

# James Benedict

Star Tribune Cover Letter

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“Mzungu, you’re famous now,” the group of boda boda drivers shouted at me laughing and pointing to their radios. Mzungu, a Bantu term for foreigner, became my unofficial name the month I spent reporting on **HIV in Kalangala** for the Daily Monitor, Uganda’s largest independent newspaper.

The drivers finally had an answer to why three Americans were hiking across their island. I had just made my debut on Radio Ssesse talking about my time reporting on the island’s HIV medication shortage.

Despite thousands of people in HIV treatment on the island, the National Medical Store shipped the local clinic medicine weeks away from expiration. I was shocked with the lack of accountability securing drugs so many depended on to survive.

Alongside the few journalists I was traveling with, I went to the local clinic where we found piles unsecured trash bags holding nearly expired medicine. We used this firsthand reporting later that day to confront the district health official who continued to claim shortages weren’t foreseeable.

Without being there ourselves we would have never discovered how the story was different from what it looked like on paper back in the capital city. Back home in school I was taught to be there and bear witness. This interview cemented that value in me.

My time in Uganda reassured me of the value journalist play in improving people’s lives. While my current home may be in Indiana, I was born and raised a Texan. I moved after my father lost his job due to **Enron’s fraud and collapse**. Driving to Indiana I wished someone had been there earlier to keep Enron accountable and my family in Houston.

Given the opportunity to work for the Star Tribune I would bring an unmatched dedication to verifying facts and keeping those in power accountable. I hope to use my data visualization and analysis tools to shine a light on abuses of power by making otherwise inscrutable subjects intuitively understandable.

I was never meant to spend my time in Uganda on Kalangala, but I knew I had to go when I heard about the stories there. I also felt compelled to cover an area that normally didn’t warrant Ugandan national coverage. The islands make up one of Uganda’s poorest and smallest district, allowing bureaucratic mistakes to go under reported. It was rewarding to cover a story I thought hadn’t been publicized enough.

If I had remained in the capital with the other interns I could have never uncovered the proof I needed for my story or found the people most effected by it. Only by being there to bare witness with my own eyes did I get the real story.

I try to never loose site of this when covering stories back in the States. Many of the stories I work on are data driven and it could be easy to forget the value of getting up from behind my computer screen. Luckily I think back to confronting a lying bureaucrat with photographic proof of my question or being thanked by a patient for traveling so far out of my way to cover her story, and I realize burning a little boot leather is always worth it.