

SAFARI YANGU MAGAZINE

AUGUST 2021
ISSUE 5

THE PROFILES ISSUE



FEATURING THE STORIES OF IMMIGRANTS FROM GABON, HAITI AND ZAMBIA

LOOK

AUGUST 2021

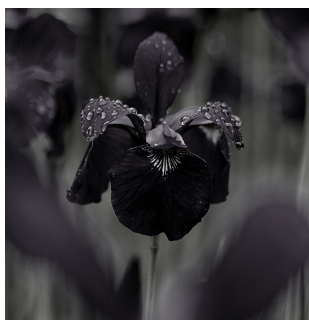
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NOTE FROM OUR FOUNDER

DEAR MEMBERS OF THE SAFARI YANGU COMMUNITY,

THIS HAS BEEN A DIFFICULT YEAR FOR ALL OF US, ESPECIALLY TOUGHER FOR THE IMMIGRANTS. THE EFFECTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAVE BEEN DEVASTATING, WE HAVE MOURNED THE LOSS OF THOUSANDS OF RELATIVES, COLLEAGUES AND FRIENDS YET WE REMAIN STANDING. IMMIGRANTS ARE A RESILIENT BREED OF HUMANITY.

SPECIAL EDITION

WE ALMOST NEVER PUBLISHED THIS MAGAZINE, SAFARI YANGU HAS BEEN FACING MANY HERCULEAN CHALLENGES RECENTLY BUT A SPECIAL GROUP OF BLACK WOMEN STOOD UP AND DECIDED TO CONTINUE THE LEGACY. WITHOUT ANY FUNDING OR RESOURCES, UNDER THE ABLE LEADERSHIP OF AISHA POWELL, ASSISTED BY OMWA OMBARA, THEY CAME TOGETHER AND EDITED THE CURRENT INTERVIEWS WITH IMMIGRANTS TO PUT TOGETHER THIS SPECIAL ISSUE OF THE MAGAZINE.

THIS CALLS FOR A CELEBRATION AS WE ARE ABLE TO TELL STORIES OF AMAZING IMMIGRANTS LIKE EDSON CHIPALO, A YOUNG BOY FROM ZAMBIA WHO WAS ORPHANED AT THE AGE OF 8 BUT ROSE FROM THE LIFE OF SQUALOR ON THE STREETS IN LUSAKA TO A PH.D. CLASS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA.

THE ISSUE ALSO COVERS THE STORY OF TWO BLACK WOMEN FROM HAITI AND GABON, WHO BEAT THE ODDS TO ASSIST THEIR FAMILIES, LEARN ENGLISH AND LATER ON JOIN COLLEGE WHERE THEY RECENTLY GRADUATED WITH MASTERS DEGREE IN SOCIAL WORK FROM COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY AND HUNTERS COLLEGE IN NEW YORK.

WE ALSO GOT AMAZING NEWS FROM TWO MEMBERS OF OUR TEAM. AISHA POWELL IS IN HER FINAL YEAR AT HOWARD UNIVERSITY FOR IN PH.D. PROGRAM IN COMMUNICATIONS, WHERE SHE DOUBLES AS A PROFESSOR AS WELL, WHILE OMWA OMBARA'S STORY IS CURRENTLY BEING TURNED INTO A FILM BY NETFLIX.

NOW YOU UNDERSTAND WHY I'M SO PASSIONATE ABOUT THIS WORK!!

I HOPE YOU ENJOY READING THROUGH THE MAGAZINE.

IN SOLIDARITY,
NICK OGUTU

PETAL IN THE WIND

GRACE'S JOURNEY & CAREER DEVELOPMENT IN BLOOM

AUTHOR: NOALANI HENDRICKS



IRIS, THE NATIONAL FLOWER OF FRANCE (CRED: AARON BURDEN)

BUT IT WAS NOT UNTIL SHE WAS ABOUT 5 YEARS OLD THAT ONE WHITE STUDENT, ALSO GRACE'S AGE, TOLD HER SHE IS NOT ABLE TO COME TO SCHOOL ANYMORE BECAUSE "SHE'S BLACK."

