A Student Reflects on his Past as Refugee

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When I was a six years old standing behind the fence in the refugee camp, hungry, wearing tattered clothes and not knowing tomorrow will ever come, I had a dream.

The road to get here was long. It was tiring. The journey was filled with hardships, and my mind was always occupied with the possibility of dying.

I come from a Tanzanian refugee camp. Living in the camp taught me lessons that no man could teach. My dream is what pulled me over and drove me forward in my life. Our most defining moments is when we hit rock bottom because that is when we find hope. Hope is priceless. It does not matter so much where you are today. What matters is that you decide where you want to go and that you take action to get there.

Have you ever been so hungry that it kept you awake?

I lived in a refugee camp for ten years, in extreme poverty.

No one could have ever convinced me that God loved me. No one could have made me see my life as a gift. And no one could have made me believe that I am powerful beyond measure.

When I was in high school, I was an at-risk student with saggy pants — I was referred to as a misguided youth. People did not think I’d ever become anything in my life, and I almost believed them. But little did they know that even when it seemed like I had no sense of direction, I still had a dream.

I am proud to admit it: I am a product of Dr. Martin Luther King.

It is through hearing Dr. King’s speech, “I Have a Dream” that I was inspired to have my own dream. A dream to live my life to my fullest potential, a dream to walk on the road of obtaining character.

Growing up in tattered clothes, I had to walk with no shoes. There were no lights, no electricity and no indoor plumbing. As refugees, my family was fortunate to come to the United States: a priceless opportunity. We knew we were in the land of freedom and the American dream it had to offer us.

But as a teenager, I took it for granted. I found myself in the streets, getting into fights, being sent to detention after detention, misbehaving, and running around with the wrong crowd.

I was bullied in school and had to act like nothing ever happened. I was discriminated against and was removed from a computer class because of the color of my skin. The words of Dr. King rang true with me then and ring true with me now, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.”

I always remember the honor festival event that took place at the end of my freshman year of high school where fifty or more students were recognized, but I had never seen those students or heard of them before. It was in that moment in time when my eyes were opened and I realized that I was not living to my life to my fullest potential.

The kid who sat in the middle of two thousand crowd clapping for others that I did not know. I knew the person I wanted to be. I knew I wanted to be on that stage. I knew I wanted people clapping for me too and I knew very well that would require hard work to accomplish. It was then and there that I made the decision to give it all I had, because I wanted to follow my dream. That decision led me to where I am today.

It is not about what people might judge you to be that define who you are; it is about what you are capable of becoming that makes you who you were created to be. When you live out your dream, you will never realize all the people that you will impact and touch. You can make an impact in the lives of thousands of people around you. Even if your dream only touches one person, that one person may reach out and touch millions.

I am so appreciative of Dr. Martin Luther King, because his speech has made a huge difference in me and has also left an indelible mark not only in this country, but the rest of the world.

At the end of my senior year of high school, the honor festival came back around.

Now sitting in the senior section, I waited as the recognition list began. Within ten minutes, I heard “Now announcing the activity leader of the year, Wilson Kubwayo!” This was the best moment in my life. I do not remember how I got to the stage, I must have walked fast!

As I received this award, people clapped for me, students chanted my name, and I came to believe that there is nothing more to life than to live life to one’s fullest potential. To walk on the road of obtaining character.

Ten minutes after my first award, I heard my name being called again, this time for an excellence achievement award.

Today, I am so thankful. It wasn’t long ago that I was standing behind a fence looking out at a world I did not know. That fence could have defined me. It could have held me back. It could have made me angry, bitter and hopeless. It could have prevented me from reaching my fullest potential. I chose instead to define my own character. I chose to make my future. I chose to make a difference. I am the captain of my soul.