Ndayishimiye Innocent
BORN A REFUGEE, HE HELPS OTHERS FIND THEIR WAY
Ndayishimiye Innocent was a third-grader when the bomb was dropped on his school. He survived, but saw friends losing limbs and, to his horror, dying. The schoolhouse was shattered, and so was life as he knew it.
Rebels had invaded Rwanda, and the government was fighting back. The civil war would send Innocent and his family across country and over borders in a years-long search for safety.

It was a journey that would teach the young boy life lessons—about empathy, advocacy, volunteerism and the importance of education—traits that would serve him well in his early life and later as an interpreter, translator and tutor in Dallas ISD and a leader in his Burundian community.

Innocent was born a refugee. His parents, ethnic Hutus, were forced to flee Burundi for neighboring Rwanda in 1972, when more than 100,000 Hutus were killed by Tutsi-led government forces in ongoing ethnic strife. Aunts and uncles were among the dead—targeted, he says, because of their education.

Ten years later, Innocent was born in Rwanda. His early life would be marked by war and a devastating loss: “My father did not escape the Rwandan war because of the nature of his job, which put his life at risk.” Following his father’s death and the bombing of the school, the family moved from place to place inside Rwanda.

“The war was hitting on every corner,” Innocent says. “The fighters continued to advance, and we’d run again. I would go to school and study for one semester, maybe two, then the war would come, and we’d have to flee again.”

In 1994, the fighting intensified even more after the downing of the president’s plane, which triggered a genocide that left hundreds of thousands dead. “The war exploded,” Innocent said, and he found himself separated from his family and running for his life—alone, at the age of 12. Only the goodwill of strangers kept him alive during the desperate trek to safety.

“As a child, when you see people running, you follow. And during hard times like that, people help each other. Persons older than me looked after me. It was a long journey.”

THE LONG WALK TO SAFETY

The walk to Tanzania lasted five weeks, and from there the group was able to reach their destination, Kenya, in a week by bus. Innocent had no way of knowing that his mother and grandfather had survived and made it to Tanzania, where they
would call a refugee camp their home for the next 13 years. His brothers and sisters, who also scattered as they fled, later met up with his mom, grandfather and youngest sister at the Benaco refugee camp in Tanzania.

But Innocent would remain in Kenya for more than five years, wondering about his family, hoping desperately to be reunited with them. Again, older people looked out for him, and he was sheltered by a group of mostly Burundians who lived together to save money.

Still, he says, “It was not easy. It was very sad, living your teenage years without your parents, brothers and sisters.” And there were potentially life-altering decisions to make. “In Kenya, the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission for Refugees) wanted to send me to a camp called the Kakuma. I was afraid. There were no schools there; nothing you can do there at all. So I decided to stay in Nairobi, where there was one of the region’s organizations helping refugees, and a school accepting refugees. That NGO (non-governmental organization) was taking care of us, paying the school fee for us. That’s how I managed to study.” He attended the school in Kenya from seventh to 12th grade, finishing high school.

Innocent credits his family’s background for giving him the drive to finish school despite the odds. “For me, there was this push. My mom did not get a chance to go to school because during her time, girls were not allowed. I said no matter what, I need to go and get an education. I had trust in myself. Also, I had my grandpa, who I had been very close to during the four years we’d spent moving around in Rwanda. He was like my best friend and advised me a lot about the importance of education.”

Finally, with the help of the Red Cross, which reunited families through the correspondence of refugees searching for their kin, “I was able to know where my family was, and then I got to join them in

---

“I SAID NO MATTER WHAT, I NEED TO GO AND GET AN EDUCATION.”
- NDAYISHIMIYE INNOCENT

At Kanembwa refugee transit camp in Tanzania, awaiting resettlement.

Grandfather, ‘the man who prayed for me.’
He continued his studies for two years in the camp in Tanzania, earning a teaching certificate, then taught in a refugee-run school at the camp, not earning a salary but being rewarded informally by parents who bartered rations for their children’s schooling. It was at that camp, the Lukole refugee camp in Tanzania, that he became an advocate for health education, co-founding COVAS (Consortium of Volunteers to Support People With AIDS), a refugee association for people living with HIV.

“People were stigmatized because of their health status,” he said, “and we realized no one would see the impact this was having on the refugee community if we did not raise this problem as a major issue. So we started educating the community on respecting people regardless of their health status.

“We were able to build playgrounds to bring together HIV orphans with kids whose parents were AIDS-free, where all could play together to help overcome the stigma of AIDS. By bringing the kids together, we were able to bring the community together,” helping to empower people to combat the virus.

