ANAM* (BURUNDI)

“Being healthy enough to go to school has been my dream.”

See Keza’s Refugee Learner Narrative for another perspective and additional information on Burundi and Rwanda.

Life before Canada

Birthplace and Family

My name is Anam, which means “shining light.” I was born on March 5, 1992, in Burundi. I am Burundi and my family speaks Kiswahili, Kirundi, and Kinyarwanda (Ruanda).

There are seven children in my family—four boys and three girls—plus my father and mother. My father was a professional soccer player. He travelled a great deal playing soccer. My mother was a business woman. She was part of a small shop where she sold vegetables. I helped my mother by taking care of my younger brother and sister while my mother worked. I didn’t go to school because there wasn’t the money to attend school. School was not free. The schools required that families pay tuition fees. The tuition fees paid for the uniforms, books, and the teacher.

In Burundi, we lived in a small city with mostly bicycle traffic. The buildings were mostly made of sand, cement, or wood. I was very close to my parents, including Dad even though he wasn’t at home very much. I was happy living in Burundi. I had a lot of friends there but I didn’t see them that much because I was usually helping my mother.

My family left Burundi because there wasn’t peace. There was fighting every day. We eventually went to Rwanda to escape the war, but first went to Tanzania. We stayed in a city called Gungu in the Kigoma region for a while. One of my bad memories that I have of that time was when my mother got sick in Tanzania and we did not have the money to get help for her from a doctor. Luckily, my father who was away working was able to send some money to pay for my mother to go to a hospital. I believe that her illness was the result of wearing clothing worn by someone else. In our culture, this is not a good thing. Eventually, my mother’s health improved.

My father stayed in Tanzania, but the rest of the family returned to Burundi after a while. But, we did not find peace.

* To protect the participant’s privacy, pseudonyms have been used in this narrative.
BURUNDI

Burundi is a densely populated country of approximately 9 million and borders Rwanda, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Tanzania. It has many similarities with its neighbour, Rwanda.

Diversity

The official languages of Burundi are Kirundi and French. All of the Burundians displaced in 1972, including those who have spent their entire lives outside of Burundi, speak and understand Kirundi. Also, many have picked up Kiswahili from living in Tanzania.

Burundi's major ethnic groups include the Bahutu/Hutu (about 7.21 million), the Batutsi/Tutsi (about 1.2 million), and a smaller population of Batwa/Twa (about 30,000–40,000). The Twa are thought to be descended from the original forest-dwelling inhabitants of Burundi and nearby region. Hutus and Tutsi are believed to have migrated to present day Burundi and the surrounding region centuries ago. Tutsis and Hutus have coexisted in Burundi and the surrounding region for centuries and presently share a common language and many similar values, cultural practices, and traditions. As a result of the conflict and turmoil between the two groups and the desire to unite and reconcile, some Burundis will self-identify as being Burundi or Burundian, rather than Hutu, Tutsi, or Twa.

Burundian refugee characteristics:

• About 40% of Burundian refugees have had no schooling, and 20% are illiterate.

• The majority of refugees are Christian. Most are Protestant, and about 20% are Catholic. A small percent of the Burundian refugees from 1972 are Muslim.

• Burundian society is traditionally patriarchal in nature.

References


I remember hearing gun shots close to our home and we would hear of attacks in nearby places. We did not feel safe living in Burundi and we wanted peace. So we left again, but this time to Rwanda.

We travelled by bus, north to Rwanda to a refugee camp outside the capital city, Kigali. My father joined us in Rwanda. Life was very difficult.

Burundian people were allowed to have their own small businesses in Tanzania but not in Rwanda.