When Grace Obama first came to New York City from Grenoble, an area located in southeastern France, at age 13 with her mother -- she would have never had anticipated she would undergo a drastic change in perspective about race and life. Both of Grace's parents are from France: her mother has Gabonian roots while her father, who lived in Germany for an extended period, origins are from the Congo. However, Grace's staunchly French national identity was challenged starting from a young age due to her race.

As a young child, Grace did not realize she was any different from other kids. She was unaware of being "Black," and the weight that label carried. Grace was raised in a predominately white area, and throughout kindergarten and

elementary school, she found herself as the only Black child. In middle school, the number of Black students raised slightly raised to about three or four students. But it was not until she was about 5 years old that one white student, also Grace's age, told her she is not able to come to school anymore because "she's Black." At that moment that Grace realized she was of a different race than the majority. In a motherly way, Grace's mom talked to the little boy and explained all different kinds of children can come to school, he understood and became one of Grace's best friends at school. However, this instance, marked the first iteration of Grace's racial formation because it inspired a newfound sense of racial awareness.

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Later, in elementary school, her hair became the new discussion point. Grace described her hair as somewhat permed but still textured and thick. Her usual hairstyle was cornrowed in the front with a puff at the back. Kids would touch her hair and remark it felt like cotton.

Grace explained that back in France there was little conversation about race, saying “In France, everyone is supposed to be French.” However, Grace still described a feeling of differentness as it pertained to race – being Black and of African descent – the experience was different. The French colorblind agenda failed to describe her, and many others lived experiences of this differentness. Grace remarked how she often felt like there was “no room” to talk about race because the focus was on French assimilation. In middle school, Grace explained that kids went to school based on where they lived. If they lived in a nice area they went to a nice school. If they lived in a poor area they went to an under-resourced school typically. Consequently, students of color who oftentimes lived in poor areas ended up going to those under-resourced schools. French people, Grace explained, would chalk up this connection between lack of resources and brown and Black students to just being a “coincidence.” The French centralized public-school system appeared egalitarian on paper but Grace notes the difference was felt. Even today Grace feels that in France there is little conversation about race. The lack of conversation perpetuates the disparities that exist and make them fester and grow under the mask of French equality. This issue is not unique to France, as many minorities face systematic racist issues that governing bodies often ignore.

Grace explained that when the predominately Black cast in the movie *Think Like a Man* came out in 2012, her French friends said they could not watch the movie due to the lack of diversity since the cast was Black. French movie critics labeled the movie as “not diverse.” Despite popular beliefs in French pop culture at that time, the movie was not set for release in France although it was not officially banned as per an official statement by Sony Pictures at the time. The French general public and cinema circles claim that the Black film was “not diverse,” and failed to depict or mirror the multiethnic French landscape. However, the question is how equitable is multiethnic France? Like France’s national flower, the Iris, is the petals or treatment of different races disproportionate?

Grace recalls a Senegalese French girl who once attempted to voice the racial disparities she experienced but she was only met with backlash because of a widely held insistence that all “French people are equal.” Once Grace moved to the USA, she believes that she finally felt equipped to describe her experiences with her newly learned vocabulary of words like “microaggression.” However, knowing the vocabulary proved not enough because she often felt like she couldn’t speak about it at home. She faced a fairly common immigrant child dilemma -- walking on a thin tight rope trying to



PHOTO OF GRACE OBAME (CRED: GRACE OBAME)

meet parental expectations and maintain a healthy sense of gratitude for the opportunities she had while balancing an urge to speak up about challenging experiences in a new country.

