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Mr. Mike makes some new friends

At 89, he welcomes African roommates

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A note from Susan: Of all the stories I wrote in the summer of 2006, as I followed readers' directions on where to go and whom to meet, this tale of an old man taking in two young African basketball players is my personal favorite. It struck me as rare and sweet.

This is a safe guess: Mr. Mike is the only 89-year-old white guy in America who shares his home, rent-free, with two African basketball players young enough to be his great-grandchildren.

Sal Kabara is 22 years old, 6-foot-6 and speaks nine languages.

Jerry Follot is 21 years old, 6-foot-8 and speaks seven languages.

Maurice Michael, whom everyone calls Mr. Mike, is 5-foot-7. Languages? He jokes: "I have trouble with one."

Their arrangement is just 3 months old. Yet in the bland, pale mid-Michigan village of Roscommon, the vivid trio lives a beautiful bargain in perfect harmony.

They shower in the same bathroom, watch the same TV, cook in the same kitchen and share a round old oak table where, for too long, Mr. Mike ate alone.

"They can't make me any younger," Mr. Mike says at the table of his new friends. "But I feel younger with them around."

Jerry says he and Sal are devoted to Mr. Mike, using a word that surprises the old man: "It doesn't matter what he asks for. We have to do it for him, because we love him."

Most of the day they're away - at class, or running, lifting weights and shooting baskets. They will start as forwards with the Kirtland Community College Firebirds when the season begins in November. Jerry sat out last year, but Sal ranked among the top 25 players in the junior-college system in America.

Most evenings, however, they're home, and often with friends. Nobody signed a contract. Mr. Mike set no rent and no rules, in exchange for a simple thing that's precious to elderly people.

It's called company.

How did this happen? Vicki Springstead suggested I look into it. She lives on nearby Higgins Lake and knows Mr. Mike from the Roscommon gym, where he walks laps almost every day around the court where Jerry and Sal work out.

"The threesome makes a very nice picture," she told me. She called Mr. Mike "inspiring for his ability, at 89, to be open to new experiences, like having housemates who are one-fourth his age."

Both young men came of age in the Central African Republic, one of the poorest countries, 500 miles north of the equator, where life expectancy is 44 years. That's an age Mr. Mike passed half a lifetime ago.

Jerry is the son of a commercial pilot who brought his family to Washington, D.C., five years ago when he became a diplomat. His father no longer serves as one.

Sal's father is deceased, and his mother makes a living doing embroidery in Africa. An African fan of Sal's basketball skills paid his way to the United States.

Both have ambitions to join the pros, or at least a big college team. In 2004, they attended a so-called prep school in Petoskey to improve their English, but did too poorly on their SATs to get into a four-year school. Coach Glen Donahue at Kirtland, who has had players from Brazil, Uzbekistan and Lithuania on his team, heard about them from a friend and recruited them to Roscommon, where he expects they'll earn associates degrees this year and be recruited to the big time.

Mr. Mike had lived alone for four years, since the death of Muriel, his wife of 60 years. This past winter Mr. Mike worked hard to recover after a kid playing basketball at the gym backed into him, knocking him down and out.

"I broke my back in three places and caved my head in," he says, showing off a flat spot on his almost bald scalp.

For a few months he stayed at a local nursing home, where at least he had somebody to talk to. When he returned to his modest house, its loneliness weighed him down like a heavy winter coat.

The only noises he heard were his own. Nobody and nothing ever surprised him.

"I'm looking for somebody to stay with me," he began to tell everyone he knew. He said the same words over the phone to his only child, a son in Utica, who, busy with his work, can visit only once or twice a year.

Silence.

"My son thought I was talking about a woman, and I let him think that," Mr. Mike says, chuckling.

He hoped he could get help, too. Not that he needs much. He's half blind, from an eye accident 50 years ago, but you wouldn't know it. His hearing his perfect. He drives with ease.

And he walks well after deciding, following his accident: "If I want to live, I have to keep moving."

That includes keeping his mind open to anything.

One day on the gym floor, Coach Donahue, who knew of Mr. Mike's mission, introduced him to Jerry Follot.

Hours later, Coach pulled his car into Mr. Mike's dirt driveway and dropped off Jerry and his two suitcases.

Mr. Mike showed him to his room, a big space off the kitchen that he and his wife once used as a family room.

Mr. Mike didn't care about Jerry's race or culture. After all, even in Roscommon, which is 96% white, a neighbor once had a dark-skinned Puerto Rican girlfriend. "It don't matter to me," he says. "We all bleed the same."

A week after Jerry moved in, his pal Sal showed up. Mr. Mike could see they were friends and let it be.

"I knew he would like us," Sal says, "because we're not bad people. We're not smoking or drinking. And we give our elders respect."

Mr. Mike, though, wanted fun. "At first," he remembers, "we didn't joke around much. But I got after them. Now it's getting around to where they joke back with me."

"Now," says Jerry, grinning, "we play with Mr. Mike."

Both athletes say Mr. Mike's place surpasses the rental homes they shared last year with teammates. To pay their rent, they had to work maintenance jobs on campus. Here, they get cable (paying Mr. Mike \$11 a month for extra channels they wanted) and watch movies on Mr. Mike's living room TV.

The arrangement is perfectly legal: Mr. Mike has never attended a men's basketball game. And, he's watching expenses, saying he'll ask the guys for cash if they end up costing him too much. As it is, they buy their own food - "Mr. Mike's milk is too thin," Sal says.

"Living with Mr. Mike is nice," Jerry says, "because he doesn't mind our friends. We just shut his bedroom door and tell our friends to keep it quiet."

He teases them about their loud music - "boom, boom, boom! And the walls shake!" - but lets that be, too. Nor does he mind that they've tacked posters to the paneling in their room: basketball posters of their hero Michael Jordan, plus a few of almost naked women.

"What do you expect?" Mr. Mike says. "They're young men."

Their hours are erratic. He's never sure when they'll be home. At noon he might eat a potpie while they stir up mac and cheese for themselves.

Sometimes their young women friends cook chicken and rice for all of them.

They help him in unexpected ways. Sal washes dishes every noon and night, unasked. Sal washed the walls and ceiling of their room. They mow Mr. Mike's grass.

"I'm warming up the snow shovel for you," he tells them, and they shiver in mock fear.

They also cleaned out the garage where, just outside the door to their room, Jerry practices on an old upright piano, playing "Jingle Bells" and "Claire de Lune" and other simple songs he's learning in a piano class.

Mr. Mike is amazed to see the instrument come back to life. "It hasn't been tuned," he says, "since 1937."

The young men from Africa have one gentle complaint: their beds. Jerry's feet hang well over his standard twin. Sal slept for a month on the floor on a thin mat he brought with him, until Mr. Mike ordered a \$105 queen air mattress from a catalog. A gift.

All three agree, though, that the pair spends little time in those beds, rising before dawn to run and work out. At night, says Mr. Mike, "sometimes they don't come home until 2 or 3 in the morning."

He doesn't mind waking up for a moment as they open the fridge for a drink of pop, or cross the living room in the dark to take a shower.

"Sometimes," he shrugs and smiles, "they forget to come home."

Mr. Mike was young once, too.