

‘America is Beautiful’

Jerry Burnes | Sunday, March 2, 2014



Chubahiro Moise folds sheets Friday afternoon at Target Logistics Bear Paw Lodge near Williston, where he now works as a housekeeper.

Every time it would rain, wind blasted water through the windowless, but walled compound.

There were no doors, the floors were made of dirt, there very little food and every way to escape from the dreaded surroundings.

If one was willing to challenge a machine gun.

Fast forward 14 years and it makes sense why Chubahiro Moise is always grinning ear to ear. To his primary boss Terry Legions, manager of the Target Logistics Bear Paw Lodge, he’s a source of inspiration and a reminder that her life will never be as bad as what the young man experienced in his past.

“I just can’t believe it,” she said. “It’s such an amazing story.”

As Moise, 26, remembers it, the compound was crowded, roughly the size of a living room with more than 30 people scattered throughout. It was cold and dark, especially when the storms washed through the unprotected walls.

Moise was 10 at the time he was in the compound, located in the heart of a jungle in Africa. His home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, had been mired in a civil war for a decade and the government had begun to implement crimes of genocide years earlier.

The regime had eventually come after his family in 1998 and in September of that year, they were captured with four other Tutsi families and thrown in a prison camp where guards killed all the men, including Moise’s father.

That tattered, windowless compound was a prison camp where Moise, along with his seven siblings and pregnant mother, spent 16 months of their lives resigned to the fact they would likely die in the inhumane surroundings.

“We had to go out into the jungle to use the restroom and the guards would follow you with machine guns pointed at you so you didn’t escape, but where would we go? It was the middle of the jungle,” Moise said. “You’d walk by a skeleton and the guard would point at it and say, ‘That your people,’ but we didn’t react. We weren’t scared because we knew that would be us.”

His mother, Rose Mapendo, gave birth to two of Moise’s younger brothers while in the prison camp.

They were twins, delivered on cardboard boxes with Mapendo pulling her own hair to tie the umbilical cords and using a piece of bamboo to cut the cords. A big honor in Africa, Mapendo named her two sons after two of the head guards of the prison camp, in an attempt to save the family from genocide.

While the guards armed with automatic weapons and the surrounding jungle presented a challenge, inside the prison camp was equally as life-threatening.

At one point, a stray jungle tiger wandered through the openings of the compound and into the middle of the prison camp. Food was scarce and health care was non-existent. Young or old, if someone became sick or malnourished, they were as good as dead.

“It was cold and you were always hungry,” Moise said. “Some days you turn and see some of your friends had died because they were hungry.”

The decision by his mother to honor the guards paid off eventually.

According to an interview with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, an order was sent down to kill the entire camp but the commander moved Mapendo, Moise and the rest of the family to a prison in Kinshasa. They were eventually transferred to a protection center run by the Red Cross in Cameroon. In 2000, the family made it to the United States as refugees in Arizona, and was quite literally given new life.

Mapendo became a human rights activist, helping to raise public awareness for refugees and founded a non-profit to help those physically and psychologically haunted by trauma from extreme violence.

Moise struggled with his transition to America at first. He didn’t know the language or culture very well at all. The most he had in common with his host family and others around him was that his family grew up Christian in Africa.

He debated suicide as the acclimation became harder to handle, but the Arizona refugee host family helped him overcome barriers and pointed him in a new direction in life.

“I want to make a difference in other people’s life,” Moise said. “It’s not always something big, it can be something little...as long you stay breathing, anything can come true. I know that because of things I went through.”

As Moise grew more and more acclimated to America, he began working, starting at a movie theater and later a golf course and Chevron station. To communicate with everyone in his area, he also learned to speak fluent Spanish.

Looking for some way to earn more money, he came to Williston and started working at the Target Logistics Bear Paw Lodge as a housekeeper.

In the truest sense, Moise is an African American, spending 13 years in the U.S. now and gaining citizenship.

He recently returned from a month-long vacation to Rwanda, Africa where his fiancé lives and where he hopes she'll move from one day and come to America. The trip, he said, humbled him because his life in America has spoiled him, allowing him to go out and buy new clothes and a car when he needed. In Africa, it's not the same case.

Those humble roots, he added, have allowed him to live this type life in America and in the Bakken oilfields. They have also allowed Moise to find himself, a person who like his mother, wants to use his experience to provide change and vision for others.

“It's crazy, but it's a lesson you can't replay, a lesson I could never learn any place,” Moise said. “It's a blessing for me. America is beautiful.”