The “louder” American way of dealing with issues that pertain to race greatly contrasted her experience in France. As Grace shared her French experiences, it alluded to a pressurized feeling like a silent tension in the air. She described a constant sense that this “is not the right time” to discuss race. The move to New York made it easier for Grace to speak about race, and even opened up more conversations between her and her mother, both of whom rarely spoke about race while living in France. As time unfolded she became more empowered, felt much more aware of her own blackness and was ambitious to create hands-on change.



GRENOBLE A CITY IN FRANCE (CRED: JKY.77)

While the move to New York City felt refreshing, providing a new adventure for Grace came with its share of financial difficulties. Grace's mother chose to move to New York to learn English professionally and further her opportunities at work. She took a one-year sabbatical to learn English at LaGuardia Community College. The pair often lived in-between hotels for two to three months while trying to find an apartment. Eventually, they rented a studio and later moved to a rented room. Their financial woes were deeply rooted in an immigrant experience, without having a credit history Grace's mom had to pay months of rent in advance.

Despite this, Grace shared there was a major highlight to living in New York City: Newcomers High School in Long Island City in Queens.

Grace lit up remembering her experience there with students from countries from every corner of the world like the Congo, Guatemala, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic. At Newcomers High School, there was a sense of comradery, community, and support as they navigated the big apple. The students supported each other and did things like helping each other learn English. Unfortunately, Grace only attended the high school for one year because the principal wanted her to attend a regular high school due to her English proficiency.

When Grace and her mother moved to Harlem, they were finally able to settle down in a two-bedroom apartment. In this historically African American neighborhood, she attended an all-Black high school called Fredrick Douglass Academy and

thought "wow I have never seen this in my life, I felt so empowered!"

The school emphasized African Americans' journeys, and specifically Fredrick Douglass's story, amongst the larger context of U.S. history. Consequently, Grace became quieter because although she is Black, she was not culturally African American. In addition, her peers would call attention to her French accent or make comments about the way she spoke. She did make friends there, however, and overall remarks it was a great experience. During her time in school, Grace had another major stressor arise: visas.

Her mother came as an F1 student and she an F2 dependent. The fear of what would come next for Grace began to boil to the surface as college years approached. By the end of her sophomore year of

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high school, she feared that she would have limited options in the future. Luckily, both Grace and her mother were able to gain citizenship.

Grace later went on to attend American University in Washington D.C. for college, where she funded her education through scholarships and loans. D.C. was too a transformative experience --it felt clean compared to New York according to Grace. The only downside was “everything closed early,” she exclaimed. After three years Grace finished her Bachelors in Interdisciplinary Studies in Communication, Law, Economics and Government.

At first, Grace thought she wanted to work in politics but after two major internships -- one in social work and the second on Capitol Hill -- her plans changed. While working in practical services interning with social workers to supply mental health support for people after incarceration and detention, she learned that her true passion was in social work. Her second internship was on Capitol Hill firmly proved to her that politics was not for her. Grace then pursued a Master’s in Social Work at Columbia University, deciding that “hands-on work” was her calling in any field she pursued down the line. The pre-trial services internship, which is where she did pre-trial services a few times per week, influenced that decision. During her master’s programs, she decided to get a concentration in programming so that she could execute ideas in a hands-on way. She then interned in the Bronx and worked with social workers to help provide emotional support to clients who were victims, but it was limited in scope. After this experience, she decided she wanted to work on a level that provided emotional support. She changed her field to clinical and did her clinical practice at Rikers Island.

When she graduated with her master’s she worked with African immigrants that needed mental health support at the Services Corps before it lost funding in 2019. Today, Grace works as a discharge planner, where she helps patients admitted to the hospital who require a safe discharge home. This job combines both her clinical and programming background and knowledge about health services. In the long term, Grace hopes to contribute to the betterment of the mental health of African immigrants and work as a discharge planner for many countries in Africa starting with Gabon. Her goals are always changing -- but her heart always links back to Africa. Her Gabonian grandfather made her promise “to bring her degrees to Gabon” and she wishes to fulfill that promise and create a substantial impact. Like a petal in the wind Grace’s mind bloomed in the United States. She grew more ambitious and was able to label her experiences and inequalities. The United States is far from utopia, as it has its fair share of serious deadly systemic issues. Nevertheless, Grace’s soft landing on New York City’s pavement perfectly, mixed with her personal and career development, gave her the power to potentially change the world in the long term.



