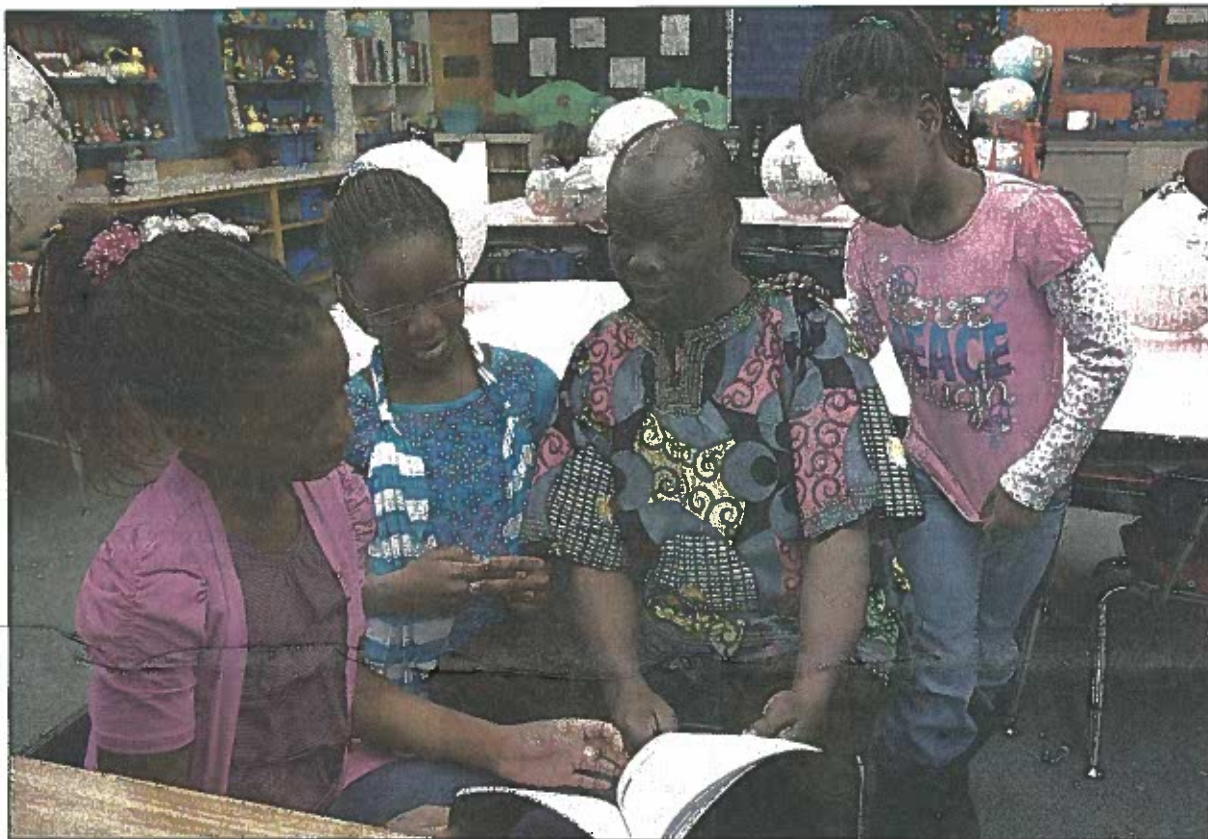


Remaking a life, reclaiming a career

A Congolese school principal works as a custodian in Idaho but hopes to teach again. New programs also aim to help other immigrants with similar dreams.



KATHERINE JONES / kjones@idahostatesman.com

In Congo and in Idaho, education has always been important to Asukulu Etoka. Now he's seeing to it that his kids do well in school. Neema, 9, left, shows him her math. Therese, 11, center, is in sixth grade, and Ruth is in first grade. All attend Pierce Park Elementary in Boise. The Etokas also have a daughter in junior high and another in college in the East on a scholarship.

BY ANNA WEBB

awebb@idahostatesman.com

© 2012 Idaho Statesman

Schools are familiar places for Asukulu Etoka. He was a teacher in his homeland, the Democratic Republic of Congo. While teaching, he went to school himself, earning certificates and an advanced degree. He became a middle school principal, then a high school principal.

Today, he still works in an academic setting, but he has a different role: He's one of two night custodians at Hidden Springs Elementary.

His day starts at 3 p.m. and ends at 11, after he has cleaned the school's four buildings, classrooms

Etoka and his family fled wartime violence in Africa, ultimately settling in Idaho. They are not, technically, refugees, but their story is similar to that of hundreds of refugees who were professionals in their home countries and had to leave their careers behind.

The state has a system in place through which teachers educated in foreign universities can get Idaho credentials. Tara Wolfson, regional employment coordinator for the Idaho Office for Refugees, knows of one person who has done so. The process can be daunting.

There can be language barriers. Even for refugee teachers who are fluent in English, getting official

REFUGEES BY THE NUMBERS

- Between 2009 and 2012, 2,487 refugees have been resettled in Idaho.
- They've come from Africa (specifically the Congo, Somalia and Eritrea), followed by East Asia (mostly Burma); Europe and Central Asia (mostly Afghanistan and Uzbekistan); and Latin America and the Caribbean (mostly Colombia).
- In 2009, 55 percent of Boise's employable refugee adults were working. That number jumped to 74 percent in 2011.
- Refugee education varies: Some hold doctoral, master's or bachelor's degrees; others have had no formal education.
- In the past five years, more than half of the refugee population resettled in Idaho has had an 11th grade education or higher.

