organize clothing distributions, help construct houses, and even assist with prosthetics fittings and clinic referrals.

Umoja contracts community volunteers for individual projects, and has assisted over 500 community members since it was founded. In 2015, Umoja received its Certificate of Incorporation from Malawi’s Ministry of Justice and hopes to continue its disability awareness projects all across the host country. While Fidel and Umoja expand their efforts nationally, they continue to have a strong presence in the camp community, running the Respite Care Center for children with disabilities. The center, sponsored by JRS and staffed by several other HEM alumni, provides day-care services to almost a hundred children in Dzaleka with severe mental and physical disabilities.

Fidel and other graduates from HEM’s Special Needs CSLT are paving the way to a brighter future for people with disabilities in Malawi. “Disability is not an inability. That’s the message I want to spread,” concludes Fidel. “I have a disability and through the Special Needs CSLT I learned how to become an advocate for my community.”

- Nadia Asmal, JRS Higher Education Project Director, Dzaleka Refugee Camp

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