In Their Own Words
Educational Guide

— 2008 —

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Middlebury, VT
www.vermontfolklifecenter.org
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Educational Guide Overview: *In Their Own Words*

*In Their Own Words* is a collection of personal histories from refugees who are living in Vermont. These stories offer a glimpse into the remarkable diversity of life experiences that refugees bring to our community. While most Vermonters will never know how it feels to be a refugee, there is value in trying to consider perspectives that differ greatly from our own. These individuals have offered to share their stories as a way to deepen the understanding of a group of Vermonters that is growing everyday.

The educational materials designed around the exhibit focus on three primary questions for students and teachers to explore: *what does it mean to be a refugee; what does it mean to be a Vermonter; and what kinds of stories can photographs tell?* The educational guide is designed to aid teachers by providing discussion questions and activities that can be used prior to, during, and following a field trip to see the exhibit. These materials are merely a guidepost and teachers are encouraged to personalize these materials to fit the needs of their class.

*In Their Own Words* will be on display at the Vermont Folklife Center from February 25th until June 14th. The Vermont Folklife Center encourages teachers to bring their classes to visit the exhibit. Teachers may familiarize themselves with the exhibit either by previewing the Vermont Folklife Center *Vision and Voice Documentary Workspace* or by accessing the online exhibit at: their-own-words.org. Schedule a class visit to the exhibit by contacting the Vermont Folklife Center at (802) 388-4964.

Questions and feedback regarding these educational materials are encouraged. Please email your comments to Greg Sharrow at: gsharrow@vermontfolklifecenter.org.

The educational guide and supplementary materials, as well as complete exhibit text and images, are available online at: their-own-words.org.

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** Some of the written content of the exhibit contains information that should be approached carefully with younger students. Educational materials have been prepared for all age ranges (including PreK-4); however, teachers should take care when approaching concepts and learning experiences that are more naturally suited for older audiences.
Topic 1—What does it mean to be a refugee?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Help students understand the impact of losing one’s home by highlighting the ways in which they are dependent on, and personally invested in, their own homes (i.e. houses, apartments, etc.).

- What is a home? What types of things make up a home?
- Describe the place where you live? What does your house look like? Who lives there? What things do you have inside your house?
- What do you like about your house? What types of things do you put in your room? What makes your room different from the other rooms in the house?
- How would you feel if you didn’t have your own house? Would you be sad if you had to move somewhere new and leave behind all the things in your house?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

1. Image: Nedzad’s Parents House—Nevzeta holding a photograph of Nedzad’s parent’s house after the war in Bosnia. All that remains of the house is the concrete foundation and walls.

2. Image: Separated from his Sister in 1990—Faustine holding a photograph of his sister who still lives in Burundi and whom he hasn’t seen since they were separated in 1990.

3. Image: Cléophace with his Workbooks—Cléophace holding his language workbooks, which are some of the only possessions he still has from his life in the Congo.

4. Personal History Excerpt: Aziza—Aziza describes how her family was forced to move, leaving their homes and most of their possessions behind.

5. Personal History Excerpt: John—John explains the challenges he faced when he first arrived in Vermont.
B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Students should experience the various elements of the exhibit and become familiar with its contents. Younger students will primarily engage the visual elements of the stories.

Activity #1: Give students 5-10 minutes to explore the space and to look for things in the photographs that are associated with home, family, and possessions.

Activity #2: In groups of 2-3, allow students to spend a few minutes choosing a story (i.e. group of three images) that the group finds most interesting. The groups can then take turns introducing the people in the images to the rest of the class (i.e. saying names and countries of origin) and telling what they like most about the photographs.

Activity #3: Finally, teachers can finish the visit by gathering the students around an individual story and telling a simplified version of the personal experiences that accompany the photographs. [Story text can be downloaded at: their-own-words.org.]

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students draw or paint pictures depicting the ways they and others could welcome (NOT help) refugees to their new home. Additionally, the teacher could guide the class in writing a card to the refugees that explains how the class collectively feels about the refugees having to leave their homes. The card would also welcome the refugees to their new home in Vermont. This should serve as an opportunity to see whether the students can empathize with what refugees are forced to endure—losing their homes/countries.

