



A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

Nene Rwenyaguza Gets a Home

BY DIANNA BORSI O'BRIEN | PHOTO BY ANGELIQUE HUNTER

FOR NEARLY SEVEN YEARS, Nene Peter Rwenyaguza thought his wife and three children were dead. Now, in a few weeks, his wife, his three children and a boy she adopted while they were apart will be arriving in Columbia and they'll come to a home furnished by Columbians, many of whom have never met Rwenyaguza.

It's a home furnished by friendship; it's a story filled with faith.

Ten years ago, Nene Rwenyaguza fled his home in the Congo to save his life. His wife and three children ran one way and he ran another, hoping separating would save all of

them. That night, the rebels set fire to his village, and when he settled down in Nairobi, Kenya, as a refugee seeking asylum, he was told no one from his small village had survived; his wife and children were dead.

Seven years later, he learned his wife and children were alive; by then he was living in Missouri as a refugee. Now, after three more years of paperwork and persistence, his family will soon be arriving in Columbia. He'll finally see the children he last saw when they were 1, 2 and 4; and meet his new son, age 14.

When his family arrives, they'll be welcomed into a three-bedroom apartment, completely furnished, including a computer and a

washer and dryer. Many of these items came from Columbians he has never met through a project organized by Charlotte Gaddy, a friend he made at Boone County National Bank.

Of course, he and his family face challenges. His struggle to learn English holds him back from getting a better paying job. Rwenyaguza will have to pay back the costs of bringing his family here, which could total as much as \$7,000. He will also have to find a way to support his family of five. The cost of housing the family will consume half his income. These financial problems will be eased at first because, like all refugees resettled in the U.S., Rwenyaguza's family members will

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In Nairobi as well, and like Rwenzaga had avoided the refugee camps. When she sought asylum, the international agencies that coordinate such refugee assistance reconnected them. Rwenzaga cried with joy. A special telephone card allowed them unlimited calls, and the family began rekindling their relationship while they waited to be reunited. Bringing family members into the U.S. requires proof that they can be supported, and there are mounds of documents and requirements to work through.

While Rwenzaga was working through the process for his family, he got a call of another kind. A group of Africans in Columbia who met at the First Baptist Church called Rwenzaga to be their pastor.

He hesitated. Moving again, even further from his wife and children? Moving to where he didn't have a job? He called his wife; she said if God calls, answer.

Rwenzaga came to Columbia and began pastoring to the African refugees here. Years earlier, a member of the First Baptist Church had begun helping African refugees make it to church activities, says Ed Rollins, associate pastor at First Baptist Church. When Rwenzaga arrived, he began attending several of the church's services and prayer times each week. "He's a deeply faithful man," says Rollins. Before long, Rwenzaga asked if his followers could officially join First Baptist, and more than two dozen were officially welcomed into the church. "We discovered there are more refugees than we knew," recalls Rollins. African worship service revivals can draw more than 100 people. Today, the Sunday afternoon African worship service is simply one of First Baptist Church's services. "They're a part of us and we've been praying about his family," says Rollins.

Finding Friendship

At first, making a living wasn't easy for Rwenzaga in Columbia either. He'd gotten a transfer for work, but the pastoral position was only part-time, and the Columbia restaurant where he also worked closed. He man-

A Long Journey
At first, Rwenzaga simply fled to nearby Kenya, settling in Nairobi, the country's capital, sprawling, gritty city of roughly 3 million people. News of violence against his ethnic group in refugee camps kept him from seeking help there. In Kenya, some people were wary of him due to his ethnic background, fearing he might be an outside agitator. Kenya, too, has had its own ethnic troubles. Then he found a church to attend and once again began his theological studies.

For six years, he struggled, working, preaching and praying. At times, he says, he thought he'd go mad grieving for his family. "But I believed in God," he explains, "and I believed they could be alive." He decided that unless he saw for himself that they were dead, he'd act as if they were alive: no remarriage for him. "The Word of God gave me comfort," he says. Finally, he received the news that he'd be resettled in the United States, and he was concerned: If he moved so far away, how would his wife find him if she were alive? Yet he was determined: "I wanted to be away from the war; no more bullets."

He also knew his opportunity was rare. Only a few refugees are accepted for permanent resettlement in the United States, with several stipulations. Rwenzaga met the qualifications, and he arrived in St. Louis in 2008. That year, only 848 refugees from the Congo were accepted into the United States, according to the U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. With the help of an international agency, he found a job at a restaurant, but getting to work wasn't easy. The trip required three buses and a train, but even when it snowed, something he'd never seen, he made it. His commute meant he had to arrive hours before the restaurant opened, and that snowy day when the others arrived, they found him shivering in the doorway, which makes him chuckle now when he recalls it.

