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Madieu Williams: Honoring his mother, and alma mater

Immigrant uses NFL success to give \$2 million to U-Md. for health initiatives center

By [Daniel de Vise](#)

Washington Post Staff Writer

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At 9, Madieu Williams immigrated to Prince George's County from Sierra Leone, one of the poorest nations on Earth. The move gave his family a sense of perspective. His mother told him over and over that if he ever found himself in a position to make a difference, he should do it.

At 28, Williams finds himself in a relatively prosperous position: He plays free safety for the Minnesota Vikings. And Wednesday, he made a difference.

In a morning news conference, the University of Maryland announced the creation of the Madieu Williams Center for Global Health Initiatives. The former U-Md. star is providing a \$2 million endowment. It is the largest gift to the flagship school from an African American alumnus and the largest sum donated by someone so young.

"I realized a vision of what my mom would have liked to do," said Williams, whose mother, Abigail Burscher, died four years ago. "She would have liked this."

Williams doesn't remember the poverty in Sierra Leone, where, according to World Bank statistics, 27 of every 100 children die by age 5.

But he remembers the standard for compassion set by his mother, a nurse, who raised him as a single parent. And he remembers his experience working with sick, sometimes terminally ill, children as a college intern in the recreation therapy section of the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda.

"I think she was raising my social consciousness," he said.

Williams grew up in Lanham and attended DuVal High School and Towson University before transferring to Maryland. He graduated in 2003 with a degree in family science and went off to play pro football.



The University of Maryland School of Public Health and Minnesota Vikings free safety and UM alumnus Madieu Williams announced the creation of a Center for Global Health Initiatives. (courtesy University of Maryland)

He proved uncommonly talented in the role of free safety, a versatile defensive position that calls for running after very fast men who are trying to catch the football and score touchdowns. Williams is in his sixth season, his second with the Vikings.

His gift comes amid a seven-year, \$1 billion capital campaign at U-Md., at a time when research universities are relying more on private support to replace lost revenue from their states. The school is more than halfway to its goal.

The concept for the global health center "really began with Madieu himself," said Robert Gold, dean of the School of Public Health. Williams had considered setting up a scholarship fund but decided on something more ambitious.

The center, conceived over the past 18 months, will focus on public health initiatives in the disparate locales of Prince George's and Sierra Leone, two places close to his heart.

Despite its concentration of black wealth, Prince George's also has the second-highest rate of AIDS in Maryland, after Baltimore, and 151,000 residents who lack health coverage, according to a county report this year.

The center will be a partnership among the [Madieu Williams Foundation](#), the university, the county and the Sierra Leone Embassy.

Sierra Leone Ambassador H.E Bockari Stevens attended the campus ceremony. He praised Williams for "trying to rebrand the image of our country," which endured a decade of civil war and is "still on the bottom of the ladder" in public health. And he praised the young immigrant for remembering his homeland.

"Many people tend to forget where they came from," Stevens said.