THE CITY OF GABON (CRED: WORLD BANK GROUP)

LEARNING HOW TO FLY NORTH

A SINGLE MOTHER'S JOURNEY FROM HAITI TO THE UNITED STATES

AUTHOR: CHIREAU WHITE



AERIAL PHOTOS OF HAITI (PHOTO CRED: KELLY LACY, JUNIOR CERANOR NELSON)

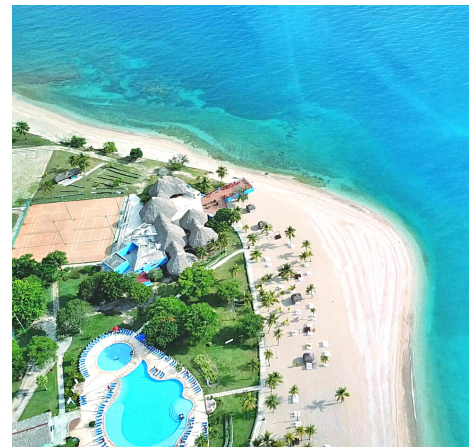
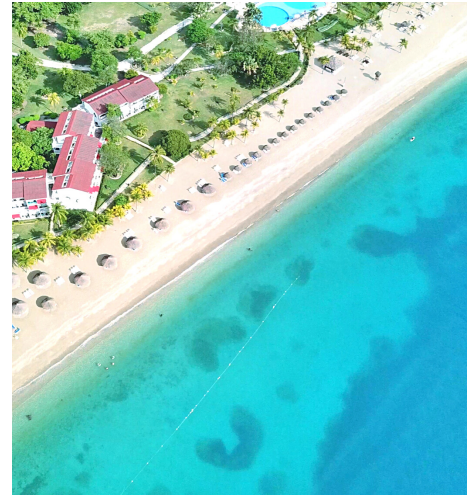
HAITI IS A COUNTRY THAT OCCUPIES THE LEFT SIDE OF HISPANIOLA. HAITI IS THE WORLD'S FIRST BLACK-LED REPUBLIC

"Piti, piti, zwazo fè nich li."

"Little by little the bird builds its nest."

-Author Unknown

Tropical birds are known for their beautiful colors and their ability to migrate from the familiar to the unknown. Some researchers argue the need to migrate is instinctual while others believe it is a result of changes in their environment. Although humans and birds are vastly different creatures, we both share the ability to adapt, change, rebuild and defy the familiar. That concept of adaptability is especially particular to the United States, as it is a country of immigrants. In fact, more than 44.9 million immigrants live in the



United States according to a 2019 Migration Policy Institute report. A growing section of this population is Haitian immigrants, with 687,000 residing in the U.S. as of 2018. The Haitian people bring with them their vibrant art, food, music and culture that represents the country's robust and unique history. For many Haitian immigrants, the journey to the U.S. is a well-thought-out process that requires a lot of deliberation and planning -- like the process for Sannecie Pongnon.

Ms. Pongnon was born and raised in an upper-class area of Haiti. She was close to her father and 9 siblings, with whom she shared a home. Her father and mother had 3 children together, although her mom had a separate house around the same area in Haiti.