Related Vermont Standards

Causes and Effects in Human Societies
6.1—Students examine complex webs of causes and effects in relation to events in order to generalize about the workings of human societies, and they apply their findings to problems.

Movements and Settlements
6.8—Students analyze the factors and implications associated with the historical and contemporary movements and settlements of people and groups in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations world wide.

Nature of Conflict
6.18—Students analyze the nature of conflicts, how they have been or might be resolved, and how some have shaped the divisions in various times of their local community, Vermont, the United States, and the world.

Identity and Interdependence
6.19—Students understand the variety of influences and impacts of the construction, preservation, and change of identity, within families, other social structures, and nations.
Topic 2—What does it mean to be a Vermonter?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

*Students recognize ethnic and cultural diversity in Vermont and the importance of getting to know people through dialogue and personal exchange.*

- Are there people living in Vermont who weren’t born here? Where did they come from? Why did they come?

- Does everyone in Vermont look the same? Does everyone live in the same kind of house? Do all Vermonters eat the same food?

- Do you remember what it was like meeting a new friend? How did you get to know them? Did you tell them about yourself? Did they tell you things about themselves?

- If someone is new to Vermont, how should we welcome them? What should we tell them about Vermont?

- Can we learn things from people who are new to Vermont? Could they teach us about the other places they lived before? How can we get them to tell us about these places?

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**Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)**

1. Image: *John, his wife, and their four children*—John’s family sitting in their living room where they have both the American and Burundian flags hanging on the walls.

2. Image: *Binh with Loan and her two grandchildren*—Binh together with her daughter and her two grandchildren that were born in Vermont.

3. Image: *Cléophace, Malinga, Bernadette, and King*—A Congolese family that now lives in Burlington, VT.

4. Personal History Excerpt: *Victoria*—Victoria explains how she was able to complete high school while working a full-time job.

5. Personal History Excerpt: *Alex*—Alex explains the issues many refugees face in maintaining their cultural identities while adapting to life in Vermont.
B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Students should experience the various elements of the exhibit and become familiar with its contents. Younger students will primarily engage the visual elements of the stories.

Activity #1: Give students 5-10 minutes to explore the space and to look for things in the photographs that look new or foreign.

Activity #2: In groups of 2-3, allow students to spend a few minutes choosing a story (i.e. group of three images) that the group finds most interesting. The groups can then take turns introducing the people in the images to the rest of the class (i.e. saying names and countries of origin) and telling what they like most about the photographs.

Activity #3: Finally, teachers can finish the visit by gathering the students around an individual story and telling a simplified version of the personal experiences that accompany the photographs. [Story text can be downloaded at: their-own-words.org.]

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students create their own class exhibit to illustrate the diversity of the Vermont community. Drawing on the format of the exhibit, students draw three pictures: a self-portrait and two additional images that show their lives in Vermont. A writing component can easily be added to this activity as well. When the stories are finished they can be hung alongside reproductions of the exhibit photographs (either printed from available exhibit materials at their-own-words.org or drawn by the students) to create a collective image of Vermonters today.

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Movements and Settlements
6.8— Students analyze the factors and implications associated with the historical and contemporary movements and settlements of people and groups in various times in their local community, in Vermont, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide.

Meaning of Citizenship
6.9— Students examine and debate the meaning of citizenship and act as citizens in a democratic society. (6.9 aa. Examine ways people become citizens of the United States.)

Concepts of Culture
6.13— Students understand the concept of culture, including the cultures of indigenous peoples, in various times in their local community, in the United States, and in various locations worldwide.
Forces of Unity and Disunity
6.14— Students understand the tensions between the forces of unity and those of disunity in various times in their local community, in the United States, and in various locations world-wide.

Interdependence
6.19— Students understand the variety of influences and impacts of the construction, preservation, and change of identity, within families, other social structures, and nations.
Topic 3—What kinds of stories can photographs tell?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

*Students are exposed to images and learn how visual information can be used to tell a story about a person or a place. [Teachers should use age appropriate magazines and newspaper stories as image resources including events, editorials, and advertisements.]*

- Where do you see photographs? What are the photographs used for? Are they supposed to tell you something?

