

By Joyce Vining Morgan



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Yves: Hope Against the Odds

At 19, Jean-Yves Ngabonziza had lived with the horrors of the Rwandan genocide for just over a decade. At our school, he preferred not to talk about it publicly, instead going to class and basketball practice like any other student. Last year, he also lived with the very real possibility that his education in the United States would finish with his high school graduation; he was a full-need international student.

During his senior year, on Rwandan National Mourning Day, April 6, Yves spoke to the entire school community for the first time about his past and the past of his native country. He began with the history of central Africa, introduced the factions of the Rwandan conflict, described the genocide (“a civil war that erupted into genocide”), told how it played out and resolved. He had organized a PowerPoint presentation but did not consult it as he reeled off names and dates and quoted leaders and documents. It was a remarkably professional presentation, in Yves’ fourth language.

He spoke for an hour without notes and, only at the end, referred briefly to his personal experience—cut off, together with his sister, from his Tutsi parents a month after his eighth birthday, helped by a Hutu friend of his father, as they wandered through province after province looking for safety. Some of his close friends knew pieces of his story, and he would reveal bits of it to teachers and advisors. Even so, the awareness of the school population to matters African, to human rights and violations thereof, grew significantly. When the film *Hotel Rwanda* came out, he watched with a group from his dorm and told them later, “That’s where my parents were.” He is lucky; both parents and both siblings survived, though he didn’t know it until some time after the end of the genocide.

In 2000, Yves’s application arrived unannounced and from it no one could discern how this slight child in the application picture had learned of us. “Soon after,” our Director of International Student Advising recounted, “we were contacted by a Chicago-based Congolese man intent upon establishing a foundation for young Central Africans to be educated in the U.S. His visionary campaign was absolutely compelling; in countries like Rwanda, the status quo of bloodshed, poverty and corruption, coupled with extremely low rates of higher education, is untenable if positive change is to occur. His determined campaign to provide solid educations to young people of Rwanda and the Congo inspired us, too.” Admission had to take the case to the school administration, because our policy is not to offer full financial aid to international students. However, with their approval (posited upon the Congolese scholar’s assurance that his fledgling organization would provide for Yves’ postsecondary education), the school decided with unanimous faculty support to offer Yves a full scholarship package and stipend. We have never regretted that decision.

Unfortunately, postsecondary financial support was more wish than reality—only at the beginning of his senior year did Yves or we begin to realize this, and the Congolese scholar was out of reach in Africa. It was clear that Yves’ family could not begin to pay for a U.S. college education and that Yves could not attend university in Kigali without a Rwandan Baccalaureate. (Nor did his home

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university offer environmental engineering, which Yves wanted to study.) Struggling with spoken English when he first came to the U.S., he worked his way to a solid B average. However, his first test scores were weak. When Yves took the SATs, after practicing hard, his score was barely average. His TOEFL score was stronger, but neither of these scores made Yves eligible for the rare and astronomically-competitive full financial aid programs I knew of for international students. Even colleges that were need-blind for most students were only need-aware for international students, and only the very well-endowed (and very selective) could assure full support.

So I did what any of us would do. I turned to NACAC colleagues. Some I called, and others Yves and I visited during a fall mid-semester break. Still others came to our school to speak with students. Everyone made time to talk with Yves and he gained confidence about the responsiveness of admission folk, even at institutions that don't by policy offer the kind of financial aid he needed.

And, of course, I appealed to the e-list.

I described Yves' situation and added, “Yves is a B student with us, plays basketball (will not play Div anything—feisty, but too short!), sings in our choir (a significant talent), makes both pottery and videos. He loves science and wants to study chemistry/environmental engineering, because he can see himself working to solve the water problems in Rwanda.

“But he will need full financial support. That's why I'm turning to all of you for ideas re: an institution that will both welcome and support him. He has the full backing of our faculty, has been a strong positive member of our boarding school community and will contribute significantly to a college community.”

Responses varied. There were several from worried counselors working with African students whose situations were as desperate as Yves'—students from Ethiopia and Burkina Faso. Other counselors told me how things had worked out for high-need international students in previous years and suggested those colleges that

had been helpful. I remembered my own earliest forays into this issue with the first group of Bosnian Muslim students who came to finish secondary schooling in the early 1990s—all of whom went on to finish college in the U.S.

There was practical advice, “Your task will be made easier or harder by his immigration status. If he has more than just a student visa, then he could be eligible for many forms of aid.” “Is he still a Rwandan citizen? Or is he now a permanent resident, have asylum...?” Refugee status would also make a difference. “If your student is a U.S. citizen we are need-blind,” wrote a colleague from one university. And from another college with a similar policy, “International admission is, though, extremely competitive. We receive around 500 applications per year and have space to admit only about 30 students—roughly seven percent of our freshman class.”

