

Reuniting a family

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In November 2006, Pastor Joseph Bukassa was finally reunited with his seven children after two painful years of separation.

Joseph Bukassa is a Christian pastor from the eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a region that, over the last decade, has been the site of continuous warfare between many different groups. The International Rescue Committee estimates that in the last six years, 3.8 million people have died in the conflict.

In 2001, Joseph changed the focus of his ministry and began preaching messages of reconciliation, forgiveness, and tolerance, urging the different groups to stop fighting. In the fall of 2003, Joseph was arrested by the local military and held for several hours. He was stripped of his clothing, interrogated, beaten, and accused of conspiring with one of the opposition groups. Similar arrests and attacks occurred over the next six months, including an attack on Joseph's wife and children. In the summer of 2004, Joseph and his family fled their house and went into hiding. On December 25, 2004, Joseph was able to fly to the United States with his wife and their two youngest children, leaving his other seven children behind, in hiding along the Rwandan-Congolese border.

In the spring of 2005, I began working on Joseph's case through the Notre Dame Immigration Clinic. In the fall of 2005, Pastor Bukassa was granted political asylum and, soon afterward, received permission to bring his seven children from Africa to the United States. I remember telling Joseph the good news that his children could come to the United States. While he seemed happy, he was subdued; we both understood the financial obstacles that stood in the way. Tickets for the seven children would cost more than \$10,000.



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I had conflicting thoughts. Technically, I had accomplished everything I could for my client. Joseph was granted asylum and his children could legally immigrate to the United States.

On the other hand, how could my job be finished when Joseph's children were still in Africa, living in constant danger, maybe to remain there for several more years?

I thought a lot about the concept of being “a different kind of lawyer.” Does it mean being an ultra-ethical lawyer? Does it mean doing more pro bono work than other lawyers? The concept likely means different things to different Notre Dame lawyers, but I realized what it means to me: always remembering that from one to whom much is given, much is expected. It means realizing that whatever benefits I have been blessed with, the blessing was accompanied by the expectation that I would use my gifts to help others. For me, it meant helping the Bukassas, even after my professional obligations were fulfilled.

In the spring of 2006, with help from the Notre Dame Immigration Clinic, my parents, and my beautiful bride, Melissa, the Bukassa Family Reunification Project was created with the goal of raising \$10,000 to help Pastor Bukassa bring his children to the United States. Flyers were distributed, donors and alumni

were contacted, and donations were slowly collected. Many Notre Dame law students gave money, along with other members of the South Bend community.

Finally in the fall of 2006, through a combination of our project and the fundraising efforts by a network of local churches in South Bend, enough money was collected to bring all seven children from Africa. Joseph had always insisted that the children be brought together, refusing to bring them over in small groups as money was raised. He also insisted on traveling to Africa himself to gather his children and

accompany and protect them on their journey to their new home. Traveling from South Bend, he flew to an airport in Rwanda and rode a bus for three days to Burundi where the children were in hiding. The bus ride was particularly dangerous because local gangs often attacked, robbed, or commandeered buses, and Joseph's persecutors were still looking for him. Once reunited with his family in Burundi, Joseph and his children embarked on their long return trip back to the United States, first by bus and then by airplane.

On November 9, 2006, Joseph and his children landed in Chicago, and the family was finally reunited for the first time in two years, just in time to celebrate their first Thanksgiving in their new home.

Helping Joseph gain asylum and bring his children over from Africa was a deeply rewarding experience for me. There are too many uncertain moments in our lives when it is difficult to know for sure whether we are doing the right thing. Every moment I spent working with Joseph, I knew with absolute certainty that I was doing the right thing. This is just one of the many benefits of working with nonprofits and performing community service.

Such service allows one to meet some amazing individuals such as Joseph, who has experienced unbelievably horrific events, yet still maintains his smile. Through my work and friendship with Joseph, I realize that the trivial things I worry about on an average day are not worth getting upset over and should always be kept in perspective. Joseph's faith and ability to stay positive while enduring two years without his children always inspired me. He is the type of individual who makes people feel better just by being around him.

Joseph is a good man and remains one of my good friends; we still talk every few weeks. This spring I will be visiting South Bend to see the Bukassas and meet his seven children.

This experience would not have been possible without Notre Dame Law School and the Notre Dame Immigration Clinic. Thank you.

A 2006 graduate of the Law School, Jay Nunez works at a law firm in Newport Beach, Calif., that specializes in construction defect, product liability, legal malpractice, and personal injury. He is currently working to establish a relationship with pro bono immigration law clinics so that he will be able to work pro bono hours in immigration and asylum law. His wife, Melissa Nunez, is in her final year at Notre Dame Law School.



In order to assist the Bukassas and other refugee families making the transition to their new lives in the United States, please donate to:

UNITED RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Attn: Refugee Program

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