

Education of Degradation:

From Punishment to Promise

By Ketsia Emelo

Introduction by Melanie Carden

Ketsia Emelo's voice sounds like soft spring rain—a sweet but powerful promise of transformation. Of the struggles she and her family overcame in the DR Congo, she is an articulate siren. Some pain, however, she understandably withholds for private reflection. After three years of navigating the immigration lottery and one additional year working—as a family—to save money for the journey, they arrived in the United States in 2016. Inspired by her mother, Baby Massaka, who maintained multiple jobs while attending college in DR Congo and who works and manages countless family needs here in Portland, Ketsia's work ethic is opening doors.



Incomer Magazine is honored to share with its readers Ketsia's remarkable story, told in her own words, her college essay.

I was born in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of Congo. On that day, my mom was doing laundry by hand and she had no clue of my coming into the world. She felt pain and tried to resist for a few hours because no one was home to help her. When she began to shout, neighbors came to help and drove her to the hospital. The doctors asked for money before proceeding with the childbirth, but my father told her that he didn't have enough money and would need to borrow money. In my country, money is valued over a person's life. My coming into the world was God's plan; if he didn't touch the individuals' hearts, I might not exist.

As a young child, I experienced violence, sickness, and abusive teachers in school and was traumatized by those events. In elementary school, my mother had to leave early for work and I was left with relatives to get me ready for school. Due to their imprudence, I arrived late to school. My teacher hit me for coming late to class and humiliated me in front of my classmates each day. I witnessed other students being severely punished for small infractions. For example, if a student wrote his name on the chair, he would be severely punished such as being beaten and suspended for many days. If a student came to school with a uniform that was too small the teacher would cut the uniform while it was on the student to humiliate them. If a student styled their hair differently than the school style the Principal would punish them by cutting their hair. These punishments were severe and didn't fit the infraction. These experiences made me fearful of school and untrusting of teachers.

In 2015, everything started falling apart; my family was struggling to have the resources to make progress in life. This period of my life affected me so much, it is hard to talk about. Our wish was to move to another country that was safe and start to build a new life. When we won the lottery to come to America, it was a huge opportunity. I remember my mother jumping up and down with happiness and excitement, but I had no idea what this move would mean for my life. During that moment, my whole extended family came together to support us and pray for us. Since God was our only hope and we believed in him every single day. After a couple of months, my siblings and I stopped going to school to help my parents save money for the move. I missed going to school, seeing my friends, and I was out of my routine. I had mixed emotions about moving away; I was excited that in America we would have many opportunities, but I was scared I would be behind and it would be difficult to start over.

Since coming to Maine, I've met influential people like teachers, guidance counselors, bosses, mentors, tutors, and coaches. When I first started at PHS, I was in ELL 1 and was shy because I thought if I tried to say a word in English people would laugh at me. When I moved up to ELL 2, I met a teacher who motivated me to have the self-confidence to speak up without being ashamed. This allowed me to move from ELL classes to mainstream honors classes in a short time. The people I have met have helped me view the world in a different way and rebuild the hope that I had lost. I am looking forward to attending college after graduation where I hope to study Business Administration and Finance with the possibility of earning a master's degree. Now I understand what I must do every day in my life: work hard, challenge myself, and build relationships with adults who want to help me succeed. My past life has taught me resiliency, strength and how to work hard to prepare for my future path and purpose in life.
