



Bridging Refugee Youth & Children's Services

## **BRYCS Youth Conversations: Engoma, a Congolese Teen**

*In January 2017, Engoma shared his resettlement journey and experiences with BRYCS staff on what it's like to be an immigrant teen in the United States.*

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### **Family Background and Migration Story**

My family and I are originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). I was born there but I left my home country when I was one-year-old and grew up in refugee camps. We are Christians, my father is clergy and we are currently living in Missouri.

The reason why my parents and I left my home country was the civil war. My parents left the DRC as soon as the war broke out in 1996 and we become travelers to one place after another, trying to find tranquility and where to start building a little life. I fled the war with both my parents and I was the only child in my family at that time. After leaving my home country we went to Republic of Tanzania, where we lived as first time refugees. We lived there approximately three years. My two siblings were born in that refugee camp, despite too many struggles, such as: lack of food, healthcare and epidemics, which was caused by the food we received, that was hardly fit for pigs. That epidemic caused a lot of deaths, my family could not endure in that situation and we moved to Zambia. We lived there approximately eight months, but we also moved again because of a similar situation to the previous camp. We then changed to Malawi and lived there for seven months, despite the struggles of getting food and charcoal. Finally, we settled in Mozambique, where we spent approximately fourteen years in the refugee camp before coming to the U.S. One of the problems we faced during our journey as refugees was trying to figure out where to eat and where to spend the night. We were like homeless not knowing our destination.

### **Life in the U.S.**

My life in the U.S. is way better than it was in my home country and in the refugee camps. The difference between the U.S. and my home country and asylum countries, is that we used to struggle to go to school, because most of the schools we could not afford and our education was very limited based on financial status. My parents struggled day to day to find jobs so they could feed us. In the U.S. education is free, however college is expensive but there's financial aid provided. There's also the possibility of having a full scholarship if the student works harder in school.

The hardest thing about coming to America is carrying the responsibilities of my family and the refugee community. It's a very challenging role, which makes me think deeply about some of the issues affecting refugees. Before coming here, I wish I knew that high school education in the U.S. is based on ages. If you are old, like 18, you can no longer attend high school in the U.S. Another hard thing about coming to America was before I started attending college, I was required to contact all the high schools which I attended in Africa to send my transcripts officially and directly to the college, which is impossible because some schools there don't have access to technology or use of computer. That made it very difficult to get all the required documents.

### **Advice for Parents**

They should help their teens understand that American society is very complex compared to the one they came from.



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### **Advice for Teachers**

My principal and some of my teachers were helpful, because they always provided me, in particular, good advice on how to overcome obstacles and how to succeed in American society. Also, my principal, counselor, and my government teacher were involved in helping me apply and prepare for the 2016 Refugee Youth Consultation in Washington DC, even though it was not related to the school.

I would advise teachers that they should try to understand the way we are and that we are not fluent in English as the with natural born U.S. citizens we are in the same classroom with. Some of us are coming in the background with no English and growing up in refugee camps.

### **Advice for the Community**

They need to accept the existence of other people's cultures and to learn how to live with refugees because being a refugee is not as easy as it is to pronounce the word "refugee". Being a refugee is more than being homeless in a country. The communities should treat refugees equally, recognizing them as human beings and not prejudging based on their religious practices, race, and language. By accepting refugees, it is keeping with American values, because all the American communities are made by immigrants, refugees and average people.

### **Advice for Immigrant Teens**

Be respectful and take everyone as a family even if they are a different religion or different culture because in the U.S. there's people from all over the world, but we all live as the United States of America, regardless of religion, opinion and beliefs.

### **Future Goals**

Based on my experiences as a refugee and my desire to help others, I want to be a leader and that is where I see my life going. I am in my second semester of college at this moment, working on the Bachelor of Science with double major in Political Science and Economics. I want to work either in the federal level or United Nations, so I can help other people to achieve their full potential.