

MERCER SENIOR SURVIVED CIVIL WAR, REFUGEE CAMP

JENNA MINK - THE MACON TELEGRAPH

Sam Johnson was 9 years old when civil war snatched his childhood. He remembers fleeing from his home in Liberia, barefoot in the dark.

He watched from a mountaintop as his village burned, then walked seven nights through the wilderness with nothing but the clothes on his back. He can still envision the thorns embedded in his skin when he finally arrived at a refugee camp in Guinea, where he grew up in a tent with little food and no public education. It's where he learned to play soccer to escape from reality. It's where he became an orphan.

A week ago Friday, Johnson officially became a U.S. citizen. On May 11, he will become a Mercer University graduate, earning four degrees at once. And by this summer, he will be back at the refugee camp in Guinea.

"That's my home," he said. "And those people, they really need help. ... I could have been them."

It will not be the first time the 23-year-old returns to the refugee camp where he lived and suffered for eight years until the age of 17. He returned last summer as a volunteer. Now he plans to open a school at the camp, offering the education he desperately desired as a child.

Johnson had been asleep in his bed when he, his mother and his siblings were forced to abandon their home in the midst of attacks. His father was away at work, and the family later discovered he had been killed.

They spent the next eight years surviving on one meal a day and living in a tent -- to this day, Johnson can only eat two meals a day, he says. Johnson remembers making bricks and stacking them around the tent to keep snakes and wild animals out. The camps endured continual attacks from rebel Liberian forces, and many Guinean citizens wanted the refugees to leave, arresting and beating them on sight, Johnson said. The family knew they couldn't stay, but they couldn't go back to Liberia, and their immigration application stalled for years. With no transportation, they had nowhere to go.

So Johnson's family stayed hidden in Guinea, where they eventually were arrested for being refugees. While the family was released from jail, his mother was wounded in the process and eventually died from her injuries -- a month before the family was sent to the United States.

"That was really sad," he said, adding it was his mother who begged a case worker to review her family's file and send her children to another country. "If she would have made it here, she would have made it."

After arriving in Atlanta, Johnson and his siblings were placed in a transition program for immigrants. That's when he discovered the generosity of people. It was the first time he felt accepted by someone

outside his family, he said. Churches, educators and complete strangers stepped up to help the young siblings, who enrolled in high school after passing placement exams.

From there, Johnson earned an academic scholarship to Mercer University, where he was overwhelmed by his good fortune.

"I have a dorm. I have electricity. I have food I can eat anytime," he said. "I have teachers available to me. I have classes available to me. This is paradise to me."

Unlike most college students, Johnson knows what it's like to be denied an education. He had no access to school growing up in a refugee camp, so Johnson took his education into his own hands. He befriended children who were Guinean citizens and followed them to school, sneaking into classes to simply listen to the lessons. He would walk hours a day to attend a class that he might be kicked out of and would borrow his friends' textbooks, reading every page.

When he graduates this weekend, he will do so with four majors, and he has a specific interest in each of those fields. But he actually ended up with that many majors because he took every class possible, simply because he could. He never skipped a college class. He quit Mercer's soccer team his sophomore year to focus on his studies.

"I would walk hours to a school that I might not be able to get into," Johnson said. "Walking from Mercer Hall to my classroom, that's a joke."

Johnson will earn degrees in political science, women and gender studies, international relations, and French, a language he fell in love with while growing up in Guinea. At Mercer, Johnson formed a close bond with his French professor, John Dunaway.

"I almost feel like I've adopted him," Dunaway said. "I've never seen anyone soak up so much knowledge as this kid. ... He has such enthusiasm and desire to learn."

Johnson plans to attend graduate school, but first he is going to the place he calls home. His goal is to open a school in the refugee camp, where children still cluster around visitors, curious about unfamiliar people and cultures. Once the school is operational, Johnson hopes to partner with Mercer to give refugee children a chance to have a college education, which he has never taken for granted. "When something is not available to you and then you have the opportunity to go to school ... I had a craving for all of it," he said.

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