



BELLEVUE EAST HIGH SCHOOL

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Former Bellevue East student cured of sickle cell disease

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News Editor

Former Bellevue East student, 21-year-old Martin Mwita Jr. begins the year sickle-cell-free after becoming the first patient from Nebraska to receive the newly approved gene therapy for sickle cell disease in St. Louis.

The gene therapy was approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat sickle cell. Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, together with St. Louis Children's Hospital, is one of the few academic medical centers in the country to offer this treatment. The complex procedure was overseen by Shalini Shenoy, MD, a pediatric professor at WashU Medicine and a leading pediatric hematologist and oncologist at St. Louis Children's Hospital.

"Gene therapy is different because it uses the patient's own cells. Doctors collect the patient's stem cells, fix the genetic problem in a lab, and then put the corrected cells back into the body," Shenoy said. "This approach, if successful, aims to address the genetic cause of the disease itself, not just the symptoms. Because the cells come from the patient, the risk of immune complications such as graft versus host disease and delayed immune recovery with susceptibility to serious infections is lower than with transplants from other donors."

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**All done.** Former Bellevue East graduate, Martin Mwita Jr. walks through the hallway with nurses after being discharged. "I'd say trust the people and the process," Mwita Jr. said. "The people that are with you during the process are professionals and it can be very easy to be skeptical, but I know they are here to help me." Photo courtesy of Jacinta Mwita

Cafeteria cited for health risk

Savannah Stultz  
Opinion Editor

In compliance with the Nebraska 2022 Food Code, Bellevue East's cafeteria had its first of two required health inspections for the 2025-26 school year, in which East has been cited for lacking an air gap in their three-compartment sink, or violating "Compliance with variance, specialized process, & HACCP plan."

According to the Rhode Island Department of Health, air gaps are spaces installed in sink pipes. They ensure sanitation and prevent backflow, which is when contaminated water pollutes the system's clean water supply.

"You don't want to have any contaminated, non-potable water come up through those pipes," inspector Jay Porterfield said. Porterfield identified and recorded the violation on March 24. As of November 13, an air gap is yet to be installed despite the infringement being noted months prior.

"[The sink] is still being used to clean and sanitize cooking utensils, trays and other kitchen items," Assistant Principal Nathaniel Bacon said. "Again, it does not cause any health risk or safety risk to workers, students or staff."

If backflow does occur, any food or equipment that comes in contact with the sinks is at risk for contamination. Nonetheless, East's cafeteria sink is not under construction and is being utilized. This continued use of the sink has alarmed some individuals who receive school lunch from the cafeteria, such as junior Maleah Chang, who expressed concern that it could potentially lead to illness among students.

"It's a human necessity," Chang said. "We deserve to have clean food and consume clean things."

Bacon stated that the reason why the cafeteria sink lacks an air gap is because it was not required when East's kitchen was first built. Since then, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Food Code has changed, leading to this new stipulation.

"There's constantly legislation going in to change these codes and stuff like that," Porterfield said. "[Inspectors] come in and it's a lot on these people in the kitchens. ... There's a lot of paperwork, just a lot of stuff that you have to follow."

As recorded on the Food Establishment Evaluation document posted in East's cafeteria, the air gap issue falls under a Priority/Priority Foundation Violation. The document states that this category of violations are traditionally corrected within 10 days. East's deadline to amend the violation has passed, and Bellevue Public Schools has not confirmed a date for when an air gap will be implemented.

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East's Native American display removed

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A display including Native imagery and artifacts was removed from the lobby at Bellevue East over the weekend of October 11.

Administrators chose to remove the display after concerns about stereotypical imagery. Before making the final decision, Principal Jeffery Wagner spoke with parents of East students and members of the Omaha tribe to learn their thoughts on the exhibit.

"We're trying to be cognizant of our Native American population, and that's why I feel it's really not my place to decide on some of these things," Wagner said. "I want to get input from some Native Americans."

He stated that the items included in the display, such as Navajo bread or cartoons of Native Americans on horses, appeared

to enforce stereotypes of Native Americans. According to the University of Washington, stereotypical depictions of Native people have harmful impacts on Native American high school students' feelings about themselves and their academic futures.

"We just felt that there was a lot of misrepresentation of Native Americans in that display," Wagner said. "A Native American parent that I'm working with, she said that looks like some of those [artifacts] were just bought at a dime store."

The display's creator, Rebecca Wells of Rebecca's Indian Trading Post, said that all of the items included were created by Native people. Former Bellevue Public Schools superintendent John Deegan paid Wells to create the display in the late 2000s to honor Bellevue's Native American history.

