



Step Into My Story, by Paul Miantona

I still visualize the scene and the time, again and again: 9:30 p.m., Saturday, the 26th of February, 1999, Abidjan International Airport, Ivory Coast. I was finally leaving my refugee life behind for Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in the United States. And as I bid the final goodbye to my parents, family members and friends, I saw mixed expressions in their faces. For some, it was renewed hope and for others sadness. As I stepped aboard the Air France plane, I knew my life had changed forever.

I was born and raised in Liberia, a country founded by citizens of the United States as a colony for former African-American slaves. The country got its independence in 1847 and it is made up of two groups of people, Americo-Liberians (descendants of free slaves from America) and Indigenous Liberians (native Liberians). The Americo-Liberians never constituted more than five percent of the population of Liberia, yet they controlled key resources that allowed them to dominate the local native people such as access to higher levels of education and financial resources provided through valuable relationships with many American institutions. Liberia was governed by the Americo-Liberians until in 1980, when the Native-Liberians, led by Sergeant Samuel K. Doe, overthrew the government and became the first president of Native-Liberian decent. President Doe ruled the country up until 1989 when a civil war began that put Liberia in total disarray and chaos and would last until 2007.

Due to the Liberian civil war, I was one of 80,000 Liberian refugees who settled in Danane, a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast. Life in the refugee camp in Danane was very challenging and inhumane. I remember the only solution to worry, hunger and thirst being sleep. As refugees we also faced discrimination as the non-stop influx of Liberians was perceived as destabilizing to the Ivorian economy. I found myself homeless on occasion but with God in control of my life, my housing situation stabilized and I was able to enroll in a refugee high school.

It was at this time that I realized that in order to change my current situation and become successful, I needed to focus on my education and excel in it. I also became involved in many extracurricular activities such as choir, soccer, and student government further encouraging me to continue to work hard until graduation. After graduation, I relocated to the capital city of Ivory Coast, Abidjan, continuing to trust God's path for my life, where I was able to find employment as a custodian while becoming active in church activities especially choir.

In 1998, I heard of an organization in the United States called Lutheran World Service that was helping to resettle refugees into the United States. They required several interviews, physicals and several documents in order to be selected. Trusting in God, I was approved to be relocated to Philadelphia, PA on February 29, 1999.

My immediate goal upon my arrival in Philadelphia was to continue my education. I began my first job at a Wendy's restaurant which I saw as a positive step in the right direction establishing myself in the U.S. During this time, I began to pray that God may open the door for entrance to a Christian College. God answered my prayers through an old friend of mine who was attending Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, IL and began to tell me about his wonderful experience. He knew of my interest in soccer and introduced me to Dave Ribbens, head soccer coach at Trinity. Dave invited me to try out and by the grace of God I enrolled at Trinity Christian College in the fall of

1999. I excelled in both soccer and academics and built wonderful relationships at Trinity. In 2003, I attained my Bachelor's degree at Trinity in Computer Information Systems.

During my studies at Trinity, the Lord laid it on my heart to give back to others in Liberia as this opportunity was given to me at Trinity by Jim & Maribeth Stech, Josh & Kelly Lenarz, Dave Ribbens, Ginny Carpenter, Pete Hamstra, Rick VanDyken, Dr. Sharon Robbert, Dr. Brad Breems, Dr. Helen VanWyck, as well as the entire Trinity family. In 2000, I joined a group of Liberian refugees in the U.S. and formed ULICAF, a non-profit organization to help churches rebuild and to establish a Christian learning community to empower Liberians to serve God. As the organization grew, I went on to pursue my studies at Keller Graduate School of Management, and attained a master's degree in Business Administrations (MBA) and a master's degree in Accounting and Finance (MAFM) while residing in Brooklyn Park, MN.

In 2005, ULICAF began to form a vision of providing the opportunity for young people in Liberia to also continue their pursuit of education through a higher education institution. They began raising funds to build the Liberia International Christian College (LICC) on 20 acres in Ganta, a major inland city. LICC brought a beacon of hope to hundreds and thousands of young men and women who could not afford to travel to the United States or other nations to achieve a Christian college education. LICC opened its door to 74 students in March, 2009, and currently has 162 students enrolled. Enrollment is expected to greatly increase in the coming years.

LICC students are actively bringing hope to a community devastated by 14-year civil war. The education LICC provides is equipping them with skills to positively impact thousands of Liberians. These students are doing this by sharing God's love and stepping up to be leaders in businesses, orphanages, schools and ministries throughout Ganta, a city of over 60,000 people. In 2011, I became President of the ULICAF board of directors, providing leadership as we give oversight to the organization's mission and vision. Currently, ULICAF has laid the foundation to construct the first **Community Research Center (public library and technology center)** outside Monrovia, the capital city of Liberia. This project is essential to the students at LICC and the Ganta community as we provide the resources that will encourage learning and connecting to the rest of the world. ULICAF is seeking financial support from donors, philanthropists, and humanitarian organizations in the construction of this important project. Additional information on this project can be found at www.ULICAF.org and www.liberiainternationalcc.org.

Being a refugee who escaped death during the civil war in my country, Liberia, and lived in the Ivory Coast for many years in inhumane conditions, I am very privileged and honored to work for Wells Fargo Bank, the fourth largest bank in the U.S., as a business banker. There are correlations between my story and that of Wells Fargo's – a story that is deeply rooted in service. My current position with Wells Fargo and as Board President of ULICAF has given me the opportunity to continue a life of service to help build Liberia International Christian College (LICC) enabling me to give back to Liberia and to also give back in the United States.

Paul Miantona and his wife Mercy Miantona live in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. Paul's phone number is 763-300-0186. Email: paulmiantona@yahoo.com. I would like to answer any questions that you may have regarding ULICAF and/or LICC, etc.