



THE RBC ALUMNI POST

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What are the subjects you are enrolled in at UBC?

"I am enrolled in Law and Society, a Coordinated Arts Program (CAP) stream which comprises of introductory courses in political science, historical development of legal systems in the world, cultural anthropology and ASTU - the study of literature, writing and reading academic and literary texts. I also do African Studies and Creative writing."

In a few weeks, your first book will come out: "Refuge-e: The Journey Much Desired". What can the reader expect?

"The reader should expect an exposure to a unique, possibly saddening but also informative and empowering reality. Much of the media reporting of the refugee crisis focuses on the Syrian refugees and how it directly affects Western countries under the umbrella (and almost always wrongly used) term "migration crisis". My memoir shifts the focus to Southern Africa, and though my story is one of the many, it outlines a perspective of refugees. My readers should expect to hear a refugee voice, not an outsider reporting or advocating for refugee issues, and even though it is somehow context-specific to the

refugee life in Malawi and Swaziland, part of the book brings out the universality of struggles of refugees."

What inspired you to write this book?

"There are two main aspects: The first is raising awareness about struggles of refugees – especially the youth – in refugee camps. Here I feel the need to quote directly from the Author's Note section of the book. I write: 'The Syrian refugee crisis intensified in August and September of 2015. The United World College (UWC) Robert Bosch College community held a meeting on September 7th, 2015, arranged by one of the students, to discuss how we could address the influx of refugees in Freiburg, Germany, where the school is located. Being a 'specialist' on the matter, I shared my story along with a poem I had written while in Swaziland. The present work was inspired by the community members' encouragement and heartfelt gratitude for how I had informed or changed their perspectives on the lives of refugees. I started writing this book while on my trip back to school from winter break on January 6th, 2016.'

The second aspect, and possibly main motivator, is the hope that once the story is out, I can generate some funds and support for my youth club in the refugee camp in Swaziland. When I started writing, I knew that I wanted to use the book as a tool to financially support different initiatives that empower the refugee youth in Swaziland and elsewhere, depending on the capacity."

How have the two years at UWC Robert Bosch College helped you to reshape your understanding of your own story?

"Being in such an international community, you quickly realize that there is more to life, to culture and to ideologies! Having lived in the refugee camps in foreign countries, I already had some multi-cultural experience, but UWC took me from Central and Southern Africa and exposed me to the whole world. The conversations with students and staff, the uncountable questions I was asked by people from completely different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds – most of whom had no idea what a refugee or living as a refugee is like – the special focus days in which I had to do researches and present or lead workshops, and many more UWC experiences forced me to critically look at my situation, the historical complexities of exploitation, colonization, dictatorships and failed governments that produce millions of people like me. My memoir has some snippets of these complexities which I definitely attribute to an understanding I developed during my time as a UWC student."

Tell us about the past year – how has it been? You’ve left RBC, started a new chapter in Canada – what were the ups and downs?

"I wrote the very last section of the book during the transitional time between UWC and UBC (the University of British Columbia). I was missing RBC terribly, I had been denied the Canadian study permit after turning down a scholarship offer by Georgetown University, my German visa was expiring, and I was almost giving up hope. I was also interning at Suedwolle Group (The company which sponsored my tuition at RBC) and living with the Steger family in Nuremberg (Mr. Klaus Steger is the CEO of the company and he became a great mentor and inspiration). The uncertainty about my future affected me a lot to a near depression, but once I made it to Canada – against all odds – and started a new academic term, made friends and started engaging in different events and programs, life became smooth. I play music a lot and occasionally do some sports. The only regret is the weather! It rains a lot in Vancouver, which would be fine if it wasn’t as cold as the East Antarctic Plateau! I also happened to seriously injure my ankle while playing volleyball on my very first day of classes in UBC and had to crutch my way around this huge campus – the least fun of my experiences so far."

When thinking about RBC, is there a particular scenario or situation than can instantly put a smile on your face?

"A lot of them! I can’t even know where to start because a string of thoughts – from my roommates, my classes, outdoor activities to my host family experience – runs through my mind! But maybe waking up at 5AM and sitting on the wall over-looking the Kloostergarten, just to listen to birds and insects and see how the dawn unfolds over RBC and Freiburg. I miss that! Also, the fascination of seeing snow for the first time!"

Looking back, what would be one advice for current students?

"To be themselves, listen attentively to themselves and others, and strive to have a voice in and to contribute to the community. RBC (and UWC in general) offers many empowering opportunities, and it takes one to make use of most, if not all, of them. The diversity itself is an opportunity to learn, make meaningful connections and empower oneself. They should also practice self-care, because IB and UWC programs combined with the fear of missing out are really overwhelming for most of the time."

Looking ahead: where will we see you in ten years from now?

"As a refugee, it is really hard to say! There is a lot of uncertainty. But I can see myself having published a third book – possibly creative non-fiction or an autobiographical novel – about the refugee experience in the West compared to the Global South. Perhaps interning with UWC or African Union? Perhaps working actively with United Nations, UNICEF or an NGO which directly empowers the refugee youth? Perhaps building some Youth Exchange centers in different countries in Africa? Hard to say but I know I'm heading somewhere!"

Book Synopsis:

In this captivating memoir, John Michael, a young refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo, embarks on a journey of growth and resilience. At eleven he arrives with his family in Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi and plays a role in their toil to create a new life from nothing. Some stability is achievable, but the escalating political tension triggers xenophobia and an ever-increasing gloom for refugees. At the height of the political crisis, his family is forced to flee their refuge; he is forced to leave behind friends and a quality education he had desperately attained. Destitute, his family starts a new life in Mpaka Refugee Camp in Swaziland. Dejection takes its toll on him due to unimaginable conditions of this familiar, yet new life, but when he starts school and Alberto, his twin friend whom he left in Dzaleka arrives in Mpaka, life becomes manageable. Alberto's arrival triggers depressing memories and thoughts about fleeing and living as a refugee for John. But new dreams are born out of despondency, and against all odds success follows him as he establishes a youth club in the camp, represents his school in multiple regional and national academic and sporting contests, gets selected to be the school Head Boy, graduates from high school as one of the top students countrywide and ultimately gets the much-desired UWC and ALA scholarships. But that's just a start of another struggle. Bureaucracy and bilateral country immigration laws combine with his status as a refugee to prove his efforts almost futile. He eventually makes it to the UWC in Germany, which exposes him to a whole new world. It's just a matter of time before he discovers that a refugee somewhere is a refugee everywhere!

Refuge-e: The Journey Much Desired exposes the reader to the connection between the little-known suffering of refugees to the much-ignored world politics in a subtle way. It details many aspects of the dark life of refugees and questions whether there is hope for a young refugee determined to succeed.