For a while, we tried to live in Kigali but there wasn’t any work for either of my parents and we couldn’t live there because we feared being arrested. We decided to return to the camp because we couldn’t go back to Burundi. My father got some money for working as a soccer coach and playing soccer. There was a small shop in the camp where my mother was able to sell some things. Life was still difficult because we were starting life all over again. We lived in a tent in the Kigali camp. In the camp there wasn’t very much peace. It was not very safe.
We moved to Rwanda when I was 13. I attended my first school when I was 14, in Kigali, Rwanda. I only attended school for about 1 ½ years because I got sick with heart disease and stomach problems. I wasn’t strong enough to continue studying.

My class in the school had about fifty students and one teacher. There were not enough materials for everyone, so we had to share the resources. We sat at long tables, usually three to four students at one table. There were three or four classrooms in the school in total. I was put in a class with other teenagers of similar age. I don’t think that the teachers in the school were well educated, but they tried their best to teach us. But, overall, I did not learn much when I attended that school.
The school week was from Monday to Friday. In Rwanda, there are two school breaks. School would start in February and go to April and then there would be a break for three months then school would reopen in August and go until January. The language used in the school was Kinyarwanda and a little bit of English. The English I learned and spoke in the camp school was different from the English that I learned in Canada.

I really liked going to school. My favourite subject was math and even now I still love math, although I find it hard at times. My biggest difficulty then was learning English. Before I came to Canada I wanted to become a nurse and that is still my hope.

Repatriation of Burundian Refugees and Asylum-Seekers

Following the Burundi peace accord of 2005, Burundi and Rwanda agreed to consider asylum seekers from both countries as illegal immigrants and deport them to their respective countries. This was followed by a tripartite agreement signed by UNHCR, Rwanda, and Burundi for the voluntary repatriation of Burundian refugees in Rwanda. Many Burundian asylum-seekers and refugees were reluctant to return because of ongoing instability and fear of continuing conflict and violence.

Tanzania has increasingly limited the Burundian refugees’ rights to freedom of movement, employment, and property ownership, making it necessary for them to seek resettlement elsewhere.

By May of 2009, UNHCR had repatriated nearly 400,000 Burundian refugees, from Rwanda, Tanzania, and other areas. UNHCR launched efforts to reunite separated children with their parents and family in Burundi from neighbouring countries in 2010–2012.

In 2012, UNHCR reported that it planned to assist the voluntary repatriation of about 20,000 Burundians from other countries in the region.

References

Immigration to Canada

We were all still living in Rwanda when we immigrated to Canada. I didn’t know anything about Canada. All I knew was that living outside of the refugee camp life could be very difficult and dangerous. Because we stayed in the refugee camp, we eventually had the opportunity to immigrate to another country. Our family’s resettlement in Canada was based on health reasons.

When I got sick, I went to the camp clinic. The camp had a doctor and a nurse who looked after 2,000 people. I was given medication for the stomach problems I had developed, but I got sicker. The camp hospital transferred me to the local town hospital. In the end, I was sent to three different hospitals. My heart was growing larger and there wasn’t any equipment for them to do the surgery. They wanted to give me other medication for my stomach to reduce the gas I was experiencing. My stomach already had an infection. I was really sick; I was throwing up blood. I was in a coma for three months. I spent almost two years in the hospital. I also developed problems with my liver. The hospital could not help me with my heart problems, but they were able to help alleviate my liver and stomach problems.

My move to Canada is a direct result of my health problems. We were allowed to immigrate to Canada so that I could get the medical treatment that I desperately needed. I was really happy to come to Canada because getting healthy was the key to my future. Once I was better and stronger, then I could go back to school, work hard, and eventually become a nurse.

But before coming to Canada, we had to return to Burundi one more time. The Rwandan government began to force Burundians in Rwanda to return home and they destroyed the camp near Kigali. Sadly, we had to leave my uncle (my mother’s brother) and his wife and their three children behind.

Starting a New Life in Canada

I was 15 when I moved to Canada. A settlement counsellor from Welcome Place helped us when we arrived. The counsellor met us at the airport.

