

Please just call me Thomas.

I've had enough trouble so I don't want to tell you what happened to me or even what country I come from. But I would like to share with you some of the difficult experiences of an African in Los Angeles.

When I first come here, I first learn that I'm "Black". I didn't know that I was Black. No one told me in my country "You are black." In my country, I didn't know to call some people "white." There's a French person, or a German person. I didn't know they are "White". Here, even the papers you sign, they give you that feeling you have to say Black, you have to say Hispanic or White and the first time I sign this thing I say No!, this is weird, but I have to say "black" because that's me. Very weird.

Then I was driving. The police stop me and I ask why. This is weird. I haven't done anything. Well, Neighborhood Watch called the police. On me? Why? And another day, same neighborhood, I am stopped by the police again. So I think maybe this is racial profiling.

And things are challenging here because the system here is pretty difficult. Even Americans don't know how you go about it. Where I come from I knew every corner. If you need this document go here, if you want to do this, go here. In America even Americans don't know. You ask *where can I get this?* They don't know.

And I hope you will believe me. I think one of the worst things in USA is the horrible process of filing for asylum. When you come here if you're an asylum-seeker you're not entitled to any benefits. You don't have a permit to work.

When I didn't have authorization to work? I'm not having anybody here, I don't know anyone, I have no benefit to keep me alive. I was so depressed. And I am not someone who wants to sit at home doing nothing. I always work. I am someone who works. It was horrible, it was very bad. But I began going through therapy sessions. I went there and I opened up and I think my doctor is one of the great people who made me survive. You go in with your heart broken and by the time you get out of her office you get back at least that hope—Let's see what happens in the next month, the next two months...

But while you wait...you wait. At least give me accommodation. I knew some Africans who were sleeping under freeways including this very smart boy. He had nowhere to go and he was sleeping under the freeway and he inspired me: If there is anything I can do to help someone, I will do it.

I did have help from some African people here. They welcomed me. But I wish I could also feel welcomed by American people.

**It's just hard to meet people. The work we immigrants get? If you are a security guard, you can't just talk to everybody. You have to stand and execute your duties. If you clean someone's house, you can't start becoming friends with the person whose house you clean!**

**So life can be lonely. But I look at the strengths, the pillars which make me able to stand, not fall. There is a saying: When you throw the cassava stem, it will start growing wherever you throw it. So in this instance, I am the cassava stem and I was thrown here. I have to start growing.**