

Keeping to the flight plan

With the help of his Embry-Riddle education, Tom O-lalobo ('68, DB) maps out a successful course in life

When Tom O-lalobo ('68, DB) attended Embry-Riddle in 1967, he thought he would just learn how to fly. But for the past 42 years, he has used that education to help him persevere through many challenges in his life, including, among other things, raising eight children, surviving exile from his home country and becoming a successful entrepreneur.

"The skills I learned to be a pilot at Embry-Riddle changed my life," says O-lalobo, who is from Gulu, a large district in northern Uganda. "They taught me to be more aware of what everyone else is doing and to realize how all the parts work together."



Tom O-lalobo is teaching others to produce crops like those on his property in Gulu (above).

HIS CAREER TAKES OFF

At first, all the parts of O-lalobo's career plan were working together as expected. In just one year, he completed the advanced Professional Pilots program at Embry-Riddle through the USAID program offered by East African Airways. "I attended as one of the first East Africans to be trained as a pilot for the commercial airlines," O-lalobo explains. "One year later, I became a pilot for East African Airways and flew DC-9s and other jets."

But O-lalobo's commercial flying career was short-lived because of the conflicts between Uganda and Tanzania, which eventually led to the Uganda-Tanzania War. "When a military coup took over the government in Uganda, I left the airline and joined the government of Tanzania," O-lalobo says. "I became a corporate pilot and flew senior government officials and other dignitaries."

He tried to return home in 1985, but soon discovered that it wasn't safe to stay there with his family. "Because my family was in politics in Uganda, we suffered a lot and I knew we couldn't stay there," explains O-lalobo, who lost several family members in the war. "I didn't see a future for raising my children there, so we moved to the United Kingdom."

While a difficult decision, O-lalobo, ever the pilot, waxed aeronautical about his options. "Life is like flying—we must plan well, know our destination airport and possible emergency landing areas, in case things don't go as planned," he says.

THE NEXT CHAPTER

For the next 20 years, Europe was the emergency landing area for O-lalobo, his wife, Rose, and their eight young children. "Life was very difficult for us there with such a large, young family," O-lalobo says. "Although my kids grew up in Europe instead of Africa, we stayed close together and managed to bring them up well."

By Ashlee (Fiser) Ilg ('03, DB)



Left: While hosting dinner at his house in Gulu, Tom O-lalobo (left) was surprised to meet a fellow Embry-Riddle alum, Daneen Leidig ('98, DB), who was serving as a volunteer in the area.

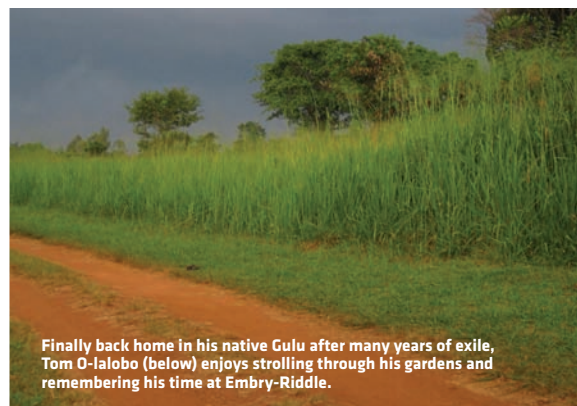
Today, the O-lalobo family has returned to Gulu and is helping rebuild their society. "After 25 years of conflict and war, our people have suffered a lot," O-lalobo explains. "I am working to develop entrepreneurial skills to help others learn to enterprise. We have to bring this country out of such levels of dependence."

To date, he has helped his wife open a bakery to provide Gulu and the surrounding districts with fresh bread. "We are now the bread supplier in Gulu, with the next closest bakery 300 kilometers away," O-lalobo says proudly. "Everyone likes it and it keeps my wife busy."

Other family members are getting into the act too. His son Tom has opened a café, another son, Obadiah, has started a food processing business, and his son Apolo is working toward developing an agricultural program for the community. "I'm very proud of my kids, and I'm working to teach others in Uganda to produce crops as well," he says.

LIFE COMES FULL CIRCLE

With all this family business activity, O-lalobo still makes time to enjoy finally being back home in Gulu. "It is much more relaxed



Finally back home in his native Gulu after many years of exile, Tom O-lalobo (below) enjoys strolling through his gardens and remembering his time at Embry-Riddle.



here, and not as hectic as it is in Europe and America. It is nice to sit back and remember the 'good old days.'"

In fact, while hosting a dinner at his home for a group of Americans, he was reminiscing about those good old days at Embry-Riddle when he was surprised to meet another alumnus, Daneen Leidig ('98, DB), who was serving as a volunteer with the Invisible Children's Teacher Exchange Program.

"During dinner, he said he learned to fly at Embry-Riddle. I almost jumped in front of him!" Leidig exclaims. "We were like instant best friends."

Leidig is looking forward to her return visit to spend time with her new-found fellow alum and his family. "I'm planning to go back to Uganda for a year," she explains. "Tom and his family are so welcoming that I feel like I have family over there."

Tom hopes that he and Rose will visit his Embry-Riddle family, too, someday. "I enjoyed the time I spent in the U.S. and still remember a lot of my flights," he says. "Rose and I want to travel all over and, of course, visit the Daytona Beach Campus and see how much it has developed."