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PHOTO OF SANNECIE PONGNON (PHOTO CRED: SANNECIE PONGNON)

was unable to monetarily assist, her mother went with her older brother to the U.S. However, due to an issue with her mother's visa, she was detained for almost a year and eventually came back to Haiti. Upon her mother's return, she formally separated from her father and requested for Sannecie and two of her siblings to live with her. "My dad tried to fight but she ended up getting us," Sannecie expressed. "I stayed with her for two years. I would still visit him because I went to school in the area." She went on to disclose "[my mom] unexpectedly became sick and died in a few days. I was 13 going on 14 at the time. She died at 39 with an unknown disease. I had to then go back and live with my dad."

Sannecie returned to her childhood home, but things were different. Her father had taken a new wife, but he continued to struggle with money. He told his children, "even if we [don't] have money, you should not walk around like it." Her father supported her, and her siblings and they all were able to finish their education. When Sannecie finished high school, things became even more challenging as her stepmother became less tolerant of having adult children in the family home. Her father also became sick. Sannecie later discovered he had high blood pressure, diabetes and had suffered from a stroke. She vividly recalled that "he was in a wheelchair" upon returning from a trip to the U.S. She later learned how to administer insulin to him, twice a day, to cut down on doctor costs. Due to his new health issues, he could not work as hard as he used to, so he and his new wife had to take on additional responsibilities in the store. This caused her to not be as engaged with Sannecie and her siblings and eventually "pushed us (them) to go find work," she explains. Fortunately, Sannecie was able to find a job at a shipping company and moved in with relatives who were in the area. During this time, Sannecie became pregnant with her daughter, Tracy. She remembered being afraid and worried about what her father would think. For the first trimester, she was often sick and could not see her father. When she was eventually able to visit him, she found him in a dire situation upon her arrival. "I came to check on him and found him in a diabetic coma," she recalls. "I called the hospital, but they said there were no ambulances, so I contacted one of our neighbors and they got their truck and took him there. My siblings stayed with him at the hospital and initially encouraged me not to come to visit him [but I later found out] he died that day...that was in 2000."

She also played a maternal role in the life of all of Sannecie's siblings, whose birth mother lived in the United States. When Sannecie was younger, her father had a good job and ran a dollar store out of the first floor of their house. She recalled growing up with maids and servants assisting with the maintenance of the house and rearing of the children. She remembered living well until her early adolescence until her father lost his job. In addition, competitors had entered the area resulting in decreased business for their dollar store. As a child, Sannecie noticed the maids disappeared, her older siblings were instructed to manage the household, and she was moved from a private to a public school. "My father was making money but for some reason, he lost his job," she recalls. Around this time, her mother was becoming unhappy with living in Haiti and encouraged Sannecie's father to help her go to the United States. When he

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PHOTO OF THE HAITIAN FLAG ON THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE (PHOTO CRED: LIFE MATTERS)

Sannecie used the adversities she has faced to build a life for her and her daughter. She hired a maid to care for Tracey after she was born, continued to work and began taking college courses. She was able to become an executive assistant at a popular mill company with headquarters in Kansas. She worked, raised her daughter, and lived in Haiti well into her early 30s before considering moving to the United States. Ms. “My brother, who stayed in contact with us after he moved to the United States, offered to file for me and my daughter to come here,” she states. “I saved up money for a lawyer, at least 6 months of living expenses, and that is how we were able to move to the [US]. I had agreed because my brother had offered, and I thought it would be a better life for me and Tracy.”

Sannecie immigrated to the

United States in 2007. On arrival, she stayed with her brother’s friend who helped her find an apartment.

She reported difficulty finding an apartment because “we did not have credit” and describes the overall migrations as “a big adjustment.” She says “I went from having a maid to help take care of my daughter and the house, to having to take care of my daughter, the house, and working full time.” Sannecie tried to apply for school but was told she would have to wait a year to qualify for financial aid. She applied to job after job for three months to no avail. There was a period of time where she went back to Haiti to work so she could sustain her life in the U.S. At the end of those three months, her brother’s friend helped her get a job as a cashier, and a few years later, she got promoted to a supervisory role at a shipping company.

