

# Miracle: Refugee's Family 'Raised From Dead'

Nene Rwenyaguza, a permanent refugee living in Missouri, is a long way from home.

He takes pride in his work and radiates unfathomable joy as he spends most days cleaning a local bank in downtown Columbia.

Nene said the source of his joy is in knowing God has a plan, a statement he made in spite of a painful past filled with unimaginable loss.

## A Rude Awakening

Nene's journey began in a country that has the unwelcome moniker of being home to one of humanity's deadliest conflicts since World War II: the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

A husband and father to three young kids, Nene had big dreams for his family. But in 2002, that all changed during a deadly nighttime raid on his village.

Nene, with his wife, Francine, and their three young children—Aline, Kwezi, and Freddy—were sound asleep in their home when they suddenly were awakened by the sound of gunfire.

Raiders were attacking the village.

"What we said was, 'It's only God who can save us now. Let's run!'" Nene recalled, describing the day his world turned upside down. He spoke through an interpreter in Swahili.

Since the attackers usually targeted the men first, he told his wife to take the children and run. Hoping to spare their lives, Nene ran the other direction to steer the Hutu raiders away from the fleeing women and children.

## **Heartbreak, Despair**

He returned the following morning, and what he saw broke his heart: all the village houses were burned to the ground.

He was told his wife and kids were dead.

“It was at that time that I realized I’ll never see them again,” Nene reflected.

He felt abandoned and alone, but he also knew it was unsafe to return.

Nene, who was born and raised in war-torn Congo, was familiar with heartbreak. His mother survived a kidnapping and several years as a hostage. She was one of the fortunate few to escape.

In the last decade, 5.4 million people have died from war-related causes in DRC. Each month, disease, war, and malnutrition claim 45,000 Congolese lives.

Nene decided his only option was to flee. He left his native home, grieving the loss of his young family.

It took him two months to find safe harbor nearly a thousand miles away in Kenya.

All the while, he relied on his faith and the help of strangers, whom he said, at any point, could have turned him in, robbed him, or taken his life.

The only thing he brought with him was the Bible he escaped with during the raid. In it, he discovered a picture of his wife, Francine.

Although Nene was born into a Christian family, he confessed he often caught himself questioning everything that happened.

“But in my heart, I felt a voice saying look at the life of Job,” Nene explained. “So I realized what I was going through

was not even difficult.”

Nene spent the next few years in Kenya and enrolled in classes at a Bible college in Nairobi.

Three years later, he received his first bit of good news: Nene had been approved to move to the United States as a permanent refugee.

“I was happy,” he said. “But I said, ‘God if my family was alive I could have gone with them.’”

### **Coming to America**

Nene landed in St. Louis and eventually made his way to Columbia, Mo.

He tried putting his painful past behind him by pouring himself into his work, just as he had done farming, teaching, and preaching in Congo.

He also pledged never to remarry unless he knew for sure Francine was dead.

“I had a feeling that maybe my family could be alive,” he said. “When I looked around in the natural I said, ‘No, I’m cheating myself.’ But in my spirit I felt strengthened.”

A custodian by day, Nene found his true calling in the ministry.

He currently serves as a pastor to refugees who meet every Sunday for an African worship service at First Baptist Church in Columbia.

As a single man, Nene’s congregation, co-workers, and friends became his family and a network of support.

Charlotte Gaddy is among his biggest supporters. She has become a mother figure to him.

The two met when he went to the bank, where he now cleans as an employee of a local cleaning company, to apply for a car loan. They bonded over their shared faith in Christ.

“He looked at me [and said] ‘Do you know my Jesus?’” Gaddy recalled. “Instantly our hearts were just connected.”

### **An Unexpected Call**

In 2009, a year after coming to America, Nene received an unexpected call from an international agency.

A voice on the other end of the phone informed him that his wife and all three children were alive and living in Kenya.

But paperwork, outbreaks, and securing flights for his family ultimately delayed their reunion another four years—on top of the seven he thought they were dead.

Finally, in July, the family was reunited after more than a decade apart.

“It was like a dream,” Nene told CBN News. “It was overwhelming. I cried once I saw them coming through the doors there at the airport.”

The couple said their story can only be described as a miracle.

“Deep in my heart, I knew my husband was dead,” Francine told CBN News in Swahili through an interpreter.

“We had witnessed so many times the raiders coming in and killing the men in the village or taking them into the bush, and later we would find the bodies of people who have been killed there,” she recounted.

“Looking back and seeing what happened, the only thing I can say is this is God’s doing,” she said.

With his wife again by his side, Nene described their reunion

as if they had just renewed their vows.

"It was like another wedding we have gone through," he said. "We have been wedded: my wife and our children."

A lot has changed in 11 years. Francine noted her husband's appearance looks quite different since they were last together in Congo.

"He has grown older," she said laughing, joining the chorus of chuckles from her children seated nearby. "He has started losing hair on his head."

Nene quickly defended his honor.

"No, I'm still young," he replied, trumping the earlier refrain of laughter. It was one of the few times during the interview he answered in English.

The other occasion was when he described his first thought when he saw Francine at the airport.

"Beautiful," he answered with his African accent. "Very beautiful."

## **A Family Reunited**

When Nene got word that his family was coming, Gaddy, whom he calls "Mama Charlotte," helped him with immigration details and found a place big enough for the family to live.

She organized a citywide effort to furnish their new home, relying on donations from generous people in the community – friends and strangers alike.

"We went from an empty apartment within a week [to a] completely furnished apartment, from everything from tennis shoes to silverware," Gaddy recalled. "God supplied everything, and it was color coordinated!"

For the last several months, Nene and his family have gotten

to know each other and are enjoying their new home.

His kids, whom he last saw as toddlers, are now teens adjusting to life in America. He is also getting to know Claude, an orphaned boy his wife found and adopted after the village raid.

Soon, the family will add another name to the roster.

Francine and Nene will welcome their fifth child this spring—a baby boy they plan to name Israel.

“This is a baby of joy,” Francine said.

Nene likened the child to a gift from God.

Still, he admitted it is challenging supporting his growing family on a janitor’s income. In addition, he must also repay the U.S. government \$7,500 for the family’s flight from Africa to Missouri.

But that doesn’t faze him. He said he’s just grateful to have his family together again.

“I know God has a plan,” he declared.

He’s also keenly aware that his story is teaching others important life lessons, which he summed up in three short and simple thoughts: “You are blessed. Be happy. And, don’t forget your God!”