



Interpreter Seydou Sow works in the Language Assistance Program at Harlem Hospital Center. He speaks English, French and several African languages. Photo by Richard Harbur.

# Interpreter is cure for hosp language barriers

**A**S AN INTERPRETER in Harlem Hospital's Language Assistance Program, Seydou Sow has plied his trade in just about every office in the building except the emergency room.

There is a good reason for that exception.

"There is no need for an interpreter because the patient is sleeping," Sow said. "I have done preoperations, though."

Yet program director Lucila Jimenez easily came up with examples where hospital interpreters such as Sow played pivotal roles ensuring that hospital patients got the care they needed.

Like the man who spoke no English and was brought to the hospital with numerous injuries he suffered when he jumped from a second-floor window.

The Emergency Service Unit crew that transported him had listed him as an attempted suicide. Protocol would require that after the man was stabilized, he be taken to the hospital psychiatric ward for evaluation.

An interpreter got the real story — the man was attending a party on the second floor when someone pulled a gun and started firing.

He jumped out of the window to save his life.

Sow, 45, speaks French, Malinka, Bambara (both Malinka and Bambara include several dialects) and English. He was chef and owner of the La Piax restaurant in his native Abidjan, Ivory Coast, in West Africa, before immigrating to the United States seven years ago.

When he arrived, he rented a room from another West African family in Harlem that was expecting a child soon.

When the mother went into labor, Sow went to Harlem Hospital with them and acted as an interpreter for the family.

After that, "I said to myself, why can't I

help other people, even in my free time?" Sow said. "That's when I came to Lucila's office and signed up to volunteer in my free time."

Sow volunteered at the hospital for several years — Jimenez said he would work four-to-five-hour shifts five days a week before heading to a paying restaurant job — before completing certification classes and joining the hospital staff full time in 2005.

Harlem is home to thousands of West Africans and other immigrants from dozens of nations, and Harlem Hospital employs doctors, nurses and other health professionals from countries around the world.

So Sow's skills are much in demand.

He was once called to the emergency room to help a doctor from India and a nurse from Korea explain to a West African man that he could not get a new kidney that same day.

If the two full-time interpreters and several volunteers in the Harlem Hospital Assistance Program find themselves dealing with an unfamiliar language, they can use a special city Health and Hospitals Corp. "blue phone" in the office to access a bank of interpreters, Jimenez said.

**S**ow is so well-known among West African immigrants that patients pass his cell-phone number among themselves, sometimes without even meeting him.

"His phone is always ringing," Jimenez said.

"I'll get a call from someone saying, 'Mr. Sow, we need you,'" he said. "Everybody in the hospital, when they need me, I get a call. That is what I tell them. When you need me, call."

"It may be a medical interpretation, or a financial situation, or to fill an application for Medicaid, or anything regarding a health-care issue," he said. "I get paid for what I do here, but I put my heart in my work." [cricharson@nvdailynews.com](mailto:cricharson@nvdailynews.com)

**CITY BEAT**

BY CLEM RICHARDSON