Making the Columbia Connection

While in St. Louis, he learned his wife and children were alive. His wife had been living

receive financial assistance for housing and other expenses. Also, he'll be able to repay the transportation costs in small increments. Still, despite any future financial challenges, Rwenzaga is unconcerned; he calls himself blessed.

A Long Way from Home

Rwenzaga, 39, can't remember a time when his native country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, wasn't at war. Even before he was born, his mother and three of her children were taken as captives and held for three years by another tribe, and two of the children died during that time.

The Congo, Africa's second largest country, was formerly called Zaire and gained its independence from Belgium in 1960. For years, unrest ebbed and flowed, but his village of about 80 families largely escaped the violence. Until then, Rwenzaga had lived a quiet life, raising cattle, teaching school and attending theology school. Then one night in 2002 the rebels burned all the grass huts and took all the cattle, sheep and goats. "At night," says Rwenzaga through an interpreter, Rubin Byishimo, "when they came back after the men, I ran away."

The conflict that drove Rwenzaga from his home goes back decades. The Congo has more than 200 ethnic groups, including Rwenzaga's, the Banyamulenge Tutsi. These Tutsi are devoted Christian farmers, according to the Center for Applied Linguistics, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., but rebellions through the years have forced them to flee from their homes. In 1994, the Rwandan genocide spilled into the Congo as Rwandan Hutu attacked Tutsi. Since then, the Congolese Tutsi have continued, at times with the support of some extremist politicians.

The turmoil and violence has caused nearly a half a million Congolese to flee their country, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Inside the country, another 1.7 million of the Congo's 74 million people are internally displaced. For Hutu and Tutsi in the United States the conflicts have been resolved, as both groups work and worship together in Columbia.

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aged to find several part-time jobs and a member of his faith group helped him buy a car, which made finding work easier.

That's how he met Gaddy at Boone County National Bank. The assistant vice president of consumer lending, she had helped him navigate the process of getting a car loan, and as with many foreigners, she periodically had to remind him of the requirement to maintain car insurance. Each time they met, Gaddy says she got to know him a little better, to hear a little more of his story until one day, she asked him how he was getting on and what church he attended. With that question, Gaddy says, Rwenyagaza came alive. Typically a quiet man who struggled with his English, she remembers how he lit up and said, "You know my Jesus?" Gaddy, thrilled, answered, "Yes, I know him very well."

Gaddy, a lifelong traveler, has a special fondness for foreigners, and Rwenyagaza's demeanor endeared him to her. Soon, he was coming to her home for dinners and holidays. Along the way, she encouraged him to apply for a job to the company that cleans the bank, a full-time job he now holds.

This summer, she learned his family had been approved for settlement in the U.S. and she sprang into action. She spoke to friends and family members, telling Rwenyagaza's story and about his need to furnish a home for his four children and his wife. A friend asked if she could help, and Gaddy asked her if she'd send emails to her friends with a list of household goods that were needed.

Before she knew it, Gaddy says, the word was out everywhere. A man she'd never met had a new king-size bed delivered to the three-bedroom apartment Rwenyagaza had rented in anticipation of his family's arrival. Others brought furniture, linens and clothing, guessing at the sizes of his children, now 14, 12 and 11. Still more donors helped fill his kitchen with appliances he'd never seen before.

Today, Rwenyagaza seems overwhelmed describing the items, repeating the word, "new" over and over, amazed at the bounty. Any surplus, says Gaddy, will be given to other refugees, of which there are a number in Columbia. The Refugee & Immigration Services in Columbia has resettled 1,300 refugees since 2001, including 58 Congolese, says Phil Stroessner, a job developer and analyst at the non-profit contracted for refugee services in Missouri. His agency helps refugees find jobs, obtain housing and find their place in the community. He notes Rwenyagaza's story of separation due to violent conflict is not uncommon.

For now, Rwenyagaza waits.

Officials, he's told, are waiting to obtain four airplane seats together, so the family won't be separated even for a flight from Nairobi to Columbia. And once the family arrives, life will present challenges. Rwenyagaza will be supporting a family of six on a janitor's salary. Despite knowing 10 languages, he still struggles with English. And when his family arrives, he'll be expected to pay the U.S. government back for their airfare, an expense he's happy to reimburse. Still, he's undaunted. After all, he's got Gaddy, Columbia and his faith to help him. CH