

Interfaith Inform: February 4, 2020



www.interfaithunderstanding.org

Interfaith Insight

Doug Kindschi

Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

Refugees tell their inspiring stories of hope

Clementine Sikiri arrived in the USA in 2003 from a refugee camp in Rwanda. At 9 years old, she started learning English and eventually went on to major in English and Elementary Education at Grand Valley State University. Just a year ago, following a terrible accident, when her car was hit by a cement truck, she spent weeks at Mercy Health Saint Mary's Hospital and months in physical therapy. She will tell her refugee story at this year's Abrahamic Dinner next Tuesday, Feb. 11, along with two other refugees.



Clementine Sikiri

For her first nine years, Clementine lived in awful conditions of war-torn Rwanda, then in a refugee camp, before coming to a strange land and having to learn a new language. For some time while living in the camp with her father and grandmother, they did not know where her mother and two siblings were. It was a great relief when her mother and one of the siblings were reunited with the family. Her oldest brother had been taken away to fight in the war and they did not discover that he was alive until much later after the family came to America.

The process of being approved as a refugee takes a long time, and it was such a relief when they were finally approved. She says that even when approved they had no idea where they would be sent, but anyplace outside of the camp was called "America." Actually, some were sent to Europe, but they were so happy when they came directly to Grand Rapids on June 23, 2003. The large airport in Chicago and the huge buildings were quite impressive.

Managing life after their arrival, without knowing the language, was quite difficult at first, but Clementine gives much credit to neighbors and others who helped them as they struggled to settle. They loved the house since it had a toilet, carpet, and a fridge. She describes the contrast to her earlier years living with no electricity, no running water, and having to search the forest to find wood for their stove.

They didn't know anyone when they arrived, and in an interview she describes: "It was really hard because we didn't speak English, and it was really frustrating sitting in that class when you didn't know what the teacher was saying, everybody looks different, and nobody understands you."

She praised the mentors in her life that helped her adjust and succeed. She cites individuals who told her how things work, about making connections, getting scholarships and finding jobs. “I’m so grateful,” Clementine says. “Ever since I got here I’ve always felt supported by Americans.”

She did survive, and did quite well, graduating from high school and then pursuing college at GVSU. She was excited when after high school she got a job at the YMCA working in the Child Development Center. She was so excited that she could get a job, especially one working with kids. As she shared, “The kids loved me and my bosses were really nice. I discovered that I really like kids. So when I worked there I decided to teach.” She finished her studies, graduated from GVSU, and then took a job as a refugee resettlement care manager at Bethany Christian Services.

In a recent article she explained, “I’m very passionate about helping people who come here as refugees – who come here with nothing – to become independent and self-sufficient. It brings me joy to help them create a life here, just like my family did.”

But life took an unfortunate turn a year ago when, driving home from visiting a friend, her car was hit by a cement truck in an accident that nearly took her life. A posting by Mary Free Bed Hospital described her condition:

“The impact was so great it caused her skull to separate from her spinal column, internally decapitating her. She was taken to Mercy Health Saint Mary’s Hospital, where doctors worked to save her. Clementine’s injuries were life-threatening. In addition to her spinal column, Clementine experienced a moderately severe traumatic brain injury, her leg and jaw were broken, and she had a stroke during surgery that caused temporary paralysis.”

Clementine recounts, “My doctor told me it’s a miracle I survived. I’ve always known that life is a beautiful gift from God and should be cherished each day that you’re blessed with it.” Her rehabilitation took over seven surgeries and many weeks of therapy to regain strength and mobility. “But I know I’m lucky,” she says. “I was given the biggest gift – a second chance at life. There’s no reason for me to be angry.”

Dr. Stuart Yablon, medical director of Mary Free Bed’s Brain Injury Program, described the medical issues, complications and setbacks, as well as the immense support of her family and the community. He reflected, “Hers is not a medical story as much as a human story. It’s a story of perseverance and grace, of family sticking together during tough times.”

Clementine made such good progress that she was cleared to graduate last April from the inpatient program and continue with outpatient therapy for the next few months. She says, “Life can be taken from you in seconds. You can just exist, or you can live a rich, meaningful life. Life is so precious, and we aren’t promised tomorrow. Just *love*.”

Clementine Sikiri will share her refugee story along with two other refugees at this year’s Abrahamic Dinner on Feb. 11. Jasna Putnik, a refugee from Yugoslavia, along with Hasan Yurtsever, from Turkey, will be joining us to tell their stories.

Our country is deeply enriched by individuals who for one reason or another had to leave their home and start a life here. Their journeys and stories may be quite different, but in each there is hope. The evening will include dinner, conversation and these inspiring stories of our newest neighbors.

interfaith@gvsu.edu