

## **The Rwagsore Family, Refugees from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Reveal How Compassion and Prosperity Can Survive Genocide**

I met Bienvenu Rwagsore and his young wife Pascasie Nyabirori less than a year after their arrival in the United States. Bienvenu had only recently brought his then-pregnant wife and four small children to the United States, where they lived together in an old Victorian house owned by the church that had agreed to serve as their sponsor when they resettled in Flemington, New Jersey. A mutual friend arranged for us all to meet for the first time in a small Italian restaurant in New York City's Little Italy neighborhood. Bienvenu and Pascasie had not had many occasions to visit the city or to dine in an Italian restaurant. They marveled at the exotic items on the menu, and the exotic people walking the streets. Little did they appreciate how they themselves stood out, a tall and strikingly beautiful young couple with an intriguing and rather exotic mystique themselves.

The language barriers we all faced at this first meeting were daunting. I was the most helpless, having no real proficiency in any language other than English. Pascasie spoke mostly Swahili. Bienvenu was fluent in Swahili and French, but at that time had only limited grasp of English. Fortunately, our mutual friend spoke English and French with perfect fluency. When I asked a question of Pascasie, our friend translated my question into French, and then Bienvenu translated it again into Swahili for Pascasie's benefit. Pascasie's responses then had to pass through the same chain of languages in order for me to make any sense of them. Our conversation was a challenge for all of us, but it was also incredibly exhilarating. We were all so eager to understand and to be understood. After all, what was being discussed were matters of life and death. Our lunch meeting stretched for many hours, and at the end of it all, we had just barely scratched the surface of the stories that Bienvenu and Pascasie eagerly wished to share and I eagerly wished to grasp.

I was able to make several trips after that first meeting to the Rwagsore home in Flemington to collect still more of their stories. I had the good fortune to be able to meet and interview Bienvenu's younger sister, Jeannette Nyakirayi as well. It was not always easy to arrange visits, as both Bienvenu and Jeanette worked full time doing janitorial, cashiering and other work for a local ShopRite in Flemington, while all of the smaller children in the family who were too young to attend public school demanded Pascasie's time and attention. Jeanette often worked the night shift. During the day, she helped Pascasie care for their teeming household, which had also recently expanded with the birth of Pascasie's fifth child. Jeanette was also working on obtaining a driver's license to make getting to and from work easier, and striving to learn computer skills. But my visits to the Rwagsore home were always a pleasure. There

was so much love and joy in that tidy household, whose walls were decorated with brightly colored cut-outs from magazine ads as well as inspirational quotes, and whose children dove into boxes of delivered pizza much like their American peers. The resiliency and adaptability of this family was extraordinary.

Bienvenu was able to tell more of his story through a French translator. During one interview session, a Swahili/English translator was also on hand as Pascasie struggled to tell her own story. Striving in the limited English she had worked hard to master, Jeanette also spent hours—in between all of her other responsibilities—telling me about her life. Together, the strands of their stories rendered a devastating account of what it was like to survive genocide in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), as well as to reside in some of the world's most inhospitable refugee camps.

### **Ethnic Cleansing Forces the Family to Flee**

After Hutu rebels forced all of them to flee their home in the DRC when ethnic-cleansing of the Tutsi population became official government policy in 2000, Bienvenu, Pascassie, Jeanette and other family members experienced separation and profound hardship and loss before reuniting—much later—in a refugee camp in Burundi, some 200 miles from their home.

Bienvenu's oldest sister was burned alive in the family home at the start of the conflict. His brother—and the father of the nephew now in his care—was hacked to death by machetes during the same year, and his brother's wife went missing. Bienvenu, a former teacher of psychology and French and the son of a cattle farmer, was studying law in law school when the conflict erupted. He witnessed fellow students burned alive after having tires doused with gasoline thrown around their necks and ignited. He witnessed one fellow student being tortured with knives inserted into her vagina—before she was killed—for refusing to engage in sexual intercourse with her tormentor. Bienvenu's own life was saved by a classmate who hid him in his room, and then helped Bienvenu cross the border into Burundi.

In the house where Pascasie was hiding when the rebels attacked, she witnessed two women having their throats slit. Miraculously, Pascasie herself was able to escape, undetected by the killers.

All of the family members were separated in the chaos as they fled in different directions. Pascasie, with the three children she then had in tow, made it on her own to Burundi. Jeannette and her younger brother and sister fled to Uvira's higher plateaus, where they lived hand to mouth for a number of months, hiding in forests. They were located by Bienvenu many months later, following an extensive search by the Red Cross.