Meanwhile, he and his family were awaiting word on their resettlement to the U.S. “The process took a long time,” he said. “You have to wait for almost two years after applying.”

The first to get word that they were coming to the U.S. were his mother and brother. “I was so happy, because the one thing I wanted most to see was my mom resettled in a safe place. We were living like stateless people. We didn’t have anywhere to call home. In a refugee camp, you don’t live, you survive. And there are so many issues. Rape. Robbery. All kinds...
of issues. So to see that your mom is getting a nice place to go and stay safe, that was good news. That was the first good news I had in my life."

His mother and brother came to Dallas, followed by his grandpa, an older brother, then his big sister – the oldest – with her husband and six children.

When he got the news that he was coming to America, he says, “Oh, I was so happy. First of all, I knew I had family here, not like my mom who came first. For me to come, I already had the news about the U.S., so I considered myself happiest of all because I already understood what it was going to be.”

In Dallas, his first job was at a supermarket, where managers found fault with him because, they said, he didn’t smile. “So you see someone who’s been a refugee, and you tell them to smile,” he chuckles now. “During the war, some people who came to kill you were smiling. Why do I have to smile, I thought. …They ended up firing me because I didn’t smile.”

After that, he went to work at DFW Airport in a custodial job, and because he spoke English unlike most of his co-workers, he was hired as a supervisor, training custodians and managing custodial work.

Innocent had learned English, as well as Swahili, in Kenya. In Rwanda and Burundi, he had spoken French. He also speaks Kirundi, his native Burundi language, and Kinyarwanda, the native language of Rwanda. When he came to the United States, he learned Spanish, too.

After two years of working at the airport, he enrolled in Richland College and continued to work. Transferring to UT Dallas, he earned a B.S. in biomedical engineering and completed an internship at a manufacturer of medical devices in Plano before taking another job in technology.

**THIS IS HOME**

He and his wife, Beatrice Niyubuntu, who met in junior college and married in 2009, have two children, a boy turning 11 and a girl, 8.

When his children reached what he calls “the learning age” of 5 and 8, he felt he needed to spend more time with them than his job allowed. “I thought, who else will they learn from but me? So I decided to find a job that would give me time to be the father and provide all necessary education for my kids. I looked at Dallas ISD and found they had jobs that would let me make use of my previous background in education. I came to Dallas ISD in 2018.

“When I started working here, I felt inspired by education because it’s something I love to do. So I went to UNT and got another degree in public health, and now I’m going for my master’s in education; primarily to teach mathematics for middle school, 4th to 8th grade. ... Once I get my master’s I will have to continue, to get my Ph.D. for my teaching career. ... I’m a lifetime learner.”

“I see that education is the most important thing for human beings,” Innocent says. “I see how the regions lacking education are the regions most affected by poverty and all kinds of disease. So I will focus on developing education that fosters knowledge to society, improving education in Third World countries. I’m here, but our background is Africa. And we know what Africa is missing. We are suffering all these conflicts because most of the people are not given a chance for education. So I see myself investing back wherever I’m needed, in Africa or wherever I’m needed. I’m willing to put my time into education research.”

‘We live in a country where we can plan for our children’s future.’

Family is everything. Innocent, Tony, Beatrice, Kayla.
"WE SURVIVE BECAUSE WE KNOW HOW TO WORK TOGETHER."
- NDAYISHIMIYE INNOCENT

TRANSLATION, AND MUCH MORE

In Dallas ISD, Innocent works in Communication Services on a team of translators and interpreters that is crucial to the school district, whose students come from 150 countries and speak 70 languages.

“Our job is more than translation,” he says. “It’s more than mentoring. It’s more than advocating. We work with minority communities, many of whom don’t know how the education system works, how they can access the resources we have here in Dallas ISD. We support families in terms of translation, mentoring, tutoring children, improving literacy, and communicating with authorities. During the COVID season, for example, we’ve been on the front lines, translating health documents that parents can understand in their own language. ... If information is needed, if different communities need support, we are there to support them.”

His work carries over to his community, where he is president of the Dallas Burundian community and chairman of the Alliance of Burundian Communities in Texas – representing, in addition to Dallas, Abilene, Houston, Fort Worth and Amarillo.

A champion of the district’s diversity, he believes it is something to celebrate and preserve. “We survive because we know how to work together. Diversity is really important to keep our society moving, not only now but in the future. Our society 50 years from now will not be the same; we’ll continue to be more multicultural. So we need to be prepared for when that happens, to cooperate, to live together regardless of our differences. Diversity is so important for Dallas ISD and for our kids, too.”