



## Tanzanian Woman With Albinism Gets New Arms

**Specialist Builds Prosthetic Limbs for Mariamu Stafford Who Has Albinism; Was Target of Brutal Attack**

By JOSEPH DIAZ

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On a cold winter evening, a soft-spoken, 28-year-old single mother from rural [Tanzania](#) stepped off a plane at Dulles International Airport outside Washington D.C., with high hopes. The goal of her trip: a shot at life.

It was 28-year-old [Mariamu Stafford](#)'s first time outside of Tanzania; but as she approached customs, an agent wouldn't let her through, claiming she refused to be fingerprinted. It wasn't that she wouldn't, but that she couldn't.

A year ago, both of Stafford's arms were chopped off -- part of a brutal campaign of death in her native country. Men armed with machetes stormed Stafford's hut while she was sleeping, she told ABC News, and began cutting at her arms in a gruesome attempt to amputate them.

[Click here to find out how to help Tanzanians with albinism](#)

[Persons with albinism](#), like Stafford, are being hunted down and murdered; their bodies sold on the black market and used in witchdoctor potions, all because of a superstitious belief that the limbs of albinos possess special powers. Nearly [60 albinos have been murdered](#) in the last three years.

The attack rendered Stafford an invalid. Unable to feed or clothe herself, or care for her young son, she yearned for independence.

"I'm a grown person, but I can't do anything," she told "20/20." "I used to be able to rely on myself, but now my mother must tend to my every need."

Stafford thought her future was bleak. After meeting her last year, "[20/20](#)" helped mobilize a group of volunteers, who affectionately became known as "Team Mariamu," to bring Stafford to the U.S. Leading the team was Vicky Ntetema, a Tanzanian journalist-turned-advocate, who bravely first exposed Stafford's tragedy.

Eventually, a customs manager, who saw "20/20's" initial report about the grotesque

phenomenon of albino killings, allowed Stafford into the country.

Stafford's first stop was an appointment with Elliot Weintrob, the president of the Orthotic Prosthetic Center in Virginia, who would build a [custom set of prosthetic limbs](#) for Stafford -- free of charge.

"You can't turn the other way when you see something like [Stafford's gruesome attack]. You got to say, 'What can I do here to help?'" Weintrob said. "I don't think I had a choice. I see and hear a lot of things, but this went right to the top."

## **New Limbs, New Hope**

Weintrob and his staff donated their time to make Stafford a custom set of prosthetic limbs. It's a painstaking process of measuring and readjusting, where precision is a must. Double amputations, typically the fallout of war, are rarely seen in this county, but Weintrob and his team begin to recreate what was taken from Stafford.

Weintrob built a basic prosthetic with hooks on the end to give Stafford the most functionality. She must use the muscle in the stump of her arm to control the hooks.

When Weintrob was putting on the final touches, Stafford asked him through an interpreter: "Are these my real arms or are you still testing?"

"These are the arms you will take home," he replied.

No translation was needed; Stafford broke out in dance and song. After 14 months of misery, it was everything she had waited for.

"The arms will me do things I never thought I could do again," she said. "I'm going to be independent!"

**[CLICK HERE](#) to see photos of Stafford through her journey.**

## **Learning How to Use Her New Arms**

To help her become independent again, Stafford visited Rashaan Holley, an occupational therapist at the National Rehabilitation Hospital and another angel on Team Mariamu.

Stafford had only a few days to master what most people learn over the course of months. Just learning how to put the prosthetics on seemed virtually impossible. At first she struggled, but eventually was able to put them on without assistance.

Her sessions went beyond the mechanics of her artificial limbs, testing the limits of her stamina and the depths of her determination. She had to relearn how to do everything -- even the most simple, everyday tasks including picking up objects, using utensils,

opening doors, getting dressed, and above all, learning again how to feed herself.

The process was grueling, but Staford never complained, celebrating every small accomplishment.

"I'm very happy and so grateful for everything," she told ABC News' Juju Chang. "The arms don't hurt, but even if I feel pain I will through it because I know that these arms can help me."

## **Staford Finds a Surrogate American Family**

During her ten day trip, Staford and her nurse, Joyce Kigembe, and Ntetema, were welcomed into the home of Kitty DeWitt, a member of NOAH, a national albinism organization, who raised two now-adult children with albinism. The group quickly became a family, spending evenings singing and dancing. Kigembe said Staford has done more for them, than they for her.

"I'm not a forgiving person. I carry a grudge, but after all Mariamu went through in life and she still forgives, it's really touched my heart and made me see life differently," said Kigembe.

Between appointments, Staford partied with the local albinism community; she tried new foods with mixed results -- French Fries and hot chocolate were a thumbs up, but donuts and cheesecake were less appealing.

"She has this sense of humor that's extraordinary given the trauma that she's endured," DeWitt said of Staford, whom she calls her "binti," or daughter.

## **Spreading Awareness on Capitol Hill**

While in the U.S., Staford became a powerful advocate spreading awareness at the highest level -- Capitol Hill. Along with Ntetema and NOAH members, Staford met with Congressman Gerald Connolly, D-Va., to lobby the U.S. government to take action to prevent the albino killings in East Africa.

Less than three months later, Staford's cause made it to the floor of Congress. The House passed a resolution condemning the attacks and called for swift action to end the murders. Only one member voted against the measure.

With seven suitcases bulging with clothes, books and toys -- presents from her new American friends to help her regain some of what she's lost -- Staford's miraculous adventure came to end and she returned to Tanzania a new woman.

With her new arms, Staford is able to write and do housework. She has enrolled in school

to become a professional seamstress. Her entire demeanor has changed.

"Mariamu has not come back with new arms. She has come back with a new spirit, with new zeal. She is a completely new person!" said Anna Nyamubi, a Tanzanian District Commissioner who took Staford into her home after she was evicted from her government-owned home. "Mariamu is ready to face the world!"

When "20/20" first interviewed Staford last year, she had just one ultimate wish: to hold her son. Now, with her new arms, she can proudly lift and hug her 3-year-old boy, Nio.

"Its hope for every person with albinism that even when you lose your limbs, you shouldn't give up," said Ntetema.

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