

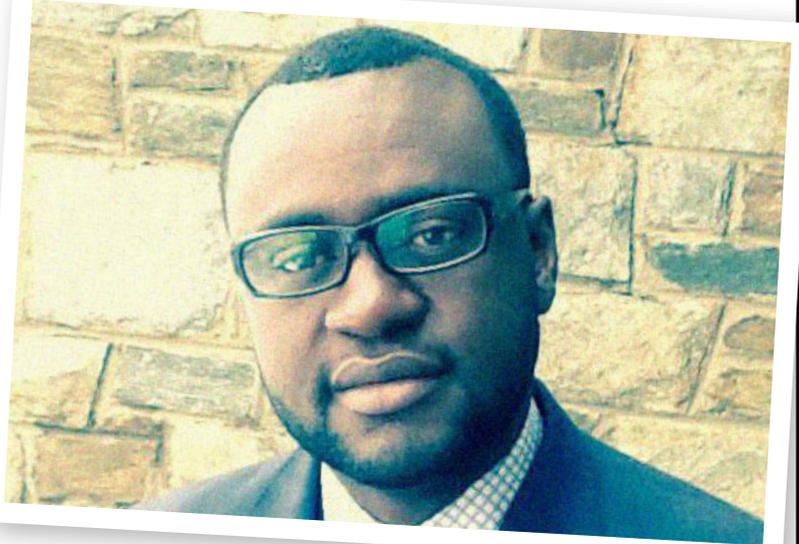


Lutheran Immigration
and Refugee Service

REFUGEE SUNDAY

Joseph's Story

*"The experiences were difficult
but taught me to always remain positive"*



RESOURCES NEEDED

- Bible
- Map of Africa
- Picture of Joseph
- Poster paper to write answers

SCRIPTURE READING

"But Ruth said, 'Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.'"

- Ruth 1:16 (NRSV)

If more time allows read the full scripture text: Ruth 1:11 - 21

FORMER REFUGEE STORY - JOSEPH

My name is Joseph. I had always envisioned growing up in Liberia and contributing toward the future of my country. School, church, and sports were things I spent my early life doing. Life was fine and everything appeared peaceful. I never envisioned leaving Liberia, but rather looked forward to my future with great optimism. However, all my hopes appeared to have reached a dead end on May 17, 1990.

On that day, my entire city experienced fierce gunfire, and the long talked-about rebels arrived in Buchanan, Liberia. I was at home watching the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) when suddenly, the lights went out and my ears were introduced to approximately 72 hours of steady gunfire. During a break from the constant sounds of shots being fired, all the members of my community assembled in an open field and asked to point out those who were affiliated with the current government. My family became a target because my mother's maiden name was the same name as the President. She was incarcerated on numerous occasions, and there were times we thought she would be killed. It was extremely difficult as a child to see my mother being treated as a criminal, especially considering she was a person who had dedicated her entire life to helping others. On October 24, 1990, she was arrested again, at approximately 6 o'clock in the evening, and taken to the rebel camp on suspicion of keeping members of the government's army in our house. This was a total fallacy. When she was finally released at midnight, she made the decision for us to leave our community and country.



We left in the night and headed for another county in Liberia, which shares a border with the Ivory Coast. We rode the freight train from Buchanan to Yekepa arriving the next morning and shortly after leaving for the Ivory Coast.

Life in the Ivory Coast was not what I envisioned. It was extremely difficult. I remember, each day, the suffering, the lack of hope, and enduring each blow delivered by the many challenges. At one point, I had only one shirt and one pair of pants for school, and wore flip flops since my mother could not afford to buy me a pair of shoes. I remember that at one point my mother became ill. I could not stand by while my family struggled, so I took a job working on a farm. My job was to work in the swamp, planting rice. I remember discussing this with my mother and she asked me to stop because I was a child and should not bear the burden for my family. I insisted that I would rather die than seeing her struggle and die before my eyes. One day, after a long day of working in the swamp, barefooted, I felt my right leg itching, but thought it would go away. When I got home to take a shower, I noticed several leeches on my right shin and called for help. A man came to my aid and used a piece of metal to pull each leech off my leg, but a portion of my skin was removed with every pull. I still bear the scars on my legs, and they remind me of how far I had come as a child.

After living in the Ivory Coast for several years, my three siblings and I were resettled in America with my father, who had already been resettled. I was 21 years old at the time, and remembered last seeing my father briefly when I was 10 years old. For me being resettled in America was a blessing in disguise. Shortly after I resettled I discovered that my challenges were far from over. I received very little help and I found myself homeless and sleeping on the streets of Washington D.C. I was lost once again. However after some months I had a conversation with a Lutheran pastor who ended up providing me with a great deal of support and encouragement. With his assistance I was eventually able to find work and eventually attended college.

I now have a Master's degree in criminal justice, and am a theological student. I am married and have two beautiful children.

Many refugees have similar experiences to me, they feel lost and out of place both in their homeland and in their new country. However, my experience, through difficult times both in Africa and in America developed within me a sense of appreciation for every opportunity I was granted. The experiences were difficult but taught me to always remain positive. I believe that everyone can be successful if they are given a fair chance. The opportunity given to me by Americans to strive for a better tomorrow now feels so welcoming, and hopeful.

I am grateful to the United States, my new home and country. Though everyday continues to present different challenges, I feel a sense of preparedness, knowing that I am alive and that there is hope.