Sadly, however, the reunion of the family in the large sprawling refugee camp of Gatumba did not gain them any enduring security or refuge. The Gatumba camp, located at the northern tip of Lake Tanganyika in Burundi, was situated no more than one kilometer over the border from the DRC.

At the end of May and beginning of June 2004, warring factions drove out tens of thousands more citizens from the Bukavu area of eastern Congo. The Banyamulenge are Tutsis, the predominant ethnic group in the Bukavu area. On arriving at the Gatumba camp, which also served as a transit station, the Banyamulenge saw that they were being separated and segregated from other ethnic groups there. Alert and suspicious, they began to demand that the United Nations peacekeeping force in Burundi move them out of the camp, as they grew increasingly fearful of an attack—as a concentrated and unarmed group of Tutsis—from Hutu extremist groups.

### **The Family Escapes a Massacre**

At 10:00 p.m. on the night of August 13, 2004, the Gatumba refugee camp was overtaken by a coalition of rebel Hutu forces from DRC, Burundi and Rwanda, armed with heavy and light artillery, grenades, knives and machetes.

Approximately 160 Tutsis—mostly women and children—were brutally massacred during the attack. Their mutilated bodies, many of them burned, were found scattered throughout the camp the following morning. At least one hundred more were injured with machete and bullet wounds.

On the night of massacre, Bienvenu woke to the sounds of the attack. Grabbing a knife, he was able to cut an opening in the back of his family's thin tent-shelter and help at least his immediate family to escape. But the larger family group lost many members that night. Bienvenu's paternal uncles, his cousins and many family friends were all slaughtered. Bienvenu was also separated from his younger brother that night; his whereabouts remain unknown to this day. Although he escaped the massacre, Bienvenu had to struggle to maintain the will to survive:

*That night, only God saved my life, as I had no experience in escaping death before this time. I grabbed the leg of my six-month-old baby. My wife took hold of my son and daughter. They fired at my jacket. Bullets perforating it through and through but none touching my skin. My pants burned on my very body, yet we escaped death that night. But I was left without all hopes for life.*

The family relocated to still another camp in Burundi, where life remained fraught. Food and water were scarce. Each refugee family living there was allocated a monthly ration of flour, beans and oil, and a

handful of salt, none of which lasted more than two weeks. Thereafter, all families went hungry until the next shipment of food arrived. If they were lucky, a family might be issued two bars of soap—to clean themselves, their clothes and their eating utensils for a full month or more. Like many others in the camp, Bienvenu and his family suffered from tuberculosis and malaria.

After a bitter period of profound despair during which he believed that only suicide could bring him relief, Bienvenu pulled himself together and began a determined campaign to get his family out of their hellish circumstances. During the several years that they resided in the camp before being allowed to resettle in the United States, Bienvenu taught at a camp school and founded a human rights group called Action pour la defense des droits Feminins (ADDF), whose mission was to offer counseling and assistance to victims of rape and other forms of gender-based violence.

The camp was filled with little girls, Bienvenu said, many as young as six or seven years old, who had been raped during the conflict. Bienvenu heard of victims sometimes being gang-raped by ten or more men at a time. He met women who had been raped while their children were forced to watch, and in some cases, while their children were still strapped to their backs.

### **Resettlement in the U.S.**

After two years of waiting in this camp in Burundi, where the fear of further reprisals and attacks remained constant, the Rwagsore family was finally selected for resettlement in the United States. They boarded a plane for New York, and after their arrival they made their way directly to the suburbs of New Jersey.

Bienvenu and his family hope very much to create a secure and nurturing home for themselves in this new country, and to restore some of the dignity and peace they lost in the prior decade. But they are also determined to help those who remain in refugee camps or in hiding, and to raise greater awareness about the conflict in the Congo and the millions there who continue to be displaced from their homes and who continue to suffer from horrendous violence, malnutrition and disease:

*Life in the camps is dangerous and people despair that it will ever change. But they can not return home. We suffer much from the knowledge that our relatives remain trapped in such conditions and we are powerless to help them. However, Banyamulenge Tutsis are a people with very strong faith. We pray constantly and it is this prayer that made life in the camps bearable. We did not turn against others or*

*ourselves as a people. We pray that the suffering will end some day. I invite everyone with compassion to contribute in the search for a new life, in a country of happiness and prosperity.*

Against all reasonable odds, the Rwagsore family has a capacity for hope and a determination to help others that is beyond fathoming. Their resourcefulness and perspective on life is nothing short of inspirational.

Lynn Savarese

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