She then went on to enroll at Medgar Evers College. She remembers it being a hectic time for her: she would run from work to school and then would have to get her daughter. “My brother would help in dropping her off near the school where I would have to pick her up,” she said. Although it was hectic, she knew she could get through it by drawing from her family’s resilience.

When 2014 came around, it was filled with many ups and downs. Sannecie became pregnant with her second child, Zayden. However, when he was born in 2014 her marriage quickly dissolved soon after. She graduated with a bachelor’s from Medgar Evers College that year but also lost her job at the shipping company. It took her 7 months to find another source of employment. During that time, one of her brothers died from a

stroke at the same age as her mother, thirty-nine. Reeling from the loss of her brother and her own financial hardship, Sannecie looked to God and her community for support. She proudly disclosed converting to Christianity at the age of 13 in response to her mother's missionary work. Through her church family, she was able to find a friend that referred her to a job with Visiting Nurse Service of New York. She started in an administrative position and was soon promoted. She met a good friend, named Stephanie, who pushed her to go back to school for her master's in social work. Sannecie remembered feeling apprehensive about going back to school. "English is my third language," she said. "My first is my native language Kreyol and the second is French that I learned in school. To go back to school and know all these things, it was hard for me." While working towards her master's, Sannecie continued to be a full-time mom to her son and her daughter, who was also working and in school. She received support from a sisterhood of women who helped her work, go to school, and empathized with her childcare needs. She reported, especially needing this support when COVID-19 hit New York hard in early 2020. In the face of all these adversities, Sannecie Pongnon was able to graduate from Hunter Silberman School of Social Work on August 29, 2020, with a master's.

Today, Sannecie and her family live in Brooklyn. She is studying for her license to take the LMSW exam; her daughter, Tracey, is studying child development in college; and her son, Zayden is in a gifted and talented program. "As a single parent, I never thought I would be able to do what I have done or gone through what I have in this country," she said. "But I did it!" Sannecie says that the media often depicts immigrants as being desperate to live in the United States but that is not true for everyone. She disclosed coming to the U.S. was an option she chose rather than a dream. She hopes her life in Haiti and in the US can serve as a model for her children. She leaves this advice for Haitians considering moving to the U.S.:

"Go with the flow. The way Haiti is now, many people may be coming to pursue their dream. But it is important to know it will not be given to you on a silver platter. This was a mentality I initially had as well, but this is not the case. Money will not grow from trees. This is a life where you will have to work extremely hard. [You will encounter] a language barrier. [You will also have to think about] class. If you are someone who comes from a higher class, you may have to work hard and become accustomed to a different way of living. Come with an open mind and go with the flow...There is a lot of distraction in this big country. Take advantage of the things this country has to offer. Ask from people who came before you and so you can learn. Things will not be a straight path, there will be bumps along the way, but you need to stand up and keep moving."

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AFRICAN IMMIGRANT COMMUNITY HOSTS PARADE AND FESTIVAL IN HARLEM, NEW YORK

AUTHOR: POJANEE FLEURY

The African Immigrants Commission of New York and Connecticut (AIC) is a collective of concerned immigrants from Africa and the Diaspora. It is an organization that advocates for issues important and unique to the African immigrant community. The commission acts as a bridge between resource agencies in New York State and Connecticut, and African immigrants and their families. Since its inception in December 2018, AIC has addressed many issues including discrimination against African immigrants, inequalities in the school system and more. AIC has conducted outreach with pertinent information like voter rights and registration. Additionally, AIC has hosted workshops such as Social Services 101, Immigration Law Q&A presented by Brewster Law Firm, and the 2020 Census in partnership with NKO USA Inc and Mandingue NKO West, Inc.

