

# Places *of* Hope

Since earning his diploma from Holy Innocents' Episcopal School, Sam Johnson '09 has graduated from Mercer University, gotten married, founded the nonprofit My Vision for Refugees and opened an orphanage in Guinea. ... And that's just the beginning.

**Sam Johnson '09** has a story that deserves to be told, a story that all members of the HIES community should know, need to know.

It will break your heart, then fill it with so much joy, so much pride that you swear it will burst.

He has survived circumstances unimaginable to most. And yet, he has thrived. And though he has thrived, he does not seek riches, fame or the everyday creature comforts alien to him as a boy in a U.N. refugee camp at N'zerekore, in southern Guinea—where Mr. Johnson, his mother and siblings spent eight years living in a tent, receiving one small ration of food per day.

No article in an alumni magazine can even begin to capture the harrowing hours, the beautiful moments, the awe-inspiring and gigantic leaps he and his family made from hopeless desperation to finding themselves the recipients of what should be considered nothing less than a miracle.

There is not enough room in *Torchbearer*. There are not enough pages. What follows now is a meager summary that will attempt to provide some background, some modest insight into a young man's tireless struggle to provide an ounce of hope in an ocean of despair.



## “Places of Hope,” continued

The following is taken with permission from Sam Johnson's website, MyVision4Refugees.org:

In 1998, when he was just 9-years-old, Sam Johnson watched from a hilltop as his village burned. His father lay dead somewhere below, one of the countless victims of rebel mayhem sweeping across Liberia. His mother hurried her five young children into the forest; then she led her family north, traveling at night to have a better chance of avoiding the roving militias.

The Johnsons were the lucky ones. They actually made it to the U.N. refugee camp at N'zerekore, in southern Guinea, where Sam, his mother, and siblings



spent the next eight years living in a tent, receiving one small ration of food per day, and hoping against hope for deliverance.

In February of 2007, the children's mother also passed away, one month before the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees transported them to Clarkston, Ga., east of Atlanta. That's where they came to the attention Holy Innocents' Episcopal School.

Sam received his high school diploma in 2009, then enrolled in Mercer University in Macon, Ga. He literally took every course he could, even quitting the soccer team—leaving the game he loved and excelled at—to focus on his studies. “I wanted to learn everything,”



he says. “Like when you don't have food, I was craving education.”

Sam graduated Mercer in 2013 after a remarkable career that included quadruple majors—Political Science, International Relations, Women's and Gender Studies and French. His next step was something he'd dreamed about since he set foot on the plane six years earlier in Conakry, Guinea; he returned to the camp in which he'd spent his childhood, the first step of his plan to help those who'd been left behind.

“I kept my dream alive and saved up money during college,” Sam says. “I had work study and worked during the summer, and when I graduated, I had about \$2,000 to help with.”

After sharing his story with a number of Mercer faculty and friends, he received donations which brought that total above \$5,000.

With the wars in Liberia, Cote d'Ivoire, and Sierra Leone over, the U.N. had ended its mission in the camp, and the people who'd been marooned there, who had nothing and no one to return to in their native countries, had created de facto villages in its place.

But they faced the same problems as before—a lack of safe water and no schooling for the children. They were also less than welcome in Guinean society, treated as outsiders and not allowed access to most government services. Sam's first trip back to Guinea

lasted six months, and he discovered that little had changed.

“Same as when I was living there, people had diarrhea, dysentery, parasites, and I knew the problem was water,” he says. “Bathing and doing dishes and drinking from the river, that's how people get sick.”

With the money he'd saved, Sam hired a local company to build a well that now provides clean water in the camp.

His primary goal, however, was to provide education and a safe living situation for the orphaned children in





N'zerekore who, just as he'd experienced as a child, were not welcome in the local schools. Receiving no help or interest from Guinean officials, Sam decided to take matters into his own hands.

He returned to America and, with the help of friends and former teachers, founded My Vision for Refugees, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization committed to improving the lives and prospects of the children, allowing them to stay together and attend school, while also having the support of each other, their teachers and house parents.

In 2014, Sam married Mary Thompson, a native of Ghana who works for AT&T in Atlanta, and who now also serves as secretary of My Vision for Refugees, Inc. Sam divides his time between Guinea and Atlanta, overseeing construction and administrative needs in N'zerekore, and raising support for My Vision in America.

“Today, I am only able to do what I do because of Holy Innocents’ Episcopal School. We found hope here.”

— Sam Johnson '09  
My Vision for Refugees  
Founder and President

## Sam Johnson '09

entrepreneur | professional soccer player | guinea, atlanta

**I plan to spend 2017 in Guinea**, taking care of the orphaned kids at Home of Hope and helping them with English. It is my wish to also encourage them to hold on to hope through Jesus Christ and provide them with emotional support, just like my mother kept our hope alive through her faith in Christ.

**My pet peeve** is tardiness.

**The first thing I do when I get to “work”** is to thank God for the opportunities I've had and be grateful that I have a means to better myself and be an inspiration to refugees.

**The thing I will remember** the most about my time at HIES is the love and support the parents and staff showed me and my family.

**The best part about doing what I am doing** today is the hope I give the former refugees and orphans my organization supports and the smile I see on their faces because of all we do for them. The food, clothing, education, medical care, etc. we provide for them makes such a big difference in their lives.

**This brings me a sense of fulfillment** and happiness to know that I am influencing them positively and helping them also have the opportunities to better themselves and be able to, in turn, help their community. In that way, I am helping to create a positive change in the world, one loving act at a time.

**Use your gifts** to make a positive mark on people's lives. Nothing is too little and positively influencing the life of even one person is a very big achievement.

**I wish I had known how difficult** it was going to be to set up the orphanage in Guinea. The government of Guinea gave me a tough time even though we had fulfilled the minimum requirements needed in Guinea and had all the legal documents as a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization registered in the United States. This was very surprising to me because the orphanage was going to help the community so I could not grasp why some of the officials were making things difficult and trying to discourage me.

**I had some officials even tell me** it was a waste of time and they even went as far as telling me I was a fool for leaving my comfort zone in the United States and coming back. But knowing this ahead of time would still not have stopped me from setting up the orphanage. I wouldn't have done anything differently, because it was my passion.

**Whenever I'm playing soccer**, it takes my mind off my worries and problems and I don't think about them.

**The soccer camp fundraiser** for My Vision for Refugees at HIES was the highlight of the year for me. It was very exciting to let the kids know that they were serving through soccer because I had a couple of them asking me “Coach, how am I helping?” I explained that the camp was to support orphans in Guinea.” It felt good to see everyone having fun.



For more about Sam Johnson and My Vision for Refugees, visit [MyVision4Refugees.org](http://MyVision4Refugees.org).