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Leave One to Remember

A child's name bears witness to his mother's Rwandan struggle.

By Laura Winslow

Emelda Nzobhampari came to Boise after years in Tanzanian camps. She is now an employee in a job readiness program administered by Sarah Priddy. In the fall of 2016, Sarah helped Emelda tell her story to author Laura Winslow.

Emelda, age 27, still carries memories from the horrors of Rwanda, horrors which few from her village survived. “What did I do to be here instead of all the others?” she wonders. “What did I have to offer?”

Slender and dark with a glowing smile, Emelda dabs tears with a crumple of Kleenex. She was five in 1994 when she last saw her parents. Her father had been a businessman; her mother, a teacher. Inquisitive as a child, she dreamed of going to school and having her chance to learn. She recalls her mother's promise: whether schooled or not, she would prosper. “It is not school that makes you successful,” says Emelda quoting her mother. “It is your knowledge and your willingness to learn. If you are kind and smile, and you tell people that they are special to you, you will be successful in life.”

It's a scorching Boise day as Emelda tells her story, and the office is a cool retreat from the weather. Emelda was a student at Full Circle Exchange and now works as a chocolatier in one of the organization's adjacent buildings. “We provide a pathway to empowerment,” Sarah explains, “so it's really about each woman, individually.” Full Circle Exchange's U.S. Job Readiness Training Program (JRTP) offers refugee women in Boise, as well as women who are transitioning out of poverty, the stepping stones to self-sufficiency. Sarah is director of the Boise JRTP and is also one of the teachers for the classes the women take. Over time, Sarah has become a friend and advocate to these women as well.

Rwandan Refugee Crisis

Kagera River winds along the entire border between Tanzania and Rwanda. The only land crossing between the two nations is a two-lane cement bridge with yellow railings. The Rusomo bridge extends over the rapids and waterfall of the same name.



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In April 1994 more than 200,000 people crossed the Rusumo Bridge into Tanzania.

Previous page: Emelda Nzobhampari, 2017.

Looking across the bridge into Rwanda, there are hills covered in elephant grass. The valleys between the hills and the bridge itself are cradled by thick rain forest.

Everything is green except the river, which is red and opaque. In 1994, the Rusumo bridge, the rain forest in the valleys, and the hills reaching for the skies were covered in a terrifying tidal wave of people. In May of that year, the *New York Times* explained that the slow throng of Rwandan refugees walking into Tanzania was over 10 miles long. Funneled onto the narrow bridge, they crossed the border: 10,000 people per hour.

People were carrying anything they could, from mattresses to radios, from cooking ware to gasoline jugs filled with water. On foot, in wheelbarrows and wheelchairs, balancing a whole group on a single bike, they moved toward the border. Among the people were cows and goats, joining in one of the largest human exoduses of modern times.

People camped around the border post. During the day, the air was filled with animal sounds, people talking, and radio tunes. At night, the air was unbreathable, thick with smoke rising from the campfires in the grass. Along the border entry,



CRYSTAL WELLS

piles of machetes and hoes were abandoned in exchange for safety.

Rwandans crowd into a makeshift border encampment, 1994.

Once in the camps, the air wasn't much better. Disease was the main concern, and the bodies of people who had tried to flee from death littered the streets. The *New York Times* wrote about this again in July 1994, describing the smell of rotting animals and humans. Trucks moved bodies to mass graves, unable to keep up with the thousands of deaths per day.

The men and women, and all the children who were born and grew up in Tanzanian refugee camps, remained years without knowing their fate. Some were dragged into the forests and killed in vengeance. Others walked back to Rwanda, hoping to pick up the pieces of their lives, and still more waited to be sent to some foreign place with promise of a better future. Among the last group was the little girl Emelda.

Emelda

Emelda was 5 years old when she last saw her parents. She was dropped off at her grandparents' home for the Easter holidays in 1994, and her parents told her they would come back to get her when school started again. When school did start up, Emelda was still with her grandparents. Her cousin,

who was also staying with them, went off to school and never came back either. Not long after, Emelda's grandparents were killed, and she was all alone.

Amid the chaos, she recognized a man in town and decided to follow him. "He used to visit my grandparents' home," Emelda recalls. "I followed him to another village in Rwanda. He told me that no one could help me there, but if I found my father's family, they would be able to help." The man wrote down Emelda's father's name for her and told her to go to Burundi, where her father's tribe was, to ask for help to find her other grandparents. Emelda made it to Burundi and remembers finding a place where the tribes were gathering. She went to the tribal leader to ask for help finding her family. "He said he recognized the name but couldn't tell me where they were. I begged anyone to help me, to find my family." But no one could. Emelda left Burundi alone.