African immigrants have a long and rich history. For years, AIC has offered programming celebrating this history and honoring those who continue the legacy in business, academia, medicine, politics, media, and more. This year it hosts a monumental event! On September 25, 2021, AIC presents the African Heritage Month Parade and Festival! There are over 30 organizations taking part in the event either marching in the parade, sponsoring, or attending the festival. After a challenging 2020 that canceled many celebrations, the AIC membership felt it was important to bring the community together. One of the most important reasons why the celebration is necessary is because of the thousands of African immigrants that are essential workers on the frontlines of the pandemic.

AIC Chairman Mory Kouyate says "African immigrants are the lifeblood of many industries in America and we have to acknowledge that and let the world know as well." Kouyate hails from Guinea, immigrating to New York at an early age. He attended Richmond Hill High School in Queens, NY and went on to graduated from York College with a bachelor's degree in political science and a minor in history. He served as the Secretary-General of the African Diaspora Parade & Festival for five years, Community Liaison of the African Advisory Council of the Bronx Borough President's Office for two years before serving as its Vice-Chair for two years and later its Chairman for a year. As Chairman, Kouyate was instrumental in the establishment of the month of September as African Heritage Month in the Bronx. Now, with his work with the AIC collective and other community leaders, Kouyate works to bring the heritage month to all of New York and Connecticut, and soon beyond.

Under Kouyate's leadership, AIC will be a vital source of development, pride and resources to the African immigrant community. The organization has bridged the gap with government and social services but also within members of the community, working to build relationships across the entire African Diaspora. Members of the board represent many different countries and input ideas from their perspectives. AIC's mission is to educate, unite, celebrate and support the entire African community here in America and all over the world. Kouyate explains, "There's strength in numbers. We need everyone to come together."

This year's African Heritage Month celebration has already brought many people together for its planning and will make a significant impact in the community, showcasing the amazing aspects of African culture and bringing more people together to share and commune at the event.

The 2021 African Heritage Month Parade and Festival parade will start at 12 pm, the festival will start at 5 pm - 9 pm. Location: The Adam Clayton Powell Jr.State Building at 163 West 125th street at the corner of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.Boulevard in Harlem. Our COVID-19 contingency plan is to carry out the event via zoom and have all our performances there. To march, sponsor, speak or perform at the event please email: africanimmigrantscommission@gmail.com

UTILIZING HIGHER EDUCATION TO SEEK OPPORTUNITY & PAY IT FORWARD

AUTHOR: CHIREAU WHITE



ABOVE: PHOTO OF ZAMBIA, BELOW: PHOTO OF EDSON CHIPALO
GRADUATING FROM COLUMBIA
(PHOTO CRED: BRITANNICA & EDSON CHIPALO)



According to Migration Policy Institute, about 32 percent of the 39.3 million immigrants in the United States, ages 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher. This is indicative of an upwards trend of immigrant students completing college degrees. Studies have shown that higher educational status is correlated with increased social mobility, better labor prospects, and improved health outcomes. While pursuing these benefits, immigrants accessing higher education often encounter barriers in the United States, including lower socioeconomic status, parents with lower educational attainment, and their own immigration status. For one immigrant, in particular, Edson Chipalo, overcoming these barriers to navigate through higher education required hard work and resourcefulness.

Edson is a 32-year-old man who grew up in Zambia as an orphan. Through his pursuit of education and employment, he has traveled to different parts of Africa, Europe, before eventually settling in the U.S. Prior to coming to the states, Mr. Chipalo spent 5 years working in Camphill Communities providing services for children and adults with disabilities as well as orphans and other vulnerable youths. When he arrived in the US in 2012, he completed his bachelor's degree in Social Work at the College of Saint Rose, a master's degree in Social Work at Columbia University and is presently pursuing his doctorate at the University of Alabama. His current research focuses on cultural, economic, and language barriers impacting mental health care for refugees and immigrant populations.

