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NBA star seeks to raise money for blood-testing kits for Africa

By Lisa Zagaroli
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WASHINGTON - Charlotte Bobcats player Emeka Okafor was on a mission Tuesday, and it had nothing to do with basketball.

Okafor was in Washington to raise awareness and money for the Safe Blood for Africa Foundation, which distributes blood-testing kits in 34 African nations.

He met with groups such as the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America and with lawmakers, including Rep. Mel Watt, D-N.C., and Sen. Richard Burr, R-N.C.

His message: \$15 can make a difference in a heartbreaking place where children wither away into lifelessness because their own blood poisons them.

Fifteen dollars is the cost of a kit to test whether blood is infected with HIV or other contaminants before it's transfused into a child with malaria or a pregnant woman in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Fifteen bucks is one life," Okafor said. "Instead of having an appetizer with dinner, you save a life. Cut down on two or three beers. One person's life, \$15."

Okafor, who calls his charity the One Million African Lives Initiative, chose to affiliate himself with the nonprofit safe-blood group because he liked its precise mission: Distribute 10 million test kits over the next five years.

"It's very targeted, and they're doing it," he said of the foundation, which began in 1999.

He also chose the cause because it hit home for him. Both of his parents are from Nigeria, and he's seen first-hand how tough it is to survive in their homeland.

"Life is just hard," Okafor said in an interview. "People over here, they forget how fortunate they are not to have to worry about catching malaria and dying, that they have roads and electricity. You don't think about the small, small, small details."

Okafor's trying to prevent the 10 percent of the estimated 25 million cases of AIDS and HIV in Africa caused by transfusions.

"We're talking about pregnant women and little kids, innocent bystanders who happen to get sick and need a blood transfusion," Okafor said.

Later this summer, he plans to journey to his father's village in the Anambra state of Nigeria to help set up a health clinic and distribute blood kits. He also will spend a week in South Africa as part of the NBA's "basketball without borders" program.

The largest contributors to the safe-blood foundation so far have been Bobcats owner Robert Johnson and ExxonMobil Corp.

Having a celebrity like Okafor attached to a charity "opens some doors that normally wouldn't open," said Jeffrey Busch, chairman of the Safe Blood International Foundation.

Okafor, who was the 2005 NBA rookie of the year after leading the University of Connecticut to a national championship, knows that celebrity can attract audiences. But he thinks those people will pay attention to the message.

"It wouldn't matter who's speaking. People will see that it makes sense," he said.

ON THE WEB

_ Okafor's Web site: www.onemillionafricanlives.org/

_ Safe Blood for Africa's Web site: www.safebloodforafrica.org/

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