

A young advocate in Africa gains new independence, thanks to the CPD

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Jacques Zongo with his new wheels

This week in West Africa, a young man is trying out his motorized wheelchair for the first time. He joins with the Utah Assistive Technology Program in thanking the people who made it possible.

“My new wheelchair has changed my life,” said Jacques Zongo, who lives in Burkina Faso. “I am not always asking for help from friends to go somewhere. It’s like I got new feet. ... I am not psychologically feeling my disability, hurting me all the time.” It was painful and discouraging when he wanted to go somewhere and could not get there on his own, he said. “Today I don’t think that will be the same. This wheelchair will help me to overcome my disability.”

Zongo has advocated for the rights of people with disabilities in Africa through the Mouvement Panafricain Pour la Défense Des Droits des Personnes Handicapées (Pan-African Movement for the Defense of Rights of Handicapped People). Until recently he used a manual wheelchair, asking friends to help push him over long distances.

In an earlier interview, Zongo said it was very hard to get a motorized wheelchair where he lives because nobody made them locally. He reached out to the UATP in Salt Lake City (formerly CReATE) via Facebook, after talking to Isamael Traore, another wheelchair user from Burkina Faso. Traore was one of a delegation of people from many countries who met UATP’s Salt Lake City Coordinator, Tom Boman, during a site visit with the Utah Council for Citizen Diplomacy in 2015. At the time, Boman tuned up Traore’s wheelchair and sent some extra wheels back with him.

Zongo asked if UATP could help him get a motorized wheelchair. The Salt Lake facility did have a motorized chair that would fit his needs, but getting it to Burkina Faso was a greater hurdle. UATP turned to Matthew Wappett, executive director of the Center for Persons with Disabilities, for advice. Wappett and UATP staff members then asked their own personal contacts to help raise private donations to pay for the shipping. (UATP is part of the Center for Persons with Disabilities at Utah State University.)

UATP staff members also turned to Natalie Moore, a former Peace Corp worker who knew Ismael. Moore served as an interpreter with Zongo, whose first language is French. She helped make sure the wheelchair was suited to his needs and to the environment where it would be used. She also started Yembre, an organization focused on helping people with disabilities find transportation in Burkina Faso, and a [gofundme page](#) dedicated to raising money for Jacques and others with transportation needs in his country. Moore also helped find a way to transport the chair to Burkina Faso.

The shipping was paid for entirely through privately raised funds. The largest donation came from [Visiting Angels of Salt Lake City](#), which contributed \$1000 to the project. “We’re excited to help people in need throughout the world,” said Bruce Allison, the company’s director.

Boman lent his time and expertise as well. Between the fundraising, distance and the logistics of shipping the chair, it took many months to complete. “It’s great to know that the wheelchair is finally doing Jacques some good,” Boman said.

Zongo is hoping for a scholarship that would allow him to study international relations outside of Burkina Faso. “Most of the studies in the public university [in Burkina Faso] lead students to teach after earning their degrees,” he said. “But disabled students cannot do that, so they cannot find a job after their degree.” Through his advocacy work he met a friend who now lives in the UK. That is where Zongo hopes to finish his education.

“Thank you, a billion thanks yous to you, to my great friend Tom, to Matthew, to all the team of UATP, to Natalie, to the lovely people of Utah, to all the American people, to Ismael Traore for connecting me with Natalie, to all my friends in the UK, France, Burkina Faso and everywhere in Africa,” Zongo said. “I will hold you all in my heart, all the time, all my life.”

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