- What types of things can be shown in a photograph? Can feelings be shown in a photograph (i.e. happiness, sadness, excitement, fear, etc.)?

- Can two people look at a photograph and see different things? [Activity: Teacher describes an image while the class tries to draw the picture the teacher is holding out of view from the students. Teacher then highlights the differences in how the students drew different pictures from the same description.]

**Available Pre-Visit Materials** (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

*All images and stories are widely applicable to these discussion questions. Students may view photographs individually to discuss basic visual content, or as triptychs (three-image series) to see how the images tell a story.*

B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

*Younger students visiting the exhibit should focus on the visual elements of the stories.*

Activity #1: Give students 5 minutes to explore the space and to look at the photographs.

Activity #2: In groups of 2-3, allow students to spend a few minutes choosing a story (i.e. group of three images) that the group finds most interesting. The groups can then take turns introducing the people in the images to the rest of the class (i.e. saying names and countries of origin) and telling what they like most about the photographs.

Activity #3: Finally, teachers can finish the visit by gathering the students around an individual story and telling a simplified version of the personal experiences that accompany the photographs. [Story text can be downloaded at: [their-own-words.org](http://their-own-words.org).]
C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students draw or paint images to tell a story about an event that happened in their life. Drawing on the format of the exhibit, students should draw three pictures: a self-portrait and two additional images that help describe that event. When the students are finished drawing the pictures, they can show the rest of the class and then explain in words the event they were trying to draw using pictures.

Related Vermont Standards

Responding to Media
5.14—Students interpret and evaluate a variety of types of media, including audio, graphic images, film, television, video, and on-line resources.
Educational Guide: Grades 5—8

Topic 1—What does it mean to be a refugee?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Explore the physical, emotional, and cultural impact of losing one’s home as well as the challenges faced in establishing a new one.

- What are the ways in which we depend on our homes? Is your home a part of your identity? Does your living environment impact the way you think and act?
- Try to imagine what it would be like to lose your home and everything you own? How would that make you feel? How would that affect your behavior toward other people (i.e. friends, teachers, strangers, etc.)?
- If you arrived into a new place with nothing, what would be the first things you would have to do to make a new home? How do you think your ability to accomplish these things would be impacted if you couldn’t speak the language in this new place?
- Encountering a new place often means being introduced to a new culture. If the traditions, activities and interests of the people in the new culture were different from your own, how hard would it be to continue living the way you always had? Would certain things be easier to hold onto than others?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

1. Image: Nedzad’s Parents House—Nevzeta holding a photograph of Nedzad’s parent’s house after the war in Bosnia.
2. Image: Separated from his Sister in 1990—Faustine holding a photograph of his sister who still lives in Burundi and whom he hasn’t seen since they were separated in 1990.
3. Image: Cléophace with his Workbooks—Cléophace holding his language workbooks, which are some of the only possessions he still has from his life in the Congo.
4. Personal History Excerpt: Aziza—Aziza describes how her family was forced to move numerous times and how on each occasion they had to leave their homes and most of their possessions behind.
5. Personal History Excerpt: John—John explains the challenges he faced when he first arrived in Vermont. He also explains how living in Vermont is in some ways more difficult than his life in the refugee camp.
6. Personal History Excerpt: James—James discusses the difficulty of trying to have a life in Vermont while knowing his Mother is alive in Sudan.
7. Unabridged Personal History: David and Jean-Luc—The story of these brothers, and their escape from the Rwandan genocide, is an extremely descriptive account of what happens to refugees when they are forced to flee their homes.
B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: Students spend 10-15 minutes looking at the photographs and reading the stories to become acquainted with the exhibit.

Activity #2: The class should then read aloud and discuss one or two stories that directly confront the “refugee experience” as it relates to losing home, family or living in a refugee camp. Of course all the stories confront these issues; however, some do it more directly than others. Teachers should review the exhibit text (available for download at: their-own-words.org) prior to visiting the exhibit and select the excerpts they feel are most appropriate. Some suggestions include: Abdi, Aziza, Malinga & Cléophace, and Faustine.

