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*Life to
the fullest*

THE AMURI FAMILY

INSIDE
THIS ISSUE

PARISH LIFE

Deep roots and explosive
growth in Georgetown

Q&A

Dr. Aaron Thompson
and the power of
higher education



A life-giving new chapter

CONGOLESE REFUGEE ALAIN AMURI AND HIS FAMILY FIND PEACE AND HOPE IN LEXINGTON

The Congolese community presents the gifts during the Mass for Life at St. Paul church in Lexington. Alain Amuri is in the blue shirt at the end of the procession. Photo by Cindy Olson

When asked about the widespread, violent unrest in the Democratic Republic of the Congo that ultimately forced him to flee his homeland with his wife and young son, Alain Amuri says — in fluent English he taught himself while in a Zambian refugee camp — only, “It’s something you don’t really like to remember.”

(Between 1997 and 2003, more than 5 million people were killed in a civil war there, and violent rebellions continue to this day.)

For all the tragedy he witnessed at the hands of dueling factions, there’s one thing Amuri is certain of: his faith saved him.

When he says this, he doesn’t mean just in a spiritual or metaphysical way, though it certainly did that as well. No, when Amuri says his faith saved him, he means it literally.

“I survived because a priest helped us,” he says. “We had to hide in a parish for a few weeks [to escape the violence]. I’ve been Catholic all my life, but that’s what attached me even more to the faith.”

STARTING AGAIN

Amuri, 39, and his wife, Rachel Mluhuga, and their older children — son Kevin, now 13, and daughter Josephine, 7 — have lived in Lexington since September 2015. Since then, their 3-year-old twin daughters, Janel and Joy, have joined their family.

Relocated with assistance from Kentucky Refugee Ministries, the family has quickly settled into a new life here filled by joy and hope.

“I’m home,” says Amuri, an employee at Amazon and a parishioner at Christ the King, where his older children also attend school. “All we’ve seen here is kindness and compassion.”

A team of lay volunteers at St. Elizabeth Ann Seton — the first parish Amuri attended in Lexington — helped the family stock an apartment with essentials and secure transportation while they were first getting settled. “They were really wonderful women who really helped us out,” he says.

Workers at the Catholic Diocese of Lexington, including Christ the King pa-

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ROENKER



"I SURVIVED BECAUSE A PRIEST HELPED US."

rishioner Debbie Goonan, now a victim advocate at Kentucky Refugee Ministries, also assisted the family during their early months in Kentucky.

The community at Christ the King Catholic School has also embraced the family in an ongoing way. "My kids came in with English being their second language. The teachers put so much effort into helping them grow and learn," he says. "They treat them like they are their own children."

Last year, the Amuri family became the proud owners of a new Lexington Habitat for Humanity home sponsored by the Catholic parishes in Lexington. (The eight parishes in Lexington build a Habitat house together every year.) Throughout the build process, Alain volunteered alongside fellow Catholic volunteers, day by day physically framing a new future for his family. The process, he says, was cathartic and healing.

"People from all the churches were coming to help," he says. "What was going through my mind was, 'These people don't know me. This is hard work. Some of them are here from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. They are giving me their time.' When I put those thoughts together, I realized, 'Why should I hold onto rage and bad feelings in my heart [about what happened in his homeland] when I know there are good people out there?' I was able to let all of that go. I felt the burden lift. I felt like the world is beautiful. I felt that there is no point looking back on the bad things, because the good is more."

EMBRACING A CATHOLIC EDUCATION

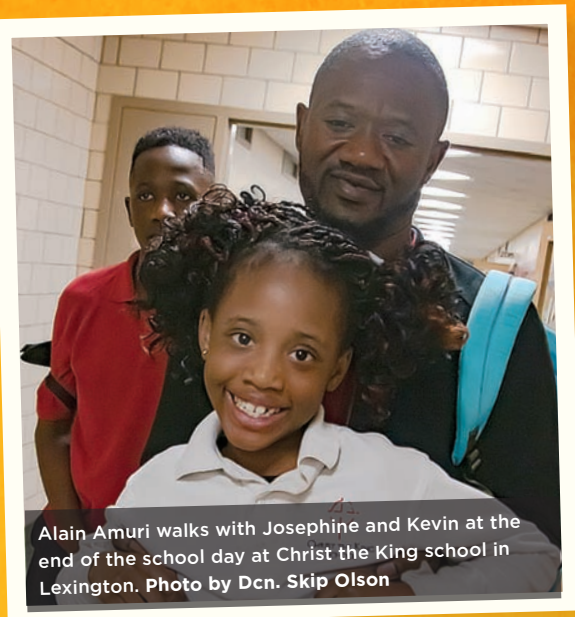
When Amuri talks about his new life in Lexington, an unmistakable theme of gratitude colors his sentiments — particularly when it comes to the ability to provide his children with a Catholic education, thanks to scholarship support at Christ the King.

"I grew up in a Catholic school," he says. "I believe in a Catholic school education so much. When Kevin and Josephine started at Christ the King, the way the principals and the teachers encouraged and welcomed them there, it's been just amazing."

Amuri's determination to provide a sound education for his children doesn't surprise those who know him.

"Alain has kept a focus. He knows what he wants for his children and what he wants for his family," says Goonan, who remains close with the Amuri family. "He is a hard worker. He has a real plan for his life. He knows that coming here as a refugee is going to be a hard road. He knows that he may not be able to get the greatest jobs or the financial security [that some others have], but he hopes that his children will be able to have those things. And the fact that he has that insight and knows that it's worth it is really the American immigration story."

Amuri says his family has been supported fully in their path toward a brighter future at Christ the King School, and he hopes



Alain Amuri walks with Josephine and Kevin at the end of the school day at Christ the King school in Lexington. Photo by Dcn. Skip Olson

to continue his children's Catholic education for as long as possible.

"As a father, Alain teaches his children the value of a good education, especially a Catholic one," says Meg Campos, director of social outreach at Christ the King. "I know that he appreciates all the help his family has been given, especially the educational opportunities they've found here."

"The teachers at Christ the King go extra miles to help students succeed," Amuri says. "And they encourage you as a parent to take it one step at a time, to allow children to reach their goals."

CONGOLESE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

While Christ the King's school and parish communities have become a foundational part of the Amuri family's new life in Lexington, so, too, has their participation in the twice monthly Swahili Mass at St. Peter Claver Catholic Church downtown, led by Father Anthony Muthu.

The Mass serves as a community builder for the large Congolese Catholic community in the diocese. (Lexington is home to the country's third-largest community of Congolese refugees, with 625 new residents from the Congo settling in Lexington in the last three years alone, according to Goonan.)

Thanks to its lively music and distinct Congolese flair, the Mass offers a way for immigrant families to bond over a shared sense of home.

"For us, Mass is upbeat, but here it's very quiet," says Amuri, who noted that almost 80 percent of the Congolese population is Catholic.

Amuri expressed sincere gratitude for having Swahili Mass possible on a regular basis. "Singing songs with the Swahili choir, it sends you home," he says. "It's really uplifting." †

To contact a Catholic school near you about registration, visit: cdlex.org/schoolfinder