Making it back to Rwanda, Emelda found the man she had once followed in a town near the Tanzanian border. "That man and his wife were like family to me." Emelda clutches Sarah's hand. "I looked to him as a father." Emelda followed the couple across the border, into the Kagera region of Tanzania, to Rukore refugee camp. As Emelda grew into a teenage girl, the relationship she had with the couple began to change. "He started harassing me," she explains, "threatening to take me back to Rwanda." Sarah breaks in and reminds Emelda that she doesn't have to talk about anything she doesn't want to. Emelda shakes her head, "I need to say this." Her expression is unyielding.

"I told him I had no family to go to," she continues. "I didn't know anyone in Rwanda, and I can never go back there. After everything that happened in Rwanda, I'll never go there again." When Emelda was 16, the harassment twisted into threats of murder. The man that Emelda had once thought could be a father to her was roaring at her that he had taken her in and cared for her. Now, as he was leaving to go back to Rwanda, she had to follow him there, or he would kill her before he left.

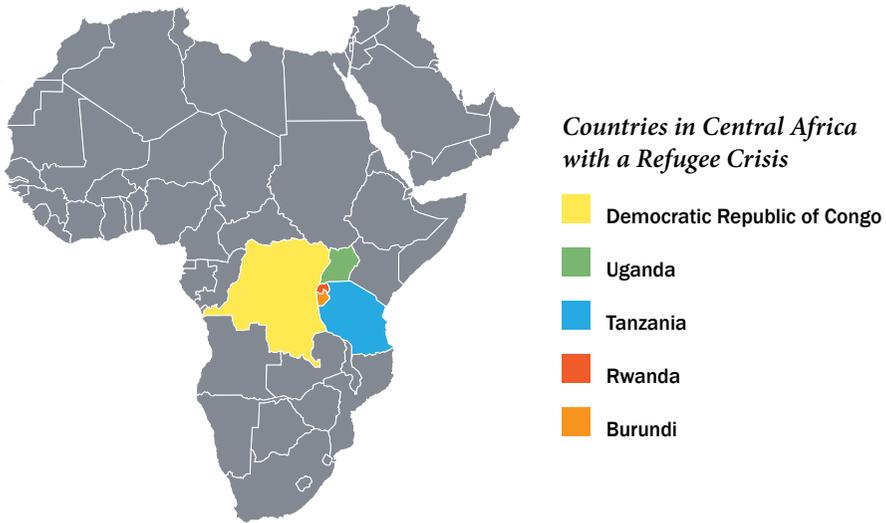


H.J. DAVIES/UNHCR

Tens of thousands of refugee children died in 1994 when cholera hit Tanzania.

“I ran.” Breathing deeply, Emelda continues, “I was so scared. I ran to the UN office in the camp and told them what had happened.”

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) welcomed Emelda, relieved that she had found them, and told her that they would take care of her. “They told me, ‘We know it hurts.’” The workers begged Emelda not to bottle up everything she felt and all she had been through, but rather tell people, “They said God will help me find my way to a better future. They were right.”



Emelda’s UNHCR file began in 2005. Her case moved forward quickly, but just as she got the news that she was going to be resettling in Australia, in 2006, Tanzania began pushing some Rwandan refugees back across the border. Rukore camp was on the verge of closing. “We were told to go back to where we came from, that we were no longer welcome there,” Emelda relates, turning the withered Kleenex daintily around in her hands. “I was terrified.” She said that some were taken from the camp by force; others were told they would be killed if they didn’t leave. Emelda knew she couldn’t stay there, but she had nowhere else to go. In the nick of time, she was transferred to Mutabira camp.

Full Circle Exchange

Trying to steady her emotions, Emelda explains that everyone she knows – her friends, her family, all of the people she used to see around her – is dead. She is alive. All the officials Emelda encountered were kind, attentive, and understanding, while the other refugees around her were unable to get any bit of help. She breaks off and looks at Sarah. “I love Full Circle Exchange,” she says, with striking sincerity. “I have received more than a job here. I have received a family.”

Emelda removes the hairnet from her head, exposing perfect braided rows of black hair, with just one bright golden braid catching the light. It’s as bright as her eyes when she remembers something important about her past.

