

# Sometimes Superheroes Need a Hand Before They Can Lend One

Stories by Pat Spanjer and Stefanie Pettit

**A**dversity crushes many people. It makes some of them stronger. And, sometimes – with some kindness and a helping hand – it creates individuals who dedicate themselves to a life of kindness to others and, in turn, to offering a helping hand when it's needed most.

These are superheroes.

Meet three extraordinary Eastern alumni who welcomed the helping hand of Eastern faculty and staff – and others – and who beat some very considerable odds and obstacles to become the first in their big families to attain a college degree. Their stories are about that, yes, but more so about how they are extending their own hands to help others just like themselves.



Godfrey Elizai '04

# A Sudanese Refugee's Story

The future looked grim for the little boy moving among the Sudanese refugee camps in the 1970s. The raging civil wars that uprooted thousands of African families doomed most of the little children like him to starvation, early death and other horrors which still cry out from the headlines today.

But this past June 12, Godfrey Elizai walked proudly to the podium at Commencement to receive his diploma, earning a B.A. in social work from Eastern Washington University – a world away from that childhood not so long ago.

A saving grace for Godfrey was his father Ezekiel Elizai, who was determined that his son receive schooling, despite all that swirled around them.

With his rare education in English, Godfrey, at age 18, got a teaching job at the Ugandan refugee camp where his family was assigned. So eager was he to teach that Godfrey initiated an under-tree learning classroom, scraping bark off trees for writing pads and using dried cassava and coal for writing.

A teaching career had begun.

Another saving grace came when Godfrey, his father and seven siblings were resettled one or two at a time by an

As a refugee myself, I have learned how those in exile face countless obstacles in day-to-day life.

American program in Pasco, Wash.

As an English-speaking resettled refugee, Godfrey was able to pursue higher education at Eastern, where the McNair Scholars Program (see story, page 22) embraced him and provided him with the motivation and support he and other students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to succeed in college.

It did something else, too. It showed him that not only was a baccalaureate degree within his reach, but he could go on past that – for advanced study, to return to college at the front of the classroom to

become a role model, to become a living example of the achievement others just like him in those very classrooms are just beginning to envision.

“The McNair Scholars Program has given me hope in all of my work,” Godfrey said. “Being part of this elite group of scholars, I have had the opportunity to conduct a full-time research internship under the direction of Dr. Golie Jansen, professor of social work. In our interactions during this research process, I have come to discover that our academic interests perfectly align.”

Jansen's experience working with Cambodian refugees and her expertise in the study of post-traumatic stress disorders was beneficial in Godfrey's research and writing. And, as it turned out, they helped point Godfrey to his own future.

During his McNair summer research experience, he conducted extensive interviews and studied trauma and its effects on Sudanese refugee children. His presentation on the subject at Eastern's May 19 Student Research and Creative Works Symposium was amazing, said Karen McKinney, McNair Scholars Program director: “I've never seen anyone work so hard and come such a long way in his ability to present before a large group of people.”

Speaking in fluent and formal English with his strong accent, Godfrey described to a standing-room-only crowd how he studied several refugee children in Washington's Tri-Cities who had been exposed to countless traumatic events, largely due to two decades of civil war in their country.

He talked about the more than 400 Sudanese refugees among the 3,000-plus resettled individuals in the Tri-Cities who have fled wars and refugee camps in countries throughout the world. He is most concerned with the ways in which

young, impressionable refugee children may be deeply, irreparably traumatized by living with instability and witnessing the incomprehensible – bloody conflicts, brutal deaths, rapes, famine and other war-related atrocities.

He knows about these things.

Based on historical data, he believes their trauma may likely lead to chronic illnesses, lack of employment, delinquency, divorce, substance abuse and criminal activities. They need a helping hand, Godfrey states.

His research-based, compelling presentation at the Symposium was judged to be one of the very best among the more than 80 research works presented and garnered for him the Symposium's Excellence in Presentation Award.

This fall Godfrey begins his master's degree studies at Eastern. “I would like to continue my research on trauma among refugees with the ultimate goal of finding feasible interventions to transform refugee lives,” he said. “As a refugee myself, I have learned how those in exile face countless obstacles in day-to-day life. I have also realized that services for refugees have been categorically mistaken as costly; thus accommodating communities have become reluctant to implement refugee programs. This is a profound misdirection.”

A master's degree by 2006, he hopes, followed by a position in a public school district or college in the Tri-Cities to assist resettled refugees. Within 10 years, a Ph.D.

“Upon earning my Ph.D.,” Godfrey noted, “I would like to teach at the collegiate level so that I may prepare the next generation of social workers. This is vitally important, as social workers need adequate preparation in order to effectively serve refugee clients.”

The lessons he learned and taught under that mahogany tree in the Sudan may be a world away, but they are still close to the heart.