

**Interview with the first blind radio journalist in Rwanda, Léonidas Ndayisaba
(realised by his colleague Prudent Nsengiyumva)**

Please describe your work; what do you do exactly at Radio Salus?

At Radio Salus I produce a song requests programme. I work twice a week. And every time I find a call-in one hour slot in my programme and choose a social topic or subject that I discuss with listeners across the country and other parts of neighbouring Burundi.

The subjects I pick are related to health, Rwandan culture and relationship among people in communities. My choices of topics are based on what I hear from people's experiences and the daily struggles they go through in their villages. People from all walks of life - youth, old, women and men - give their contributions using phone calls and short messages, and always give suggestions of solutions to the problems we discuss on the radio.

Recently, we were discussing about traditional medicine practice in Rwanda. Many people in this country, especially in rural areas, still trust and go to traditional doctors rather than modern medicine. Many listeners called and gave different views on this issue. For the moment that's what I do on Radio Salus.

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What kind of messages from the blind community do you read on air?

In Rwanda there are some blind people who went to school, but the only writing they can read is Braille. Those people don't get equal chances and opportunities to get their voices heard on the radio. So, I help them gather their greeting messages since I know how to read the Braille writing.

The song request and greeting show on radio Salus is one of the most popular shows, and people like it. Blind people felt left behind because they could not send their greetings. From the time they first heard me on the radio Salus, every week I get piles of greeting messages from blind people to read on air.

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How important is the role of Radio Salus for blind and other people with disabilities?

Radio Salus gives them value. Normally Rwandan society rejects and shuns disabled people, especially the blind. Salus is exceptional because it gave me this opportunity regardless my disability. I think that only few institutions can accept to give a chance like this. Thus, this encourages other people with disabilities to have self-confidence in themselves.

I think it's a good message that Radio Salus sent across to other institutions that blind people are skilled like others and we can make a difference in our lives. Blind people can be well educated and smart. As some employers do not think that people with disabilities can have knowledge and use it, such persons often loose hope, which affects them badly, because they feel to be behind the society. It's important that Radio Salus sticks to its objectives, it's a community radio and people with disabilities are part of that community.

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On a personal level, how important is your job for you? How has your life changed since you started working for Radio Salus?

The first important thing is that I got to know many people and they knew me, particularly other journalists. Working for Salus gave me confidence in my future. I hope even to be able to work for international radio stations in the future, after my graduation.

Before I started working at Salus, I used to listen to the radio and thought I would never be able to speak in the microphone. But today I'm used to it and the only difference with other journalists is that they can see and I don't.

Another thing is that people who found the blind useless before are now progressively changing their opinion. Even though I'm blind I can do something positive for the society.

As a student I learn many theories in class but they can't help me without practice. Salus gave me an opportunity to apply my knowledge and to acquire a new one, through a hands-on training, which is crucial for my future career.

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How did you get your job at Radio Salus?

I liked journalism very much since I was young. After being admitted to the National University of Rwanda, I thought the only thing I could study was journalism. However, the challenges for people who have difficulties to see like me were obvious. On the contrary to the television and newspapers though, I thought radio could be easier because it uses sounds.

Then I learned that the University has a radio station, Radio Salus, which helps students in practical training. I immediately asked the authorities whether they could give me a chance to work at this station. And fortunately I was accepted. I started in March 2008 and the radio staff helped me get familiar with the station. I'm used now to the work in the studio and wish to get involved in the production of other programmes. I would like to create a special show, exclusively dedicated to people with disabilities.

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Do you interact with other reporters from Radio Salus? If yes, in what ways and on which topics?

I really enjoy socialising and interacting with other Radio Salus reporters. Most of the time, we talk about sport, Rwandan culture and politics. I like discussing about football news with them because I play football myself. When we discuss and comment on different things, this helps me to be up-to-date with the news. They are more than my colleagues - they are my special friends. They understand me very well and tirelessly help me whenever I need.

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Do you know other journalists who are blind?

I head people saying that in some developed countries there are blind journalists; personally I don't know anyone in Rwanda. I think I am the only blind person to be working on the radio. One of the reasons behind this lack of representation is that even studying in same institutions with other people is new in our country.

Now we can be accepted in public schools and study with others who don't have any disabilities, but it was a serious problem before. And though we still have difficulties, I hope it's a good starting point and slowly, but surely, people will get to understand that we are as important as the rest of citizens.

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