It was December and it was so cold that I thought that I was going to die from the cold. I couldn’t touch anything because I felt frozen. It was very difficult for me to breathe. When I was in the hospital in Rwanda I was on oxygen most of the time, so the cold weather in Winnipeg made me feel very weak. I could only go outside for very brief periods of time. This is what I remember most about that time. Despite this obstacle, I pushed myself to attend school because I wanted to go to school so badly.
My father put a deposit down on another house we wanted to rent but then we weren’t allowed to move in. We tried to get the deposit back but the person had already spent it. Fortunately, an acquaintance gave us two rooms to live in for several months. Later on we found a house to rent on Anderson. But, there were lots of problems with this house too. We lived there for about a year. We moved two more times again before we settled in East Kildonan. In all, we ended up moving five times in the first two years.

When I think about those years, those were the things that I liked least about Canada: the break-ins, the many moves, having to go back to the hospital, and being cheated out of $2,000. But not all was bad. I really liked the fact that living in Canada has allowed me to get an education and the medical treatment that I needed for my heart and stomach problems.

Also, I like the living conditions and physical environment in Canada. Now that I have had heart and stomach surgery and recovered, I am feeling much better. I am thrilled that I now have good health. I never imagined I could feel so well and healthy. I am now able to walk a good distance without tiring. I am strong enough to attend school regularly. I am able to do whatever I want because I am healthy and feel good.

I am also pleased with my life and relationships. When we arrived in Canada there was a family that my family knew from the camp and we were able to resume our friendship. I easily made friends with young people who speak the same languages as I do. I am still living with my family, which has grown since being in Canada, with the birth of my new brother. I have good relationships with all the members of my family. Everyone in my family is active and either working or going to school except for my now three-year-old brother! No one is experiencing any after-effects from the war or from our refugee experiences. We all found it difficult to learn English. But for all of us, the worst problem we faced living in Winnipeg was finding safe, affordable housing. Now that we have found that in East Kildonan, we are all very pleased.
School Experiences

The first school I attended in Winnipeg was a large junior/senior high school. I went to that school because of a friend of my father. The friend’s son went there and he encouraged my father to enrol me at the same school. The EAL classroom I was placed in had about 18 students (depending on the time of day) with one teacher and an educational assistant. I was placed in Grade 7/8. This is the only school I have attended in Canada.

At first, I spent most of my day in the EAL classroom. I was quiet in class but I worked hard and I handed my work in on time. The teachers saw that I was a good student and worked hard. My EAL teacher was very welcoming, spending one-on-one time with me, helping me develop my English skills, and feel more comfortable speaking English. She also made sure that I got other support, such as a volunteer to assist me with my reading when the EAL teacher was working with the other students. The regular (subject) teachers helped me during the lunch break by giving me their time and helping me with what I didn’t understand. I was also given extra time on tests and exams. I believe that being placed in the EAL program was good for me.

My friendships and relationships with other students in the school were good. Usually, I found it easy to make friends, but I was shy about talking to the boys in the class even though the classes I attended in Rwanda were mixed. There was another girl who also spoke Swahili and I soon became friends with her. I found having a common language helpful in making friends even though we come from different countries. I also made some Canadian friends with students in the regular classes who were taking the same subjects. We became friends by working together and helping each other with the assignments and course work. My friendship with these students goes beyond the school and I see them outside of class. I love being in school in Canada, that was my dream.

I do not work while I am in school, so that I can focus on school. I am looking forward to graduating in June 2013.

Life Today and Hopes for the Future

I have just finished volunteering at The Children’s Museum. My EAL teacher helped my friend and I become volunteers at the museum. Because of this volunteer work, there is a possibility that I will be able to get a summer job at the museum. I love volunteering at the museum because I love working with children.

