

### **Finding a Home**

A Congolese community shares their stories, their company and a place to sleep.

It's a brisk Friday evening in July—nothing out of the ordinary for Johannesburg's arid winter. I've bundled up for the night in four short-sleeved layers and a hooded sweatshirt—a makeshift thermal outfit for the under-packer. I'd soon find out that I should have also layered my socks.

Tonight, I'll forfeit the familiar comforts of my dorm room at the University of the Witwatersrand. Instead, I'll sleep in a United Nations disaster relief tent shared by a fellow journalist and six exiled Congolese men at the Rifle Range Road displacement camp on the outskirts of Johannesburg.

The camp houses 1,700 foreigners from other African nations in a tent community set up for their protection by the South African government. The camp residents have been subjected to violence and threats by native South Africans who banished them from their communities and attempted to take over their jobs and businesses. Erected in June 2008 after just two days of intense construction, Rifle Range Road stands as the largest displacement camp in Johannesburg.

### **When the sun goes down**

It's 9 p.m. when our car rolls up to the fence manned by two armed security guards. Immediately, they stop us. A crisp breeze chills my face as I roll down my window to speak to the guard glaring down at me. His expression is stern. He seems a bit

more hostile than the other guards we've encountered during our numerous daytime visits to the camp.

We'd find out later that's the nature of the night shift. Camp residents are more prone to getting drunk at night and starting fights, or they'll use the darkness to shade thievery. The night guards have to be tougher than their daytime cohorts.

The guard wonders why my 26-year-old colleague Judy Lelliot and I are at the camp at such an odd hour. The humanitarian groups have all left. Reporters had returned to their newsrooms hours ago. Even the camp manager, Buks Burger, has left for the day. What could a couple of seemingly naïve student journalists want to do at the camp after hours?

We're spending the night, we tell him.

Our peculiar response amuses the guards. But after a phone call from their boss approves our mission, they hastily let us pass.

### **A divided path**

We park and begin walking the familiar path to the northeast corner of the camp, past the surprised looks of the Somalis and Malawians. My white skin and the expensive camera gear dangling from Judy's shoulder make us a target for wandering eyes.

Before long, we reach the boundary path that separates the Muslim Somalis from the Christian Congolese. These groups have a deep history of distrust, so the wide path acts as a buffer separating the two from the lingering stigmas of conflicting religious beliefs that have provoked decades of struggle between their countries.

As I walk across the path, I think about the divisions throughout Africa—borders within borders, prejudices within the same race, tension and hate within the same country. These social and religious divisions resonate through Rifle Range as well. Without them, the camp would disintegrate into chaos.

It's these distinct communities that led Jean-Baptiste Kanda-Kanda and his family to seek refuge at the camp. Jean-Baptiste is the first to greet us as we cross the divide into the Democratic Republic of the Congo's community. He's happy to see us, as usual, but looks concerned about our safety. The roughly 6-foot-4, 225-pound Congolese family man has taken it upon himself to guide us around the camp every time we visit. Tonight would be no different.

### **No easy answer**

Jean-Baptiste leads us past rows of tents, roaring campfires, the sounds of lively conversations, the smells of bread baking and rice cooking to tent number 174. I know this tent well. It's Pastor Raphaël Mbombo's tent.

Pastor Raphaël, 32, is a community leader among the Congolese. When I poke my head into his 6-foot-high tent to say "Bonjour," he hops to his feet, with plenty of headroom to spare, and comes out to shake my hand. His handshakes usually last about three minutes. His hearty grasp makes me feel welcome as he speaks in his native French, locking his one steady eye with mine while the other wavers lazily. Two years of college French don't take me far in conversations with the pastor.

Soon, familiar faces circle Judy, Pastor Raphaël, Jean-Baptiste and me. There's the pilot, the lawyer and the doctor. I can't remember their names, but that's OK. In the camp each professional is addressed by his title.

When their native South African neighbors attacked the Congolese in May, they were forced to abandon their homes, practices and businesses. But that didn't take away their degrees or status within their own community.

After struggling through Franglish—our best version of each other's language—the pastor takes Judy and me to a campfire near his tent. There, about a dozen wide-eyed Congolese, intrigued by our late-night presence, welcome us. Pastor Raphaël pulls up two upside-down buckets so Judy and I can sit next to the fire.

The scene conjures up fond youthful memories of summer camp. But for the Rifle Range Road residents, camp life is an ongoing nightmare that keeps them from pursuing their dreams. They don't want to be here. They want nothing more than to find a safe home in another country that isn't suffering from a political and economic crisis like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and isn't conflicted with xenophobic tension aimed at foreigners like them.

### **Fireside chats**

Conversation around the fire is casual. The Congolese ask about my interest in journalism and media coverage of the U.N. displacement camps. They let me know their discontent about what they've read in the newspapers. Coverage could be improved, they say, by promoting community action against xenophobia and educating people about the hardships inflicted on foreigners.

“South Africa doesn’t care about anyone’s safety,” says Joseph Mbuyi, 18, of Pretoria. “[Action] goes beyond what people say. It’s what they do.”

Joseph was about to graduate from high school when he was forced to leave his family and seek refuge at Rifle Range in June. He was taking the bus home after school one day when he noticed a mob brandishing machetes, iron pipes and baseball bats waiting for him at his bus stop. He yelled for the bus driver to keep driving, and she did.

He never turned back.

Like many others at the camp, all Joseph wants is to get on with his life, to finish high school and study law, journalism or political science. He wants to pursue opportunities, not just dream about them.

“Time is already passing. I can’t afford to sit in a camp for another year,” Joseph says. “But I can’t go back to a school where I will be abused or killed.”

I walk with Joseph down to a group of a dozen high school kids gathered around another campfire scorching out of a metal container. I’m surprised to hear the group talk about issues ranging from xenophobic violence and safe sex to local and national politics. They speak from experience.

#### **Tent 174**

Around 10:30 p.m. Pastor Raphaël and the doctor come to tell me they’ve prepared a spot in their tent. While heading back to my resting place, I’m stopped by Jean-Baptiste.

“Do you have everything you’ll need for tonight? Are you sure you’ll be comfortable?”

I can tell he's still worried about my safety, but he's sympathetic to my cause. "You know, you're doing God's work."

Jean-Baptiste's caring words reflect the Congolese's belief that God will help them find a solution to their conundrum: They can't return to their homes in South Africa nor can they go back to their native country. But these are the only two choices the South African government has given them as ways out of the camp.

Their problems trouble me as I lie on the thin mat that Pastor Raphaël has given me, curled up next to Judy for warmth in the frigid night air. I'm lying under three blankets and wrapped to my ankles with layered clothing, yet I'm shivering. I hear the cries of the young.

For me, tomorrow will be a new day full of promise and freedom. The other six men in the 18-by-11-foot tent won't be so fortunate. They'll have to fend for themselves, fenced off from the land that has oppressed them.

I eventually fall asleep. I don't dream in this place.

### **Freedom of religion**

When I open my eyes, I'm disoriented. The morning sun illuminates the cold blue tent, making it almost impossible to sleep. The tent is empty except for Judy and me.

An angelic harmony draws me out of the tent and toward the center of the camp. Judy follows. In an opening between rows of tents, about 50 Congolese encircle Pastor Raphaël and sing praises to the Lord. As the sun rises, the Johannesburg skyline glows in the distance.

The 5-foot-tall pastor commands the attention and devotion of this transplanted community. Here in the camp, the Congolese can praise the Lord in their native tongue, among their brothers and sisters, without fear of persecution. They call for forgiveness for the enemy that has wronged them and ask for the strength to make it through another day.

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