



## The Post-Standard

### **After surviving war and life in a refugee camp, they're celebrating their first Christmas in America**

**A dream comes true for an extended family that fled civil war in native Burundi**

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**By BoNhia Lee**  
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When Jean Claude Ndizeye fled the civil war in his native Burundi 13 years ago, he had very little hope that things would get better so he could return.

His father was among the more than 200,000 people killed in the ethnic fighting that flared in 1993 when the first democratically elected president of the Central African nation was assassinated.

Ndizeye lived in a refugee camp in Tanzania for 12 years, praying to someday find a safe place to live.

His prayers were answered in August when he found a home on Syracuse's North Side, thanks to Catholic Charities' refugee program and Living Hope Christian Center, a nondenominational church on North State Street.

Ndizeye, 34, lives in a four-bedroom house with his wife, Evelyne, their three children, his two sisters, a nephew and two nieces.

"I was just imagining, hoping," he said in French, which was translated by Laura Frantz, of Fayetteville, who is helping the family settle in their new country. "I was always thinking, dreaming of where to go except back to Burundi."

As Ndizeye and his family celebrate their first Christmas in America, he reflected on his flight from war, life in a refugee camp and about rebuilding his life in Central New York.

He was studying mechanics at a boarding school in October 1993 when Melchior Ndadaye, Burundi's first democratically elected president, was assassinated, igniting the country's 12-year-old civil war.

Ndizeye walked for about a week to his parents' village in Ruzo, in northern Burundi. The house was empty.

His family was gone.

He figured his relatives had crossed the border into neighboring Rwanda, where ethnic fighting was going on between the Hutus and the Tutsis. He canoed across the river to Rwanda, where he was reunited with his mother, a Tutsi, and sisters. He learned that his father, a Hutu, was killed in the fighting.

Six months later, the family was forced to leave Rwanda when ethnic tensions mounted after Rwanda's president and Burundi's new leader were killed April 6, 1994, when the airplane they were traveling in was shot down over Kigali, Rwanda's capital.

Ndizeye and his family returned to Burundi and he went back to boarding school.

He was on the run again, three months later. Soldiers stormed the school and randomly picked students out of class and killed them, he said.

Ndizeye was captured by soldiers, and escaped when he went looking for water, he said.

He fled to neighboring Tanzania, where he found his two sisters in Lukole refugee camp. It was in the camp that he met his wife, Evelyne Ndayisenga, 27. His mother is missing and he hasn't found his father's body.

### **Life in the refugee camp**

In the camp, Ndizeye and nine family members lived in a one-bedroom house made of metal sheeting. He slept outside most nights to keep burglars away.

"It was difficult," Ndizeye said in English.

There was no education for women and children. The United Nations' refugee agency gave Ndizeye permission to take mechanic lessons outside the camp. Women earned money making and selling crochet mats. One dozen mats are sold for 30,000 Tanzanian shillings, about \$23.

Every two weeks, the family received 11 pounds of corn or beans from relief workers.

"They cook and cook the beans and it would never get soft," Ndizeye said.

In those difficult times, Ndizeye relied on his faith. He went to church every Sunday and prayed for a safe place to live.

Three years ago, Ndizeye and his family applied for refugee resettlement, hoping some country would accept them.

In July, his prayers were answered.

America had accepted him.

"I was very happy," Ndizeye said in English.

### **A new life in Syracuse**

In Syracuse, Ndizeye marveled at the furnishings and the refrigerator stocked with meat, milk and other foods.

"Here, this house is beautiful," he said, sitting in his living room with stuffed animals and plastic garlands of flowers and butterflies hanging on the walls.

Shortly after arriving here, Ndizeye and Evelyne enrolled in English class at the Syracuse school district's Refugee Family Program on Park Street. Evelyne is working on finding a job through JobsPlus.

His sons and nephew attend Frazer Elementary School, his nieces attend Hughes Magnet School and his 15-year-old sister attends Fowler High School.

Last month, Ndizeye landed a part-time job at L'Adour restaurant, where he speaks French with the staff and is also learning English. He works three days a week, earning \$7.50 an hour.

When the family arrived, each member received \$425 or \$4,250 total from the federal government to cover the first month's rent, security deposit and food, he said.

Ndizeye pays \$300 a month for heat and phone. The Onondaga County Department of Social Services helps him pay the \$850 rent each month.

He hopes to find more work so he can make more money to support his family and go back to school.

"I had to stop school in Burundi and Tanzania and would like to go back to school to learn to drive trucks," he said.

The children are adjusting to their new lives, going to school and learning English.

Ndizeye's younger sister, Beatrice Havyarimana, 15, is the freshman at Fowler, where she plays soccer and hopes to become a doctor some day.

"I like go to school," said Beatrice, who is learning English.

At home, she and Evelyne love to knit, a skill they learned in the refugee camp. On a recent visit, she was knitting a crochet mat.

There's a new addition to the family, the first American.

On Dec. 7, Ndizeye's sister, Serafina Kaburo, 17, gave birth to a daughter, Aline. Her husband is still in Tanzania.

The family hopes to bring him and Ndizeye's two other sisters and a brother to Syracuse.

Living Hope Christian Center is helping the family learn American culture. The family started worshipping at the church four weeks after it arrived in Syracuse.

Frantz, the family's friend and translator, met the children through her husband, who works with the church's outreach ministry. Considering what the family's been through, Frantz said she's impressed by its sense of humor.

"What strikes me about them is they're always laughing and smiling," she said. "They have a lot of joy, it seems. I believe that comes from their faith in God."

Church members took family members grocery shopping, to Kmart and treated them to their first Thanksgiving dinner, a Christmas party and a visit to Chuck E. Cheese's.

"One of the things they requested is to get them new shoes," said Pastor James Gebhardt, of Living Hope. "Out of all the things they could have asked for, they asked for shoes."

Many people in Burundi walk barefoot because they can't afford shoes, Ndizeye said. He wore his first pair of shoes when he went to secondary school.

Ndizeye's family is the second refugee family the church has embraced. Last year, it helped settle a family from Sierra Leone.

"We have just fallen head over heels in love with them," Gebhardt said about Ndizeye's family. "I can't fathom what it would be like to be coming to a different country where it's culture shock and not being aware of the surroundings."

Gebhardt and members of the outreach ministry introduced their two refugee families to American culture by taking them shopping, to the beach and to restaurants like the Spaghetti Warehouse and Old Country Buffet.

"We're there to assist them to adjusting in a different culture and a different community," Gebhardt said. "They have become like family to us."

Ndizeye and his family are looking forward to their first peaceful Christmas.

In Burundi, families celebrate Jesus' birth by attending a church and inviting family and friends to a dinner where meat is served.

Today, the family's Christmas dinner will feature chicken and fish, Ndizeye said.

"It's very hard to find meat to eat or fish," he said. "But here, you can go anywhere and it is right there."

Ndizeye said he's happy to be in America.

"He's safe and he's got something to eat," Frantz said. "Free medical care."

And he has big dreams for his children.

"I want my children, Joyce, she will be doctor," he said in English. "My sons will be pastor and teachers."

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