Next school year, I will be taking Grade 12 Math, Chemistry, Biology, and Dance. I have already completed my Grade 12 English language arts requirements. I have had good experiences at the school. I had the opportunity to develop a good educational foundation and I am being well-prepared for my future. The school has helped me in identifying what I would like to do and career choices. I have received help from student services in making my course selections and how to apply for scholarships. The school has done all the right things for me. They have been great, and there isn’t anything the school should have done differently. I hope that they continue to offer the same programs and supports to me and other students.

I plan to attend university to study pediatric nursing. I already know how to find a vein and insert an intravenous line because of my illness and the long time I spent in hospitals. I remember when I was in the hospital in Rwanda the doctors suggested that I become a nurse.

I am at a point where I am very satisfied with my life in Canada. I am in good health now and I am living my dream of getting a good education. I feel good about myself and my prospects for the future. I am so very happy to share my story.
VIDEO RESOURCES

See Caution Concerning the Use of Resources about War and Refugee Experiences.

**Burundian and Rwandan Conflicts**

*The 1972 Burundians* is a United Nations video by UNFugee about the 1972 Burundi conflict. It appears on the UN’s YouTube channel.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=BluiW35gFw

*Burundi Refugee Displacement* is a video about a Burundian refugee’s experiences with displacement during several periods of conflict.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=chFUjUVp3zU

*The Rwandan Genocide* is a series of videos on the History Channel’s website about the Rwandan genocide and the international reaction to it.
www.history.com/topics/rwandan-genocide

*Rwandan Stories* is a great collection of videos, photographs, and articles exploring the origins, details, and aftermath of the Rwandan genocide through the eyes of both survivors and perpetrators.
www.rwandanstories.org/index.html

*The Rwandan Refugee Crisis: Before the Genocide: Part I* is one of the video resources available from this site which is dedicated to the Rwandan genocide.
www.ushmm.org/confront-genocide/cases/rwanda/turning-points/the-rwandan-refugee-crisis-part-i

**Refugee Camps and Experiences**

*UNHCR Tanzania, Angaara Refugee Camp* is a 2012 video that provides insights about a camp in Tanzania where about 60,000 Burundians are living.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=omEVKdf9YBo

*Burundian refugees in Tanzania worried about the army,* by BBC Africa, discusses the fears of Burundians at the last camp left in Tanzania.

*NYTimes.com—Signs of Peace in Burundi* is a 2008 video about the restrictions placed on Burundians in Tanzania.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=wKILWPSC2mA

*Tanzania: A New Start. The Story of Mawazo Pardon, a Refugee from Burundi* is a video by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Mawazo Pardon has a new lease on life. After spending his entire life as a refugee in Tanzania, he now has the possibility to become a citizen of Tanzania.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=hc_Fsie6j8M

*Burundi: Finding Our Place* is a 2008 video by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees about the challenges faced by returning refugees.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTlNm5WWPE

*UNICEF: Helping returning refugee children in Burundi* is a UNICEF video about support being provided to refugee children.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=CNZP33N4nvw

*Burundi 2012* documents the travels of nine youth and three adults in Burundi, working with Sister Connection, an organization that works specifically with widows and orphans.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=giG9KmvubGg

**Burundians in the Diaspora**

*Refugee Stories: Mudibu, Burundi (Parts 1 and 2),* by USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is the story of Jean Patrick Bimenyimana, whose artistic name is “Mudibu,” who grew up in the central African state of Burundi and was forced to flee after the 1993 civil war.
Part 1: www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcPwM86fSxl
Part 2: www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQt0BFWjcCY

*Saido Berahino shares his own refugee story,* by United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, is a video about Burundian refugee and West Bromwich striker, Saido Berahino, who shares his story of displacement, and how he came to find a new, safe home in the UK.
www.youtube.com/watch?v=VFRGPO8g8zl

*No More Blood in Our Phones (Parts 1–4),* is a video by Anna De Leon MacDonald, a grade twelve student at the Seven Oaks Met School. Anna was inspired to do this documentary after learning about the negative impact Canadian mining companies are having in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.
http://vimeo.com/user12280931