Full Circle Exchange is snuggled in among a nest of office buildings on Cole Road in Boise. “Most of the stuff here is donated,” says Sarah, pointing out a vintage barn door that decorates one wall of the modest classroom. “The guys that were renovating this room had this lying around and gave it to us.” The classroom is part of the Job Readiness Training Program that Sarah runs for Full Circle Exchange.

The program, although still in its early years, has been successful. Local news channel KTVB quotes Sarah stating that JRTP saw a 92 percent job placement rate last year. The missing placement was due to one woman moving away shortly after the end of the program. KTVB describes Full Circle Exchange as a “safe place [for refugee women] to help them move forward with their lives.”

“We take care of the stress first. That is, we give the women an income while they are here so that they don’t have to worry about paying rent or the grocery bill. If these women are worried about making ends meet, they won’t be open to learning and healing.” JRTP offers computer skills training, résumé building skills, English classes, financial literacy, and more, while simultaneously giving the women in the program exposure and training in a wide array of jobs. The program ends with the women receiving a real employment opportunity from a local business right here in Boise.



FULL CIRCLE EXCHANGE

A package of Full Circle Exchange products assembled by Emelda.

“For women to successfully rise out of poverty, or adapt to a new place, they first need to feel welcome and wanted.” Sarah looks around the classroom at the warm-colored fabrics and small decorations that help to make the place cozy. “We



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give them that.” The program also includes healing through art and music therapy, mentorship, and group counseling. “A lot of the time, women get stuck in a vicious circle of poverty because they can’t see the point of getting out. They need to feel important and know that they are worth it. Once you give a woman the sense of empowerment, she can do anything.”

Emelda is a JRTP graduate who now works at Happy Day Chocolates, a small chocolate factory that makes ethically-sourced artisan chocolates. “This is how we can give each woman on-the-job training,” Sarah explains. “The women work here a few hours a day, have quotas, and experience a real work dynamic with managers, trainers, and co-workers. By having it here and running it ourselves, we can work with the women as they learn the ropes of a typical American business environment.”

Sarah Priddy, top left, poses with coworkers at Full Circle Exchange, 2017.



PHOTO CREDIT

Custom-made artisan chocolates are crafted by refugees at Happy Day Chocolates in Boise.



Refugees queue to be transferred from Burundi to Nyarugusu camp in Tanzania, 2015.

Remember Emmanuel

Emelda breaks her story and looks up. She lightens up and laughs. “I want to tell you about the boy!” she exclaims. While she was living in the Rukore camp, Emelda met a boy named Emmanuel. She didn’t know him well, but they went to the same church and she saw him around. At first, she didn’t really care to talk to him, but they had become almost friends when they were both transferred to Mutabira.

“In the Mutabira camp, the UN process involved a series of interviews,” Emelda explains. “They want to see who you are and test you to make sure you really are a refugee.” Sarah nods, adding that many of the women who have come to Full Circle Exchange have had the same experience. “They ask you these questions about your past. Then, several months later, they ask you again to see if your story matches. It’s not a perfect system.” The names of people who had passed their interviews would be displayed on the UNHCR office wall.

“Emmanuel and I had to go through the same process,” Emelda says, smiling again. “We became closer.” They fell in love. “I eventually gave that lucky guy a chance, and we started dating.”

Emelda remembers the day an announcer told the camp that there was a new posting of names for all of those who would be resettled to the U.S. “We looked at the names, and mine was there.” Emmanuel’s name wasn’t. The couple was expecting their first child at the time. Emmanuel wanted to add Emelda to his family’s file, as he was in the camp with his parents. It would have resulted in everyone being placed back at the beginning of the process without knowing how long they would be stuck in the camp. Emmanuel was to be sent to Canada, and Emelda and the baby were to go to the U.S.

“We wanted to get married,” Emelda says, “but we didn’t have time. Instead, Emmanuel followed the ways of his father’s tribe.” Emmanuel hosted a small celebration for his whole family so that they could meet Emelda. His parents accepted her wholeheartedly, and she finally felt safe. “When you are introduced to his family, that is when you know a man truly loves you.” She smiles, remembering how she told him: “I love you so much, and I want to grow old with you. I will have your baby, and in the future we will get married and be a family.”

Emmanuel’s son was born on July 14, 2014. In February of the following year, Emmanuel left for Canada. On their child’s first birthday, Emelda walked out of a plane carrying the 1-year-old boy named Remember Emmanuel into Boise, Idaho.

Emmanuel, still in Canada, calls Emelda every day. The two hope to find a way to be together.



LAURA WINSLOW, a native of Denmark, holds bachelor’s degrees in sociology and marketing from Boise State University.