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students select and re-read their favorite story excerpt from the exhibit (full story text is also available online). Students then describe in writing what qualities about that person(s) that they thought were impressive and helped them overcome the challenges they faced. Finish with an exercise whereby students imagine having to leave their homes with only the possessions that can fit in their school bag. For homework, student should go home and actually go through the process of packing their bag. Finally, they should reflect on this experience by explaining what they chose and why, as well as describing some of the things that they initially had wanted to bring, but couldn’t fit.

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6.19— Students understand the variety of influences and impacts of the construction, preservation, and change of identity, within families, other social structures, and nations.
Topic 2—What does it mean to be a Vermonter?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Discuss ethnic and cultural diversity in Vermont with regards to the growing refugee community and contemplate challenges and solutions for cultural exchange.

- What kind of diversity exists in Vermont (i.e. income, age, religion, race)? What does “cultural diversity” mean?

- What kind of cultural diversity do you have in your community? Is Vermont a culturally diverse place? How about when compared to the U.S. as a whole?

- What changes have you noticed in the diversity of your community or the state as a whole? What are the challenges that these changes create? What are the opportunities? How can we overcome the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

1. Image: *John, his wife, and their four children*—John’s family sitting in their living room, where they have both the American and Burundian flags hanging on the walls.

2. Image: *Binh with Loan and her two grandchildren*—Binh together with her daughter and her two grandchildren that were born in Vermont.

3. Image: *Cleophace, Malinga, Bernadette, and King*—A Congolese family that now lives in Burlington, VT.

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6. Personal History Excerpt: *Alex*—Alex explains the issues many refugees face in maintaining their cultural identities while adapting to life in Vermont.
B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES
Activity #1: Students spend 10-15 minutes looking at the photographs and reading the stories.

Activity #2: The class should read aloud and discuss one or two stories in which the refugees describe their lives here in Vermont. Teachers should review the exhibit text (available for download at: their-own-words.org) prior to visiting the exhibit and select the excerpts they feel are most appropriate. Several suggestions include: Alex, James, Victoria, and John.

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY
Students are given the simple task of coming up with two experiences in which they encountered someone or something they felt was unfamiliar or new. The first experience should be an encounter that was positive—exciting, fun, etc. The second experience should be one that was more difficult—unnerving, scary, etc. Students should discuss these experiences and attempt to focus on how they felt rather than merely what happened. Teachers should help bridge the gap between how the students feel on an individual level and what happens in a community that undergoes an influx of new people and cultures. Students finish the activity by writing about how these personal experiences and the lessons learned might be useful for a community undergoing similar encounters with new people and cultures.

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Interdependence
6.19— Students understand the variety of influences and impacts of the construction, preservation, and change of identity, within families, other social structures, and nations.
Topic 3—What kinds of stories can photographs tell?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Students explore how images, and words, can be used to convey information, and discuss ways in which these tools of communication can be both informative and misleading. [Teachers should use age appropriate magazines and newspaper stories as image resources including events, editorials, and advertisements.]

- What are the ways that people use photographs to convey information (i.e. news, advertising, politics, propaganda)? Does it always work as intended?

- How do captions influence our understanding of images?

- What are some of the problems with using images to convey information? Are there things that cannot be conveyed using photographs? Are there things that shouldn’t be conveyed using photographs?

- If two people look at the same photograph and see different things, is one more right than the other? Does that mean photographs can lie?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

*All images and stories are widely applicable to these discussion questions. Students may view photographs individually to discuss basic visual content, or as triptychs (three-image series) to discuss their impact as a storytelling device. Comparisons can also be drawn between the photographic storytelling and the written personal histories—along with the impact of using them together.

B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: Students explore the exhibit for 10-15 minutes looking ONLY at the photographs.

Activity #2: Teacher gathers students together to discuss initial impressions of the images and also what the students think they know about the storytellers from the photographs alone.

Activity #3: Students spend 10-15 additional minutes reading the accompanying text and then discuss how impressions developed, evolved, or changed altogether.
C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students work individually or in groups to formulate an idea or message they want to convey to the class. Students then use the internet, magazines, newspapers, etc. to collect images to convey the idea or message they have chosen. Students can present the images however they like, but they must use some images with captions and some without (the captions can be existing or written by the students). The final products should be viewed by the class and discussed to determine how effectively the visual arguments were made.

