

Resist injustice

Olivier Rukundo

The assistance that I, as a refugee, received from Barbara Harrell-Bond shows that her defence of refugees went far beyond the preparation of asylum applications.

I first made contact with Barbara in October 2011, after hearing a BBC radio interview with her in which she denounced as premature the planned invocation of the cessation clause for Rwandan refugees. Her defence of Rwandan refugees of different ethnicities encouraged me to think she might be able to help me, and her words gave me hope that I might find a way out of my ordeal.

I was at that time a PhD student living in China on a programme supported by the Government of Rwanda. After I had refused a request to return to Rwanda to make false testimony against the Rwandan opposition leader ahead of the 2010 presidential elections, the Rwandan government had refused to re-issue my passport and stopped my student bursary. The Rwandan embassy in China had also refused to officiate my marriage, and my son – born in China in 2011 – and I were left undocumented.

When I contacted Barbara the first time, I did not expect a response because we did not know each other. But Barbara did reply to my email and she guided me in preparing my case for an asylum application in China. First she shared with me a sample application to help me create my first draft, and then she went through my story with me many times, asking questions until it was complete, and reviewing and proofreading the application over and over again. We communicated by email, instant messenger, Skype and telephone.

Barbara was used to working with Rwandan refugees and had access to all the necessary country of origin information. She was very sympathetic because she even told me about her early life and the difficulties she had encountered. Barbara also sent us money and

contacted UNHCR's Beijing office frequently and persistently to stir them into action, copying her other contacts at UNHCR.

Barbara also ensured that I was able to further develop my career in academia. She proofread my computer science academic papers, introduced me to many scientists in the UK and US working in my area of expertise and, after I completed my PhD, wrote me a recommendation for the US-based Scholars at Risk organisation,¹ who arranged temporary faculty positions for me at universities in the Netherlands and Belgium.

In June 2012 I was granted mandate refugee status in China and in February 2013 I was resettled to Sweden, where I still have refugee status and am waiting for my recent application for Swedish citizenship to be considered. The success of my application for me would mean the possibility of integration and full protection.

During the six and a half years that I knew Barbara, I learned that her defence of refugees went far beyond facilitating asylum claims. She defended us like a mother defending her own children and grandchildren, not only to find a way out of our ordeals but also to become successful in our careers. Her legacy to me is to resist injustice – something everyone could learn from her. The advice I would like to share with other refugees is simply: defend what is right, despite the costs. The easy way out of my situation would have been to bow to the pressure to do what was wrong. I resisted and, ultimately, thanks to Barbara's help, found a way out of my ordeal.

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1. www.scholarsatrisk.org/



Olivier and son in Torsby, Sweden.



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