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A Day in the Life of Dzaleka Camp: From Malawi to Quebec

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Marie Wilondjo is about to turn 21, but the cake she cuts into marks much more than a coming of age. It marks the celebration of the beginning of a fresh start in life. Along with her family, Marie fled from her native Rwanda in 2009, and has lived ever since in Dzaleka Camp, 30 kilometres from Lilongwe, in the southern African country of Malawi. Alongside nearly 20,000 others, from Congo and Somalia, Ethiopia and Burundi, Marie put down roots here on the Malawian plateau, never entirely certain whether this will be home, or just a stop along the way. Marie's outlook is no less uncertain than that of tens of millions of displaced persons worldwide. Exile is about lived uncertainty.

For this young woman, known horizons were recently transformed again, when news came from Canada: her name appeared on the UNHCR list, and an offer of resettlement was imminent. Quebec City, thousands of miles from the Great Lakes of central East Africa, had offered Marie a place to restart her interrupted life, complete with a full WUSC scholarship to study at Laval University. In Dzaleka, Marie had pursued a rare opportunity to obtain a liberal studies degree through Jesuit

Commons: Higher Education at the Margins (JC:HEM). JC:HEM's 45-credit Diploma, fully accredited by Denver's Regis University, gave this talented, multilingual student a place to grow. Her resettlement offer came so suddenly that Marie would miss the graduation celebration alongside her classmates from Congo, Somalia, Burundi, Malawi and Rwanda. Setting her sights on Quebec, her JC:HEM training will nevertheless help her to hit the ground running, and make the most of her vast potential.



Resettlement—even while it offers the important salve to so many whose lives have been displaced by conflict—comes at a cost. As she looks ahead to Canada, Marie keeps an eye on her close-knit family that remains in Dzaleka. Her brothers, Pasqual and Jon, share parts of her JC:HEM history: Pasqual studies in the Diploma program, and Jon has graduated in both Community Health and IT certificate tracks. Marie’s mother, who cooks and does tailoring to augment her modest monthly rations from UNHCR, watches her daughter pack a small suitcase, fingers tightly crossed that they will be reunited, someday, in the not too distant future.

Marie and her brothers’ JC:HEM studies included a three-year grounding in liberal studies coursework—Sociology, Philosophy, Dynamic Algebra, World Religion and the like— alongside a Concentration in Education, with particular emphasis on Primary Teacher Education (PTE). While JC:HEM offers concentrations in Business and Social Work, PTE is where some of the Dzaleka community’s greatest challenges lie, with classrooms regularly filled with 100 and more students per class, and the solo teacher armed frequently with little more than a blackboard and chalk.



At JC:HEM’s Arrupe Learning Center, Marie had served as an Academic Assistant, helping younger classmen and women along. She was for a time the only woman on staff, and her presence and example served to inspire other young women to seek out this rare educational opportunity; that continues to be particularly important in a culture of chronic scarcity, where access to limited resources tends to favor men. (Since its inception in 2010, JC:HEM has aspired to gender parity in its offerings; in 2015 it achieved 50% female enrolments among its non-degree certificate programs, while diploma program enrollments were about one-third female overall.)



All photos: Nicholas Griffin and Joe Slaven

In a time where global conversations frequently stammer over the question of refugees and a host community's absorptive capacities, Marie's JC:HEM training will soon be Laval's gain. They'll be welcoming a young woman with skills and experience well beyond her years, and JC:HEM's alumni diaspora in Canada will grow.

A few days before her departure, Marie arrived at the Center with something not often seen in the dusty byways of Dzaleka Camp: a perfectly frosted pink and white chocolate layer cake. Grateful to those colleagues who had worked to make the only female on staff always feel welcome, this resourceful, young woman had cobbled together ingredients from mini-shops and neighbors, and fashioned an oven out of a box with walls made of charcoal and room enough for a single baker's rack, just enough to get to temperature and just enough to produce a small miracle, sweet and not burned. Marie cut the cake, and recalled how in Dzaleka, as in refugee settings the world over, a well-worn saying is heard, "*Nous nous débrouillons.*" *We will make do.*

Marie will make do, today in Malawi as she says her goodbyes, and tomorrow in Canada, when she looks to a broader horizon. 