



BRYCS Parenting Conversations: John and Ellen, A Liberian Family

On May 29, 2007, John and Ellen [1] met with BRYCS staff to talk about their life and experiences as refugees from Liberia, now raising a family in the United States.

Refugee Life and Coming to the U.S.

Husband: My wife and I have been refugees since 1990, when we fled Liberia. I came to the U.S. in May of 2004 with three of our children. My wife joined me here two years later with two more of our children.

Back in 1990, I worked for the Liberian government, in the Ministry of Agriculture. I was a target for the rebels because of my government affiliation. Our family is Grebo from the Eastern region of Liberia. We fled to the Tabou area in the Ivory Coast and lived in a refugee camp there for more than 13 years. Life in the camp was very difficult. There were no schools and little food, so there was no control—"the person who controls your stomach, controls your direction." We only ate one meal a day. We would eat about 5:30 P.M. and then not eat again until 5:30 the next night. The U.N. gave us handouts. We had just one room for the whole family. It was difficult to control the children; we did it through prayer. Some children left their parents who were in the camp. Whatever money we got was reserved for food. I was not able to buy my wife clothes for many years.

We are also Assemblies of God ministers, and we ran a ministry in the camp. Every Wednesday our congregation would fast and pray. One particular Wednesday in 2003, my wife was leading a service of fasting and prayer, when soldiers from the government of Ivory Coast entered the church. A civil war was starting in the Ivory Coast, and both sides accused Liberians.

Wife: I was standing at the front of the church facing the congregation, so I was the only one who could see the soldiers enter the church with their guns. I tried to remain calm so the people would not panic. I told the soldiers we were fasting and praying, but a soldier responded, "It is time for war, not time for church." Once the congregation saw the soldiers, people starting running in every direction. The soldiers arrested us and took us to the local authorities. They made the men take off their clothes and stand in the sun from 8:00 A.M. until 5:30 P.M.

Husband: Since I was the vice chair of the refugee committee for the camp, I was at a meeting in the United Nations compound while this was going on. I received a message that government soldiers had arrested my wife and congregation, so I went to another office on the U.N. compound and requested the U.N.'s help in freeing them. The U.N. called in French troops stationed nearby, who confirmed that my wife and the other church members were refugees. The Ivory Coast soldiers checked to make sure that all of the refugees were registered with **UNHCR**, which they were. However, they freed everyone except my wife. They considered her a threat because she was a leader, and they told her she had to leave Ivory Coast. A U.N. vehicle agreed to drive her to the Liberian border the next morning, along with our 6-year-old son and 10-year-old daughter.

Wife: It was not safe for my husband to return with me to Liberia, due to his past government affiliation, so I went alone with our two smallest children. I stayed in Liberia for about 11 months—until "World War III" broke out in Liberia—then I brought the children back to their father in the refugee camp. We were in an impossible situation—I could not remain in the Ivory Coast and my husband could not return to Liberia.

Around this time, we heard that the U.S. might be willing to resettle some Liberians from the Ivory Coast, due to the unstable situation there. I decided to go looking for our three children who had been scattered, in the hopes of reuniting our family.

I went out to the bush trying to find our three missing older children. I went to the last place we had heard that they went, and then I followed word of mouth from one place to the next. I was able to locate one son in Guinea, in a refugee camp near the town of Nzerekore. He had fled to Guinea when the war broke out in Ivory Coast. This son and I then tracked down another son living in a village in the Ivory Coast.

Husband: While she was out in the bush, I was called for a U.S. refugee resettlement interview, in February 2004. They moved us from the refugee camp in Tabou to Abidjan, the capital of Ivory Coast, about 12 hours away. We stayed there for about four months while they processed us for resettlement. First I gave my story to IOM [the International Organization for Migration], then I had an interview with U.S. "immigration" where they cross-examine you. It takes about a week to find out if you passed the interview. I got the results the second week of April and came to the U.S. with three of our children, in May 2004.

Life and Employment in the U.S.

After arriving in the U.S., I was eventually able to make contact with my wife, who had returned to the Tabou refugee camp with our two sons. I went to a local refugee resettlement agency and filed "Affidavits of Relationship" for my wife and sons.

It was terrible being a newly arrived refugee and a single parent. I was confused. I could not sleep. I just worried. But I had to work to send money back to my wife. I got a job stocking shelves on the night shift at a large discount grocery chain. I worked from 9:00 P.M. until 5:30 A.M. I left my oldest daughter in charge, but at work I worried about leaving the kids alone at home. My daughter did most of the cooking while I was separated from my wife; men do not cook in Liberian culture.

I still work at the discount grocery chain on the weekends. I also work for an agency that delivers meals to people with HIV and cancer. I handle ordering of supplies, and delivery of meals. Our family also collects used clothing for refugees back in the camp. When we have enough clothes and enough money, we package it in a large barrel and mail it back to Tabou.

We are Assemblies of God ministers, but here we attend a Catholic Church that has been very helpful to us. We are used to more dancing and singing at church. We still support a ministry in the Tabou refugee camp, called Maranatha. We take a tithe from every paycheck and send it back to support this ministry. However, we are in the U.S. to stay, and we hope to someday have a church here.