Related Vermont Standards

Responding to Media
5.14—Students interpret and evaluate a variety of types of media, including audio, graphic images, film, television, video, and on-line resources.
Educational Guide: Grades 9—12

Topic 1—What does it mean to be a refugee?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Consider not only the personal and cultural impacts of being displaced from one’s home, but also the lasting impact of those experiences on the ability of people to rebuild their lives in new places.

- Can you imagine how you would react if you were forced to leave school today and never return to your home again? What are the things about you that would be likely to change? What things would stay the same?

- How might the experience of losing home, family, and country affect someone’s personality, and even their behavior in a new place?

- How does culture influence who we are? What is cultural identity? What are the challenges to maintaining personal and cultural identity in a new place?

- What issues do we encounter with the notion that refugees can begin “new” lives once they are resettled? Is this a reasonable expectation to have?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

1. Image: Nedzad’s Parents House—Nevzeta holding a photograph of Nedzad’s parent’s house after the war in Bosnia. All that remains of the house is the concrete foundation and walls.

2. Image: Separated from his Sister in 1990—Faustine holding a photograph of his sister who still lives in Burundi and whom he hasn’t seen since they were separated in 1990.

3. Image: Cléophace with his Workbooks—Cléophace holding his language workbooks, which are some of the only possessions he still has from his life in the Congo.

4. Personal History Excerpt: Aziza—Aziza describes how her family was forced to move numerous times and how on each occasion they had to leave their homes and most of their possessions behind.

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B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: Give students 15-20 minutes to look at the photographs and read several of the stories.

Activity #2: The class should then read aloud and discuss one or two stories that directly confront the “refugee experience” as it relates to losing home, family or living in a refugee camp. Of course all the stories confront these issues; however, some do it more directly than others. Teachers should review the exhibit text (available for download at: their-own-words.org) prior to visiting the exhibit and select the excerpts they feel are most appropriate. Some suggestions include: Abdi, Aziza, Malinga & Cléophace, and Faustine.

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Students read the complete text of at least one of the thirteen stories (available online at: their-own-words.org). Students should then make a list of the physical and emotional challenges that the subjects overcame in the course of the narratives. Students should then choose to write about a moment in their lives when they overcame a challenging situation and how that situation influenced the person they are today. After the writing assignment, student will hopefully have been given the chance to reflect on the way in which personal experience influences identity. At this point the teacher should return to the lists of challenges that the students identified from the refugee stories and lead a discussion about the ways these challenges might have shaped, and continue to shape, the personalities and identities of the people that experienced them.

*Note: Teachers must be sure that students do not feel pressured to discuss traumatic experiences from their own lives. There is a potential for students to feel this expectation when presented with the content that they will be reading in the stories. This should NOT be an exercise in which students are forced to personally confront dangerous physical or emotional situations from their own lives; rather it should be an exercise that helps them appreciate how experiences impact their personal identities and the identities of others.

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Topic 2—What does it mean to be a Vermonter?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

*Discuss the impact of incorporating refugees into Vermont communities and contemplate ways of benefiting from this demographic shift, and overcoming potential challenges that arise.*

- How are Vermont communities changing with the influx of more culturally and ethnically diverse groups, such as refugees? Are these changes affecting your community and, if so, how?

- What qualities about Vermont, and Vermonters, make the State a good place to resettle refugees? What might be some of the problems? How might these problems be mitigated or overcome?

- What is cultural identity? What is your cultural identity? What are the challenges of adapting to new cultural diversity while maintaining cultural identity? Is maintaining cultural identity even important?

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**Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)**

1. Image: *John, his wife, and their four children*—John’s family sitting in their living room, where they have both the American and Burundian flags hanging on the walls.

2. Image: *Binh with Loan and her two grandchildren*—Binh together with her daughter and her two grandchildren that were born in Vermont.

3. Image: *Cleophace, Malinga, Bernadette, and King*—A Congolese family that now lives in Burlington, VT.

4. Featured Personal History: *Victoria*—Victoria explains how she was able to complete high school while working a full-time job and also supporting her family in Africa. Her experience articulates how life can be vastly different for students attending even the very same high school.

