

Nancy's Story



I have to forget about Uganda. There are some sweet memories but that's a place I can never go back to. What happened was they arrested a few people at an illegal meeting and somebody during interrogation named me....

My landlord never saw me again, I just disappeared just like that. They also attacked my mom. When I got my asylum, she sold her place and had to leave and go to a different place where I think she'll be safe.

You know, there's a thin line between someone who's been granted asylum and someone who's not been granted asylum. It's a whole different story for you. You just do not know what's going to happen the next day. You are so unsure. You don't really feel safe and some things don't make sense at all. Things could get turned around and your life is on the line and maybe the lawyers couldn't do anything. They may say, *We're sorry, this is a complicated case* and you are taken back. So you don't fail to think what may happen and it usually comes with a negative force.

For me one of the biggest challenges that I had in the asylum process was my student attorneys asking for my address in Uganda. When somebody has been exposed to the American system they are thinking this is how it should be elsewhere, but in Africa we don't have a street address. Here we have the number, the street name, apartment number, city, zip code number. In Africa it's a whole different thing. We rarely receive mail. A mailing address is something you never think of. I had to explain that to give an address you have to give a description, a physical description. Like maybe there's a big store in the center of the town, or you say *Once you reach this member of Parliament's home, you can ask the taxi man about Mr. Johnson because people would know him and after Mr. Johnson, keep walking and there's a big mango tree and you will find a small business with a lady there selling oranges*. If she's not there that day they will be getting lost.

Yes, for a few business places here and there, the roads have names. Or if there's a wealthy man in this place and there's a road that leads to his home he could upgrade the road and just put a sign. Or someone just puts *Nancy Road* without anyone's

consultation, *it's my land, I can put it*, and then people get used to it and say *oh, yes, I know that place*. After a while it becomes permanent.

So when I came here, this was a dilemma. I had to make maps of where I used to live and then they tried Google maps so they could see it but they could not locate the actual place because Google maps doesn't bring it out, it was one of those small villages. Eventually they had to just take the name of the village, the zone, the council and the district.

I was frustrated because I told the lawyers this and it was very unbelievable to them. I was explaining to them and explaining to them and they asked for more and more and more and one of them finally said *I believe you*. And when she said *I believe you* I thought OK, maybe before she *didn't* believe me.

The other problem I had was with the mail. Someone was supposed to send me an affidavit. They thought his information was very important so they asked me to tell him to write how he helped me. And there wasn't a problem with this. I phoned him and I just gave him my address here and he sent me the mail. He sent it in January and my interview was scheduled for the 4th of May. And the mail wasn't here. The lawyers are trying to reach him and finally they say maybe we can do it without him. So I went to my interview in May. The mail reached my apartment in July. So seven months!

Then I was waiting for the result of my interview. You are just thinking so many things and there's so many things you cannot do because of the limitations of your status. You can't get a job, you cannot go to school. And my money in the bank in Uganda, I cannot access my money. I don't know what's happened to my piece of land. I had the balance to pay but I'd paid 90% of it. And because they attacked my mom I was scared to send her anywhere to follow up on anything that would relate to me.

But personally, I was lucky. When they explain to you the asylum process right at the beginning they say some cases are fast tracked and other cases go into the backlog. When you don't hear from them, from immigration, then the panic sets in. But mine was one of those that were fast tracked and I was working closely with my legal team and my PTV team and I was just lucky. So many of my colleagues have not had this luck.

Here at PTV I was working with Dr. Durocher, and she helped me so much realize that what was going on in my life was not unique to me. She helped me understand certain things that didn't make sense to me, especially when you're subjected to certain things, then you turn into someone else. But I had a very rough time because when I was at home my life was about going to school and being lucky getting a job, working so hard, getting to another job when I was 27 and the youngest person to rise to that level. When I was in my country it was a very big achievement, to me, to my family, and to my community-at-large. When I came here I met people who were professors at home and here they are cab drivers. This is where I met Masters-degree holders doing security and people living so crowded in a home. It was very overwhelming for me because I could not even do what they were doing because I didn't have legal status.

At PTV they told me, *You have survival skills that you didn't know you had*, because I used to do awful things, things that I never thought that I would do just to survive, to pay my rent. It just took me down to the basics. I had to go collecting recyclables. In my country, the people who do that are the street kids, so they can go buy cigarettes so to reach that level was very devastating to me.

At PTV I met with the case manager and the doctor, Dr. Cindy Willard, and they are very wonderful people. They explain to you the different things that happen to immigrants and then you realize this is not a unique situation to you but other people have gone through this. In Africa, there's a way of thinking when you watch American movies. You start to think it is heaven, you think it's the land of opportunity, but when you get here, as I tell Cindy, nobody can believe it. Now I'm reading this book [*Americanah* by Nigerian-born author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie] from the library about what people go through, coming from Africa. It's a really good book. Reading it, things are coming into my mind. You wonder in the story if the main character is the writer or is it fictitious but some of it you can really tell this is what we go through.

So I was waiting for the result of my interview. Everything was successful. The excitement comes when you get your work permit and now I thought I can get my foot on the ground. But finally when you get your asylum, because you have so many fears within you, they have a power in your thinking. And it is very tough here and very expensive.

You know in Africa you're fighting against so many odds. Especially for women. There's so many things they don't believe a woman can do. My success was a revenge tactic as my father was not the best one. He had a number of children, over 30, four with my mother. For the girls, to him when you were about 15 you're supposed to get married. He didn't believe in paying school fees for girls, he never believed you could be of any use at all, as though women don't have a brain and when you get that from your father...it can affect you seriously.

When you're growing up you're looking at your parents as mentors. They're your role models and if they keep bringing you down, then it becomes really tough for you, but we had this man in the village who was highly respected. He was a lawyer. As kids when we were playing we were always careful that no one would shout when they were passing that man's house. I thought maybe this is the kind of respect you get when you become a lawyer, and he was kind and he was everything you could admire in someone. So I said *I'll be a lawyer* and once my father heard that he thought I was bewitched. A woman becoming a lawyer!?! He was always bringing me down, bringing me down.

I had a bad experience with him. He threw me out of the house. Then something gets up in you and says you want to prove these people wrong and because you want to prove them wrong you have to run an extra mile in everything that you do. You want to excel and become brilliant and challenge them. So that takes you an extra mile. You visualize yourself doing different things so you never settle for less. You don't want to be mediocre so you keep going and that is how I think you progress. I think that's what gave me the confidence that made me so aggressive.

My mother was very supportive since my childhood and she paid for our school fees throughout. My mother didn't have the chance to go so far in school because my grandfather was village chief and a highly respected man but he fell sick with the cancer for a long time, about 12 years, and most of the property that he had was sold to take care of his health. Once he passed, that was the end for my mom. She used to tell us that before she lost her dad she wanted to become a nurse. So she was so obsessed for me to become a nurse but I never admired anything about being a nurse. I intended to be a lawyer.

I was the top female student in my school. Throughout the country the government sponsors 2,000 students for university—now it's been raising up to 4,000—so that time I was lucky. I performed well and I was taken into the program, but not the law program.

Now I want to go back to school. To law school. I resolved to become an immigration attorney to represent people the way I was represented by PTV and Public Counsel to get my asylum. It was a turning point for me, the new direction of my life. Now I have a Social Security number and I can live freely here. I can go out for a jog, I can go to school. In five years I am maybe a citizen and I won't have to worry about anything. I had the chance and people in my community and others also need that chance.

To read more stories of courage and survival, please go to www.SecondChancesLA.weebly.com