Wife: I again pastored the Assemblies of God church after I returned to the Tabou camp, but it was hard being separated from my husband. Usually, a Liberian woman does not work for income, everything is on the man. I could not sleep. The thinking was too much for me. It was so hard to be lonely.

When we finally were reunited in the U.S., in April 2006, it was jubilation. He brought me flowers at the airport. It was not strange being back together as a family; the only strange thing was getting used to this culture. I have been volunteering at an outreach program through our church, and I am now applying for jobs as a nurse's aide.

Husband: Here, everyone is in their houses, but in Africa our doors are open. I can enter your house anytime except when you are sleeping, but here you can't do that.

Childrearing

Wife: Here, the children get their own way, but in Africa we can beat [2] the children. Here you talk, you need patience, you advise them not to do that, but the children need to see action before they get afraid.

Husband: The Bible says, “Spare the rod, spoil the child.” Shortly after we arrived, I asked my young son to untie my shoes. His four-year-old friend, who was with him, responded that my son did not have to do that for me. My older children, who were over age 15 when they came here, already have the African culture in them. They are more submissive: when I talk they respond.

The freedoms are too large for the children here. In Liberia, when parents are speaking, the children shut up. Here, children have the first priority; children demand from their parents, they don't ask.

Education

Husband: Our older children went for years without school in the refugee camp. In Liberia, there were no textbooks. Here the children are going to school freely, there is no tension on us. Now, my youngest son is in 5th grade; he takes the bus to school. Another son and daughter are in 9th and 10th grades. I drop them off at the high school in the morning, and they take a city bus home in the afternoon. Our son in the 10th grade plays varsity soccer at school. He plays for a private team as well and just won a soccer tournament. Our 21-year-old son is getting his General Equivalency Degree (GED) and job training through a local **Job Corps** program. We see him on weekends.

Family Obligations and Marriage

Husband: In Liberia if you needed childcare, a relative—usually a single female—would come to live with you and take care of the children. Here, Liberians are adjusting to the American system and using daycare.

In Liberia, no matter how old or grown a girl is, until she marries she will stay with you in the house. After marriage, the wife goes to live with the husband's family, where she will serve the parents. A daughter who leaves the house without a husband would not have respect, she would be considered hopeless.

Marriage arrangements can happen by the parents' choice or your choice, but the child or the parent can also reject the choice.

We have been married 35 years; we were about 20 when we married. We chose each other.

Wife: But my parents rejected my choice. They cut off contact with me for several years. But after our fourth child, they were convinced and they had contact with me again.

I have four sisters, and one brother who died a long time ago. Two sisters live in the Liberian town of Harper, one sister lives in Monrovia, and one sister is in the Ivory Coast. However, sisters can't file in the U.S. to reunify with sisters. If my mother was still living and was in the U.S., she could file for my sisters, but my mother was killed in 1994, when the rebels chopped her up.

Husband: My mother is still alive in Monrovia. She was in a refugee camp in the Ivory Coast in 2003, but now she is with her sister in Monrovia, and we support them from here.

In Africa, if you're from the other village, you're still my sister. There is no line—if you don't help your extended family, you are selfish. Two or three times a day I get calls for financial help from Liberia. If I don't help, I am considered selfish. I got two calls today asking me for money while I was at work. It is difficult.

We support about 10 people who are still in Liberia or in the camps. Every paycheck, we send some money. Plus, when they call me from overseas, they want me to call them back so that I pay the phone bill. Because we were in the refugee camps for 13 years, we know how hard it is.

We still have one son who is missing. We don't know where he is. He would be almost 19 now. We last saw him in 2002, but we have no reliable information about him now.

Advice

Husband: Here we are released. To bring up children here, the burden is less. Over there, it hurt me because I wanted to satisfy my son, but I didn't have it.

My advice is to be yourself, take your time, be mindful to get into the culture, do not rush, be quick to hear and slow to take action. It is easier to live here. What the law says, do it. Be obedient.

Wife: We bless God for the American government that brought us here. It only takes the love of God to do that.

1 - Names have been changed to protect participants' privacy.

2 - Note from BRYCS: Liberians and other Africans may use the term "beat" to mean any type of physical discipline, including spanking or light switching - this does not mean "beat up" as it might in the U.S.

Discussion Questions for Refugee Serving Agencies:

1. How can the Job Corps program be a resource for refugees in your area? What local GED or job training programs are available to refugees?
 - Job Corps
2. How would you help a refugee family wanting to trace family members separated by war or conflict?
 - Red Cross Tracing Services
3. How would you help refugees in your area who want to bring other family members to the United States?
 - USCCB's "How to Sponsor a Refugee Relative"
4. What effect can prolonged stays in refugee camps have on refugees and their children?
 - Find out about the U.S. Committee for Refugees' "Campaign to End Refugee Warehousing"
5. What else do you know about Liberian refugees?
 - BRYCS Resource:
 - *Liberian Refugees: Cultural Considerations for Social Service Providers*
 - From UNHCR: <http://www.unhcr.org/publ/PUBL/4371d17c0.pdf>
 - Update on Liberian refugees in Ivory Coast, from Refugees International