"The superintendent at the time wanted to pay tribute to the Native people," Wells said. "The things I brought were Indige-

nous-made items. I bought them from Native people."

Wells started Rebecca's Indian Trading Post in Bellevue 30 years ago after being inspired by her mother's Native heritage. Since then, Wells has created other displays on Native American history, including at Logan Fontenelle Middle School and Bellevue West.

"I understand they have to rotate things," Wells said. "I'm privileged to have been able to have it there [my display at East] when I was able to I know people talked about it for a long time and said that they saw my display there and they enjoyed it."

One student who appreciated the Native American display was freshman Addison Bishop, a member of the Cherokee tribe. Bishop said her family also liked the exhibit.

# Sickle Cell: Take an in-depth look at the recovery and treatment of Martin Mwita Jr.

Sickle cell disease is a life-threatening condition in which red blood cells become sticky and clump together, blocking blood flow and reducing oxygen delivery throughout the body. Martin Mwita Jr.'s mother, Jacinta Mwita, discovered that Martin Mwita Jr. was born with the disease. By the time he was an infant, he had suffered strokes and blockages in the blood vessels of his lungs, which left him in a coma for 3 weeks before he recovered. The life expectancy for individuals with sickle cell disease is approximately 35 years.

"The doctors told me that the life expectancy at the time was 35 years, but you don't know what kind of 35 years you're going to get," Jacinta Mwita said, "so right away, quality of life, obviously, when you're thinking long term, of course, you want to live and I want to see my grandbabies and by that's God's grace, so it was a sight for life."

Martin Mwita Jr. experienced recurring complications when he was young, such as pain crises, strokes and organ failure. As a child, even routine physical activity or changes in the weather could trigger intense pain, leading to frequent hospitalizations. Basketball was a sport Martin Mwita Jr. enjoyed but had to give up. His previous treatment at the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC), his primary clinic at the time, involved blood transfusions every two to three weeks, a strategy that carries risks like infections.

"Internally you just realize at some point that other kids aren't going through the same kind of thing that you are," Martin Mwita Jr. said. "But we worked with a team of doctors and nurses at UNMC and they made sure that I was very educated on it. So from a very young age, I was learning that I needed to stay hydrated, limit physical activity, or avoid certain weather conditions because it might affect this or it might trigger that."

After extensive research, discussions with his pediatrician, and bringing the treatment option to UNMC, Martin Mwita Jr. was presented with the opportunity to live sickle-cell-free. He received a gene therapy called Lyfgenia made by Bluebird Bio, a biotherapeutics company in New Jersey.

"This represents a major leap forward because gene therapy was not considered a possible cure just a decade ago," Shenoy said. "Only a few centers in the U.S. currently offer this treatment. The success of this treatment also made it possible to develop gene therapy for several other genetic disorders."

The procedure is complex and was the most expensive procedure at the hospital ever, costing about \$3.1 million. According to WashU Medicine, the treatment involves mobilizing the patient's stem cells into the bloodstream, collecting them, genetically modifying them in a lab, preparing the body with five days of high-dose chemotherapy, and then infusing the modified cells back so the body can produce healthy red blood cells.

"Generally, the treatment process itself usually takes about 3 to 6 months," Shenoy said. "After the treatment is finished, the body still needs time to start making healthier blood cells. This typically takes another 6 to 12 months, and doctors watch the patient closely during this time to see if hemoglobin levels are rising and if pain episodes are decreasing. Because gene therapy is still relatively new, patients are monitored for up to 15 years to make sure the treatment continues to work and to watch for rare or delayed

side effects."

After the procedure, Martin Mwita Jr. was placed in an apartment in St. Louis over 400 miles away from his home and family to undergo stem cell collection, then the treatment and recovery in December 2024. He went to the hospital for multiple tests that would be sent to the Mayo Clinic, the only lab that can measure the new cells. He was soon allowed to go back home, but had to stay in a quarantined state because his immune system was weak.

