Giving

A Meeting of Minds
A scholarship sponsor and a recipient share a common dream | BY THEA SINGER

Perhaps the separate paths of Joel Lamstein and Alexis Gitungano—once so far apart—were fated to converge.

Lamstein, 74, born in Brooklyn, N.Y., studied math and physics at the University of Michigan, where—on October 14, 1960—he heard Senator John F. Kennedy introduce the idea of the Peace Corps in an impromptu campaign speech. “He was calling our generation to service, to help the world,” says Lamstein. “It was a life-changing moment for me.”

He heeded the call. In 1978, Lamstein cofounded the Boston-based public health consultancy John Snow, Inc. (JSI), after studying at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, aiming to bring management concepts to public sector issues. Just 34 at the time, he had rarely traveled except between Michigan and New York. “And then the next thing I knew, I was on a plane and getting off in Ghana,” he says with a laugh.

Gitungano (SPH’19), 28, of Burundi, East Africa, fled his war-torn country twice with his mother and three sisters, escaping the genocide that ultimately took most of his mother’s family. Sustained by his Christian faith, he offered his services as a volunteer whenever possible, helping in his church and visiting patients in public hospitals. “I find my purpose by giving,” he says. “There’s a saying, ‘Give until it hurts.’”

In June 2014, with aid from a church in Idaho, Gitungano brought four-year-old Leo—a Burundi boy whose face had been severely burned after he fell into a cooking fire—to Boston for treatment at Shriners Hospital for Children. The surgeries multiplied, and political violence again erupted in Burundi, preventing their return.

“Where is my future going?” Gitungano wondered.

Lamstein and JSI helped provide the answer, and this past spring, Gitungano enrolled in the School of Public Health. Support from the Lamstein Family/JSI Scholarship funds his tuition.

“It’s as if I were walking, and Joel Lamstein stopped and put me in his car,” says Gitungano. “He is giving me a ride to get to my destination.”

After his trip to Ghana, Lamstein never stopped moving. Today JSI has eight offices across the US and employs more than 2,100. Its staff has worked on projects in 106 countries, from developing a supply chain for HIV antiretrovirals in Nigeria to implementing Kangaroo Mother Care, a method for caring for low-birthweight newborns that promotes skin-to-skin contact and breastfeeding, in Ethiopia.

“I’d worked at IBM and could have gone back there after business school,” says Lamstein, who chairs the SPH Dean’s Advisory Board. “But what difference was I going to make? If I were one of the few bringing that skill set to public health, I could work at the population level, making many people’s lives better.”

Gitungano, too, realizes it’s time to expand his reach.

“One of my visions is to start an international health organization, to help many people at once,” he says. “Education is key to getting there.”