“I used Doug Thompson's list... to help the students create their lists so there were schools on their lists that might offer them a full ride. I have a copy if you need one. As well, there's another list I just printed off the NACAC e-list—Shaun McElroy has put the schools offering international student financial aid on his school's Web site.” In fact, the College Board's International Student Handbook also lists colleges and universities that offer financial aid to international students.*

Several admission folks pledged to try to find funding for Yves. Harold Wingood at Clark University in Worcester (MA) had long tried to supplement what his university can do by fund-raising for international students with extreme need who, like Yves, come from fragile politico-economic environments. Clark was close enough for us to visit during that mid-semester break, and Harold made the time to have a long talk with Yves. And several admission visitors to our school were frank about institutional limitations but hoped that there would be a long shot that somehow financial support could be arranged.

Then, several weeks later, I got an email from Mike Frantz at Wilkes University (PA), “I have talked with my colleagues at Wilkes University regarding your student. We are willing to fund this student in terms of tuition, room, board, and fees (he would be responsible for books, personal expenses, etc.), assuming he is admissible. We do offer both chemistry and environmental engineering majors (with emphasis on hydrology, water quality, etc.). Please let me know if he would like to pursue this option.”

Yves and I poured over the Web site and then the materials that came by mail. Wilkes was a good match, and the generosity of their offer was extraordinary. Moreover, it was not terribly far from the Vermont host family with whom Yves had been staying for four years during vacations, but would he be admissible?

Eventually Yves applied to seven colleges, all following communication with their admission offices about the possibility of finding financial aid. Our students average between five and six applications apiece, so at least superficially his process resembled that of his peers. On campus Yves was coming out of his shell, spurred on by the hope that college was more than a

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dream. He played more basketball, tried capoeira, entered nutty student-sponsored competitions in all-school assembly (to the delight of his dorm-mates, who chanted “Yves, Yves, Yves” while Yves took the stage with a shy grin) and eventually became a member of the four-student team, which competed in Vermont and then, state champions, in Washington, DC for the National World Quest Competition. And, like his classmates, he waited for “the letters.”

When they came, there were some rejections. We had already talked about policies which, when financial aid isn't possible, promoted a “courtesy deny.” Whatever the reason for the deny, Yves kept his emotional balance, but some of the letters made the financial problem very clear (“However, if you find a sponsor or have access to additional resources and are still interested... please let us know as soon as possible.”) and that helped pad the disappointment.

Harold Wingood wrote to offer a place in the class of 2009, and a substantial, but insufficient financial aid award, and his pain was evident: “I write this letter with very mixed emotions. I want you to know that we believe that you would be an outstanding member of our community. At the same time, I recognize that our financial aid award is insufficient to enable you to enroll at Clark. While I have attempted to find outside resources to provide the remainder of the funding you will need to attend, I have been unsuccessful.”

Then Mike Frantz wrote from Wilkes. Yves scores and grades and essays were good enough. All that was needed was a sponsor to cover expenses for books and supplies etc. and one was quickly found at our school. After graduation, Yves went to visit Wilkes with his host mother and knew that he had found the right match.

“Lord have mercy,” wrote one colleague on the e-list. “Will you follow up? If an institution is generous enough to do this, can you give them credit on the e-list so they get public recognition of their good-heartedness and civic-mindedness and interdependent planet-ness?”

Many institutions and many good admission directors, tried. From the e-list I learned of a number of colleges and universities who made it work for an international student without resources; for those who struggled to be ready for college, each acceptance and offer of support was very individual. There really is no overall list of colleges with full financial aid for students from shattered economies who may not present the credentials that the few highly competitive scholarships all but require. The above-mentioned lists are helpful, but conversations with admission and financial aid colleagues are the most productive. A student like Yves is a welcome addition to colleges that might seem too competitive by the numbers. And good folk are out there working on the problem—“The Admissions and Financial Aid Committee wants me to express our disappointment that we are not able to do more financially to assist you,” Harold concluded. “It is our hope that with continuing efforts to raise funds for students like you, we will be able to do more in the future.”

The call to help is to more than just colleges. If individual philanthropists and foundations could match a college offer of a full tuition grant, students like Yves would be amply supported—and many colleges can make that offer. If more high schools could prepare third-world students for our colleges, there would be little risk to accepting them to study for the B.A. and beyond. The first Bosnian Muslim students of the 1990s came to the public high school of Exeter, NH, and the next waves were welcomed at many public and some private high schools across the country. The Congolese scholar placed a number of Rwandan and Congolese young people in various independent boarding schools. Every one of these schools nurtured the international students through culture shock and adjustment to a new academic environment, taught them English and prepared them to flourish in college. All they need, to release their unlimited potential, is continued financial support.

*Doug's list will be posted on the OACAC Web site at www.oacac.com, and Doug can be reached through that site at Thompson@oacac.com. Shaun McElroy has just moved from Escuela Campo Alegre in Venezuela to the Shanghai American School and his list can now be found inside the pages of his blog: www.internationalcounselor.org.