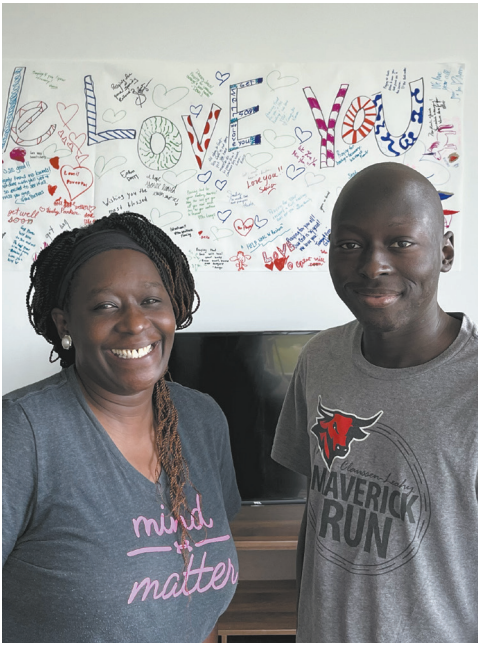
"It was just the two of us [Martin Mwita Jr. and Jacinta Mwita], literally the entire time," Jacinta Mwita said. "I had to be trained as a parent. I had to flush his lines twice a day. I had to take his pressure a few times and document what he was eating, and how much he's drinking."

Martin Mwita Jr.'s sister, freshmen Abigail Mwita, also lives with sickle cell disease and faces many of the same challenges as her brother. She has experienced severe complications that required extensive neurological care, including multiple brain surgeries last summer. Abigail is now preparing to undergo the same gene therapy treatment and is expected to be the youngest patient to receive it.

"I know that the process of being cured and being in the hospital for a long time is hardno one likes being in the hospital," Abigail Mwita said. "I just can't wait to not have sickle cell so that I can just live my life without having any worries."

Mwita Jr. has now reached the final stage of his recovery, with only routine immunizations remaining. He is able to live more freely and with less stress, staying as active as possible and playing basketball regularly with his friends. His story was told in a YouTube video titled "A Cure Within: A First in the Treatment of Sickle Cell Disease."

"I would say for anyone, you know, who's going through something similar, perhaps the exact same thing [sickle cell]... just trust God," Martin Mwita Jr. said, "You know, our faith is what's gotten us through this."



**Lots of love.** Jacinta Mwita [Left] and Martin Mwita Jr. [Right] receive a banner from their church for their medical apartment in St. Louis. Martin Mwita Jr. and his mother Jacinta Mwita stayed in St. Louis for a month before getting discharged. "I became a care giver for the time we were in the apartment because they have to make sure the cells stuck and are they growing, but we received lot's of love during this time." *Photo courtesy of Jacinta Mwita*

# Cafeteria: East responds to air gap issue in school sink



"I think it's really important," Chang said. "And it needs to be a bigger issue because water supply is something that is a necessity to people."

However, Bacon confirmed that it is not East's responsibility to resolve the issue, but rather, that task lies with the district. Bellevue Public School's Board Policy states that the school district provides public funds for the repair, remodeling, or construction of school-owned buildings/site improvements.

"A lot of times it does come down to mechanical issues that the school doesn't have money for," Porterfield said. "Some of them don't want to spend the money, to tell you the truth. [Inspectors] just kind of go through the Department of Agriculture and see how much we can actually do. So it's difficult sometimes, it's a long process."

**Sink Safety.** East's cafeteria's three-compartment sink health code violation remains unresolved as it continues to be used by cafeteria staff. Despite health inspector Jay Porterfield stating that the violation posed a possible contamination threat to food cleanliness, Assistant Principal Nathaniel Bacon stated that he didn't consider the issue to be a health risk. "Maintenance problems come up with appliances and things just as they do at anyone's home," Bacon said. "They are handled as they come up to ensure safety and that students receive their food with no issue." *Photo by Savannah Stultz*

# Change: Wagner has plans for new historical display

"I thought it was pretty cool," Bishop said. "I feel like [the old display] looks cooler than what it does now."

Now, the area underneath the main entrance stairs features banners that say "Welcome to BEHS" and "Once a chieftain, always a chieftain." East has maintained other displays meant to honor Native history, including a brick mural of the Omaha Chief Big Elk, who was known for his leadership and peacekeeping. Wagner said that the school is using Chief Big Elk as inspiration to create a new historical display that will be more representative.

"I want to kind of tie it back into the

school a little more," Wagner said. "What does it mean to be a Chieftain? How do we wrap that in so when our students walk by, do they say, yes, leadership, integrity, service to others?"

The new display will likely include depictions of the Chieftain head that is East's mascot, as well as quotes from Native American chiefs. Wagner said they may also reuse certain artifacts from the original display.

"Sometimes we need things changed for certain purposes," Bishop said. "The principal maybe was like, oh, we need to change this. We need it to represent more."



**Native history.** The previous display at East included Native American artifacts from Rebecca's Indian Trading Post. Rebecca Wells, the owner of Rebecca's Indian Trading Post, said the display was meant to pay tribute to Bellevue's native history. "I did quite a few different displays so I don't remember everything that was in there," Wells said. "They've [the artifacts] been there a long time." *Photo by Caden Munderloh*