

# To Save My Life

by Elisa Duraha

To save my life, I had to escape from Congo, my native country in Africa. My mother is Rwandan and my father is Congolese. I lived all my life in Congo and married a Congolese man and we had

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ten children together. But when the internal fighting between Congolese and Rwandians began hard in 1997, things got very bad. There was no food, no money, and people were angry. One day, some people came to my house and said I had to leave right then because I was part Rwandan and would be killed as a traitor if I stayed in Congo. They said I had to go or I would be burned to death. It was so terrible to leave.

I was taken to Catholic Charities a couple of hours away where I stayed for one year. I was so depressed. I could not eat or sleep and cried all the time thinking about my husband and my children. I could not talk to any of them and it was so terrible for my children. I didn't know what was happening with my mother, brothers, and sisters. Later, I found out that they were also forced to leave.

Catholic Charities advised me to go to America and then work to bring my family there. In December of 1998, they gave me a passport, dressed me up as a nun and put me on a plane to Boston. When I arrived, I was taken in by a family where the wife's mother had been helped by my husband in Congo.

I lived with them for two years and they were very good to me. They helped me find a

lawyer to get asylum and approval for my family to come here. The lawyer told me to go to the Red Cross to communicate with my family. It wasn't easy to find them because the children's names had been changed to protect them. Finally I got a letter with my phone number to my husband through a friend visiting Congo. One day in July of 1999 at 5 AM, my husband called me. He and my children couldn't believe I was alive. I spoke with all my children who were all okay, but no one knew where my mother, brothers, and sisters were.

I was already learning English at the Immigrant Learning Center starting in 1999. In 2001, when I got out of the hospital after surgery, I had no place to live. The Learning Center helped me find a homeless shelter but life was difficult for me there and I couldn't get to my church. I was very depressed. But many people helped me along the way. A

social worker at the shelter helped me make an application for permanent housing, the doctor from the hospital gave me a recommendation, and the Housing Authority helped

me find an apartment. A therapist helped me with my depression. Later, one of the teachers at the Learning Center helped me do a fashion show to raise money to bring my children here—I had a business making clothes in Congo.

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## Coming To The U.S.

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United States are doing well in school, playing soccer and basketball. Three will be in college this fall. My daughter Geraldine was recently honored by Oprah Winfrey for her essay "Like Night and Day," a story of survival. My children are talking about being nurses, construction engineers, doctors, lawyers, and chefs. I am working as a home health aide and studying for my GED. I want to go into nursing administration.

I want to thank Americans because they

didn't know me, but they accepted me. I want to stay in this land that doesn't have a problem with me because of where I was born. Here we can live in peace.

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*Elisa Duraha was born in Congo to a family of 11 children. She finished middle school in Congo and took professional training as a seamstress. She ran a successful business making clothes in addition to being a mother of ten. She was forced to leave Congo and her family in 1998 because her life was in danger.*

# Exploring Your Experience

## Life journeys

Make a class chart about your life journeys. Answer these questions on the chart:

1. When did you leave your country?
2. What was happening in your country when you left? What **pushed** you to leave your country?
3. Why did you come to North America? What **pulled** you to North America?

Name	Your country	Departure	Push	Pull
Victor	Liberia	2003	War	Peaceful life
Manuel	Mexico	1999	Bad work NAFTA	More money to send home; better life for kids
Olga	Russia	1989	Hard time for Jews	Sister here; better for Jews?

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Edmonton: Grass Roots Press, 2004.