REFUGEES

CONTINUED FROM A1

transcripts from their home universities can take a long time — if it's even possible.

Wolfson recently helped a man from Sudan send for his transcripts from the Egyptian university where he'd studied. From start to finish, the process took more than a year and a half.

Sometimes, former teachers have to return to school because the state of Idaho requires specific classes. That can be time-consuming and expensive.

TRANSPLANTING PROFESSIONS

The Idaho Office for Refugees has a new program to help educators keep a foothold in their profession as they work toward recertification, by becoming preschool teachers and child-care workers.

The program guides refugees through the process of getting their Boise child-care worker licenses, as well as pediatric first aid and CPR instruction through Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center. It helps connect them with Idaho Stars, a statewide child-care referral system.

In the past year, the refugee office has helped 13 refugees get their licenses and first aid training. Most have found jobs in child-care centers and preschools, said Wolfson.

Jog Bhattarai, a Bhutanese refugee who taught for many years in a Nepalese refugee camp before coming to Idaho, started a new job at a Boise child-care center last week. She credits a network of people who helped her, including the Idaho Office for Refugees, and the Idaho Department of Labor, whose staffers helped her polish her resume.

Like Etoka, she wants to teach again.

LEAP OF FAITH

Etoka and his family left Congo in 1996 — an odyssey that involved fleeing their homes on foot, Etoka and wife, Charlene, holding their tiny daughter Salima's hand, their belongings on their backs. The trip to the U.S., through several other African countries, took four months because of the tangle of red tape.

The Etokas' first stop in the U.S. was California. A relative recommended Idaho as an affordable place to live.

So a decade ago, they took a leap of faith and bought bus tickets to Boise. The Etokas now have five

"I told them it doesn't matter the work that I do.
It matters how I lead my family."

ASUKULU ETOKA, SCHOOL CUSTODIAN AND FORMER TEACHER

daughters; the eldest, Salima, 18, earned a scholarship to Trinity University in Connecticut and is finishing her freshman year. She's studying social policy with an emphasis on international affairs.

Etoka speaks Swahili, French and several tribal languages as well as English. He worked as a French tutor for a time. He worked at Zamzows, then at a Boise cleaning company.

Breaking into the Boise School District was tough, he said, but he persisted — it was closest to the professional world he'd known back home.

He applied five times before landing his first custodian job, he said. He's worked at several schools, Hidden Springs for the past three years.

'AMERICAN STORY'

Having been a school leader helps him do a good job now, Etoka said. He used to set the high standards for the people who cleaned his schools' floors.

Hidden Springs Principal Brett Forrey often chatted with Etoka but didn't know much of his story or of Salima Etoka's academic success until recently, he said.

District director Matt Kobe said sitting down to hear about Etoka's life and long journey to Idaho was akin to sitting down at a documentary film festival.

"We're a diverse district, and we're becoming more so," said Kobe. "We're a nation of immigrants, and the Etokas' story is like a microcosm of the American story."

Etoka said his job is "a stepping stone."

He's taking classes at College of Western Idaho to get his teaching credentials. Forrey is hoping to make use of Etoka's talents, perhaps through a French language club for students. Etoka already has shared African drumming and music with teachers and students, Forrey said.

SUCCESS IN IDAHO

Like Salima, the Etokas' other daughters are thriving.

Lena is in junior high, in accelerated math. The three youngest — first-grader Ruth, third-grader Neema and sixth-grader Therese — are enrolled in the Classical Program, a rigorous, language-focused curriculum at Pierce Park Elementary.

Charlene Etoka has two part-time jobs, working at an assisted-living residence in Boise and cleaning the church the family attends.

The Etokas are happy in Idaho, Etoka said, but they wish they could have stayed in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

A HARD LIFE IN CONGO

Decades of rule by dictator Mobutu Sese Seko had bled the country's resources. But Etoka felt he was doing important work there, including with a nonprofit that planted trees and set up programs to educate adult women.

The group also created a program to keep children from dropping out to work in the Congolese gold mines. The strategy: Paying parents with food if they kept their children in school.

But when the war that would overthrow Mobutu broke out in the mid-1990s, Etoka feared it would last for decades. He was right. Millions of people have died in a series of conflicts since then.

Staying in Congo was not an option for the Etokas. Their lives were in danger — Etoka was even threatened by former students who had become vindictive child soldiers.

Today, Etoka has come full circle.

In Idaho, he's working with refugees on a community gardening project and is a member of the African Community Development organization, a support group for local refugees and other immigrants and their allies.

All his experiences, good and bad alike, he said, are making his "history."

Anna Webb: 377-6431

ANNA WEBB

Anna attended Boise public schools and taught English in the summer school program at Mountain



Cove High before getting her first reporting job. She has written for the Idaho Statesman since 2002. She covers nonprofits and Boise city, education and community stories, and is the Saturday breaking news reporter.