



FRANK MUGISHA

Born: 17 June, 1979, in Kampala, Uganda

Organisation: Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG)

Frank Carlton Mugisha was born into a strict Catholic family in a working-class suburb of Kampala.

When he was seven, his father was shot and killed on the way home from work. The murder was never solved. Frank was raised by a single mother.

He attended all boys' Catholic schools, where he played sports such as tennis and handball and enjoyed theatre.

After realising he was gay in his early teens, he would pray to God to make him straight. When that had no effect, he came out to his brother, with other family members soon finding out the news. On occasions, he was taken to family friends who suggested they could help to change his feelings

"Some of my family members said, 'It's fine, just don't tell other people', which is what happens to many Ugandans." (The Independent, August 2014)

By the age of 16, he was out to his friends and later went on to study at university. In early adulthood, he would express his sexuality in anonymous blogs and would sometimes casually mention in conversation that he was gay to gauge the reaction.

With other student friends, he founded the Icebreakers - a social group for gay men - and within a few years, Mugisha joined the activist organisation SMUG, quickly rising to the position of executive director, a position he still holds today.

SMUG's 2007 'Let us live in peace' campaign sparked a backlash, briefly forcing Mugisha and others into exile in Kenya. But in 2009, a politician introduced an 'Anti-Homosexuality Bill' which resulted in sustained harassment and attacks on LGBTQ+ people. Mugisha's friend and SMUG co-founder David Kato was murdered in his home in 2011.

Although the Bill was enacted into Ugandan law in late 2013, it was ruled invalid within eight months. Meanwhile, Mugisha - the recipient of several human rights awards, as well as a 2014 Nobel Peace Prize nomination - continues to advocate on behalf of LGBTQ+ Ugandans for whom visibility would mean substantial risk.

"The safety I've gained [comes] from being open and visible over the years... I'm no longer afraid of being outed. That is my greatest success." (Hirschfeld Eddy Foundation, February 2022)

Image credit (Creative Commons 2.0)

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/noraddir/15810279028>

Frank Mugisha, leader of Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG) at the Norad Conference 2014 (image: Fredrik Naumann)