

ATUU WAONAJE

One afternoon my little brother and I were playing on the shores of Lake Tanganyika near our home. Suddenly we saw hundreds of people fleeing for their lives. They were crowding onto a boat, pushing and shoving to get on. We'd heard stories of torture and killing in our country, Zaire – which we now call the Democratic Republic of Congo. War was raging there. I feared for our lives, so I grabbed my brother's hand and ran onto the boat. We crossed the lake and landed in Tanzania, with only the clothes on our backs. This was 11 years ago, in 1996. I was 15 years old and my little brother Msimbe was 11. We were all alone.

Then we lived and slept under trees for a few months until someone took us to Lugufu refugee camp. There, we eventually found our parents, our grandmother and our siblings. Lugufu camp is enormous – it has 32 villages. People live on rations from the World Food Program.

Some Tanzanians called us fighters, robbers, eaters of men. They thought we were incapacitated, people of no value.

Soon after I arrived I knew I must continue my education. But for a long time in the camp there was nothing -- no teaching materials and no school building. We were studying under trees, in schools begun by refugees. I remember I was writing on the cover of a corn flour package. To pay for school I had to sell some of the food we received from the World Food Program, even though it wasn't enough to survive.

Many people didn't want to go to school at first because they hoped they would not be in Tanzania for long. They believed that studying while being in a refugee camp had no sense since the education would not be recognized anywhere.

I attended an English evening class operated by refugees. Most people thought that learning English was a waste of time because we don't speak English in DRC. But in 1999, thousands more people arrived at Lugufu. People realized it was important to study English so they could communicate with people working for the international organizations. My classmates asked me to teach

them English. So I started an evening class. I called this initiative Love Your Neighbor Center.

The Love Your Neighbor Center was very successful. I decided to start a new organization that would do more than just teach English. So, while I was still in secondary school I founded CELA – the Center for Youth Development and Adult Education. In my language, Kaswahili, we call it “Kituo cha Maendeleo ya Vijana na Elimu ya Watu Wazima.”

Our headquarters are in Lugufu camp. But we’re planning on moving to Congo to work with people whose lives have been destroyed by the war.

At our organization we fight against poverty and ignorance. We increase employment opportunities for refugees. We develop programs for women and youth and we provide language training. We organize workshops and seminars. We organize campaigns and conferences. We create awareness on social issues.

We started with just a few volunteers, friends of mine. Now we have a staff of 44 men and women. We have given assistance to

orphans so they can go to secondary schools. We've had a campaign to teach people about HIV/AIDS. Women learn tailoring, soap making, knitting and computer skills so they can find jobs and make a living.

Why do we work with women and children? Our center believes that educating women is like educating the whole world. We want women to tackle their problems themselves and develop confidence. We want women to live without fear. We want them to participate in the decisions that affect their lives. A refugee woman is everything; she is the source of whatever is in her family or household.

Children in Lugufu refugee camp have been raped and forced to be married when they are very young. They have missed out on school, sometimes because they're child soldiers.

We're proud of our achievements. The center has been recognized locally and internationally. We've managed to get financial support from individuals and organizations. Because of our work, every person in Lugufu is aware of AIDS and their

attitudes have changed towards the disease and people who have it. 80% of the youth who speak English in the camp have learned it at our center. Women get jobs because of our programs.

Thank you for honoring me with the Voices of Courage award today.