Getting where he is today, took a lot of effort Edson explains. "I worked hard in school," he said "[It] was my only solution to get to where I am. My survival was based on scholarships. I worked my ass off to get a good GPA during my undergraduate, master's, and now my Ph.D. Apart from making sure I had a good GPA, I also got involved with campus activities. I was always involved on campus and so people were able to get to know me and let me know about opportunities that fit what I needed." Like many immigrants pursuing their degrees, he had to rely on financial aid and his academic community to keep afloat. Once he obtained his first degree, he went on to use what he learned to provide mental health care to native children and families in Alaska. This further bolstered a passion to work with refugees and came to influence his research interests. He hopes to conduct mental health research that can influence the Biden administration in addressing the foreseeable influx of refugees.

UTILIZING HIGHER EDUCATION TO SEEK OPPORTUNITY & PAY IT FORWARD

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Like many immigrants from non-European countries, he faced discrimination and dismissal of educational pursuits completed in his country of origin. “I have experienced a lot of racism myself,” he said. “One of them is institutional racism. I was supposed to graduate as valedictorian, 4.0 is the requirement,[but] because I was Black, they went with a white person who had a 3.8 for the honor...[Faculty] will assume you are not a good student.” Just like their African American counterparts, African immigrants are subjected to the same stereotyping and discrimination that has been imparted to Black communities since slavery. Asuo-Mante found that in a qualitative study of 10 Ghanaians living in Connecticut, participants reported experiencing discrimination in the workplace and higher rates of racism in the U.S. than in Ghana at an unprecedented rate. Police brutality can also be experienced by African immigrants in the United States; most notably seen in the 1999 shooting of Amadou Diallo, a Black Guinean immigrant. Edson recounted the recent killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor to highlight that “there is racism in this country [and] as a Black person, I must work very hard and be mindful of my interactions with others.”

Commentators have argued structural racism impacts immigration policy and subsequently the recognition of foreign qualifications. “Many people come here, and, in the U.S., they do not accept their educational degrees,” he remarked. He went on to propose that “rather than just throwing it [educational degrees] away, find a system to recognize their [immigrants] accomplishments. In Africa and China, it is different. Africa discusses [diverse] issues, and this does not always fit in with the US education system.” There is a deficit in research highlighting the experiences of African immigrants forced into jobs that do not match their qualifications due to this. However, journalists have made attempts to represent the stories of a few, from the nearly 2 million, college-educated immigrants working lower-paying jobs due to lack of U.S. educational credentials, financial resources, and language barriers.

As Edson reflected on his educational journey and his future aspirations, he wanted to share tips for those thinking about traveling to the United States for school. “For those thinking about immigrating to the U.S., do your research and obtain the cultural understanding of where you are going,” he said “Ask questions to the people who are already there so you will be able to get general expectations.” He advises immigrants to learn as much about the language as possible and to be open to going to states that have opportunities rather than states that are most popular. He also urged those immigrating to the U.S. to develop “self-discipline and [to think about] what you want to do in life.” By taking these elements into consideration, Edson claims it would help in measuring immigrant expectations with reality. In his own experience, he felt the United States, academic-wise, has met his expectations. “There were some exaggerations that things would be shiny and new but that is not the reality,” he adds. As Edson heads towards the conclusion of his studies, he hopes to become a professor and do more work with individuals impacted by substance misuse, domestic violence, and trauma from political violence in both the United States and Africa.

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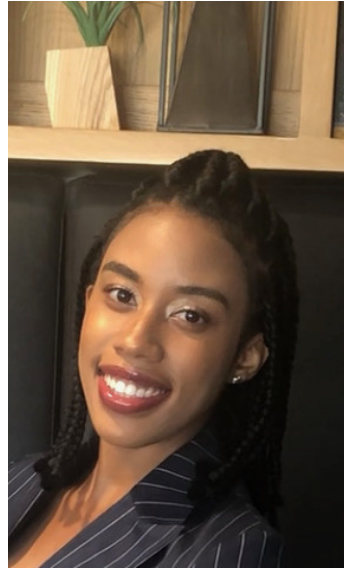
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