

“You can be anything. If you work hard you can achieve.”

—J.

When hearing the bounce of a basketball and the swish of a net or the wheels of a skateboard gliding through the street, the neighborhood knows J is around. He greets us with a smile and asks us if we want to play outside. Three houses down lives a 15-year-old basketball player, musician, big brother, and friend. J is outgoing, bold, and light-hearted. He approaches life courageously, talking to anyone he finds interesting and picking up new hobbies, like badminton and guitar.

J was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, spent three years in Tanzania, moved to Kenya and spent seven years there before finally coming to America at the age of 10. J spent time in three different states before finally settling in Buffalo, NY. When asked why he moved from state to state, J responded simply, “Life was kind of tough, but it was fine.” Not every environment was a good fit for J’s family. His father didn’t have access to a car and was forced to bike everywhere, so during the winter it was a challenge to go places like the supermarket or the bus stop. However, J never personally felt burdened. He exclaims that he owned, “two bikes, two soccerballs, a downstairs and upstairs, a TV, everything that [they] needed. But [his] dad didn’t have a good job.”

Eventually J’s grandpa in Buffalo called and “welcomed [the family] here” so J’s parents decided to take a chance and move to Buffalo. It can be painstaking to find all the factors of stability within one place; constant relocation is a universal part of the refugee experience.

When asked about his feelings towards Kenya, J immediately explains how much he misses the country that he once called home. “Here too I got friends, but [in Kenya] I got friends, and family too. So I miss it.” J wishes he could visit Kenya, and remains hopeful that one day his family might return. Once his parents receive citizenship, J believes they will be able to travel



more freely and go back to the stops they made on their journey here, like Kenya and Tanzania. Refugees must live in the U.S. for at least five years before they can apply to become citizens, and for J's family, 2020 is the year they will be eligible. But despite the nostalgia he feels towards Kenya, J is glad he can call America home too. "We actually would have went to Australia but we missed *one* interview -- boom everything changed." When I questioned J about whether he would have preferred Australia to America, he compared the two by saying, "Australia is like back in Africa," specifically with the climates of both continents.

Legally, J is a refugee but in his own mind that is not how he identifies himself. "I knew I was a refugee, it just sometimes goes over my head." The reason he so easily forgets is because of J's own implicit biases about what makes a refugee. "I had a nice house, it was made out of bricks, my dad worked on it. I had nice neighbors," recalls J when he thinks back to his childhood in the DRC and Kenya. His family is adjusting well as refugees in America but J is having a harder time. He doesn't like the constant moving around because every place he emigrates, he leaves behind "a nice house" and "good friends that help [him]." One way for J to cope with his frustration is through humor and friendship. "We make jokes about everything. We don't have to fight." J feels extremely welcome at his current school, International Preparatory School and within the Buffalo community.

J notes that school in the U.S. is very different from school in Kenya. In the United States, emphasis is placed on English, math, and the sciences. Back in Kenya, J's school made learning English and Swahili a priority. This is why J is fluent in nearly three different languages.

In American schools, J describes a lack of independence among the students. "[Here] in 8th grade we used to line up, go as a class. It sucks." J was happy to find that ninth graders were trusted to switch classes all on their own. In Kenya there were no switching classes. "We only stay in one class...but different teachers." J was taught by the same teacher all throughout his elementary years. He had one teacher who taught different subjects. J went to a "public school" with "a lot of kids." But a large class size is something J enjoys. "It was actually good cause [during] recess [we] play soccer or did something dumb or stupid. We just used to take a scarf and just start beating each other. The spanks are really hard," J adds with a wincing smile.

The transition to an American school system took some time for J. "When I was here I started to get really mad." In many of the schools he attended in America, J would be blamed for things he didn't take part in, like fights. This angered J and encouraged him to fit the narrative others were dictating for him. "I started to get in a lot of trouble." J recounts his middle school years explaining, "This one time I fought a student and then a teacher stepped in and I started fighting her." J received suspension and in-school suspension multiple times each year. "Then in 7th grade I let this one girl beat me. I didn't even touch her but I got suspended for it." When J tried to come back to school during his suspension his school found out and placed him in ISS (in-

school suspension). J reflects on his troubled years, “I used to get mad easily, I couldn’t control it at that time. But as I started to get older, I started to understand things and be less angry. I started to think before I do.”

J still doesn’t feel like he fully fits within his school, his home, or in this country. The pressure from his parents, teachers, and from society weighs heavily on him. His eldest two siblings are still living in Kenya, so here in America J is the eldest brother to his four little sisters. He plays a big role in keeping his family afloat. “My dad knew a little English, I knew more than him so I actually helped most of the time.” When J’s parents leave he becomes the guardian of his little



sisters. “Babysitting,” he says “sucks.” While his parents hope to buy a house soon and move out of their tiny apartment, as of right now his home is always loud and busy so he spends all of his moments of free time outside. “I go outside to take a break.” Within his family he takes a large responsibility for their wellbeing which contrasts the belittlement he feels outside of his home within institutions.

Another way J takes a break is when he goes to church. Back in Kenya, J’s family had a very close relationship with their local church. His father, who is a singer and guitarist, like J, released his first album with the help of their church choir. Maintaining

this close relationship to religion allows J to feel connected to Kenya and the DRC. In Buffalo, he and his family attend a small church near IPrep. There, J plays the drums and also sings in the choir.

As far as his plans for the future? J is in no hurry to decide. He wants to use his knowledge and skills to benefit others but doesn’t want to think too far into the future. Right now he prefers to focus on mastering new songs on the drums and improving guitar-playing skills. When J isn’t showcasing his musical talent, he is playing sports. His favorite sport is soccer. Recently J was thinking about learning to code through his school in order to design a video game, “I can make [a video game] my way.” J thrives on freedom and creativity. He adds his own flair to everything he does, whether it’s a new dunking trick, a song he wrote on the guitar, or possibly in a video game he will code.

J plans to go back to the Democratic Republic of Congo some day. He doesn't know what he wants to be when he grows up, but figures a career in public service in the DRC will allow him to have a more direct impact. "I need to go back there, teach them the things that I know and then they will help other children too, to achieve the things they want."