5. Featured Personal History: *Abdi*—Abdi describes challenges he faced as one of the first Somali refugees to attend his high school.

6. Featured Personal History: *Alex*—Alex explains the issues many refugees face in maintaining their cultural identities while adapting to life in Vermont.
B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: Give students 15-20 minutes to look at the photographs and read each of the stories.

Activity #2: The class should read aloud and discuss one or two stories in which the refugees describe their lives here in Vermont. Teachers should review the exhibit text (available for download at: their-own-words.org) prior to visiting the exhibit and select the excerpts they feel are most appropriate. Several suggestions include: Alex, James, Victoria, and John.

C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Pairs of students will interview one another about personal, family or social traditions that are important in their lives in an attempt to highlight elements of cultural identity and diversity. Students will be responsible for writing a narrative describing the tradition that their partner chooses to share with them. After writing the narrative, the students will show their partner and get feedback on whether the narrative needs any changes. The narratives will then be read aloud to the class by their authors. The activity ends with a class discussion about the relationship between something as simple as traditions and the concept of cultural identity. With a model of cultural diversity on a classroom scale, the students should be more able to contemplate the impact of cultural differences in their community and the state.

Related Vermont Standards

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Interdependence
6.19—Students understand the variety of influences and impacts of the construction, preservation, and change of identity, within families, other social structures, and nations.
Topic 3—What kinds of stories can photographs tell?

A. PRE-VISIT: FRAMING DISCUSSIONS

Students contemplate the ways in which photographs can both represent and misrepresent reality and truth, and they also discuss the dilemmas associated with using beauty and aesthetics to convey hardships and suffering. [Teachers should use age appropriate magazines and newspaper stories as image resources including events, editorials, and advertisements.]

- Are photographs a representation of reality or an interpretation of reality? If they are an interpretation of reality, who is doing the interpretation? The photographer? The viewer?

- What kinds of things can influence someone’s experience in viewing a photograph? What is the impact of presenting photographs with text?

- Do photographs tell the truth? Do they sometimes tell the truth? How might we recognize when they are, and when they aren’t?

- How do you feel about photographs that portray suffering in an aesthetic manner? Are there issues with trying to depict problems in a beautiful way?

Available Pre-Visit Materials (see “Supplementary Materials” section)

*All images and stories are widely applicable to these discussion questions. Students may view photographs individually to discuss basic visual content, or as triptychs (three-image series) to discuss their impact as a storytelling device. Comparisons can also be drawn between the photographic storytelling and the written personal histories—along with the impact of using them together.

B. ON-SITE: EXHIBIT ACTIVITIES

Activity #1: Students explore the exhibit for 10-15 minutes looking ONLY at the photographs.

Activity #2: Teacher gathers students together to discuss initial impressions of the images and also what the students think they know about the storytellers from the photographs alone.

Activity #3: Students spent 10-15 additional minutes reading the accompanying text and then discuss how impressions developed, evolved, or changed altogether.
C. POST-VISIT: CULMINATION ACTIVITY

Student search the school library or internet for several examples of images being used to communicate personal struggle. Students evaluate these examples and determine which are most effective at communicating their message and which are least effective. Selecting one example of each (i.e. effective vs. ineffective), students form a written argument for why they feel one is more effective than the other. The emphasis should be placed upon students developing personal preference and criteria for evaluating successful visual storytelling. These opinions should then be discussed as a class to highlight the similarities and differences that exist in the ways that different people experience visual media.

Related Vermont Standards

Responding to Media
5.14—Students interpret and evaluate a variety of types of media, including audio, graphic images, film, television, video, and on-line resources.
## Supplementary Materials

### Photographs

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### Personal History Excerpts

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### Unabridged Personal History

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*Note: These images and text may be used for educational purposes only. All other reproductions or uses must first be approved with written consent from the interviewees. Contact Ned Castle at: nedcastle@gmail.com or (802) 310-0163.*
Photographs

Nedzad’s Parents House.
Separated from his Sister in 1990.
Cléophace with his Workbooks.
John, his wife, and their four children.
Binh with Loan and her two grandchildren.
Cleophace, Malinga, Bernadette, and King.
**Topic 1—Aziza  Uzbekistan (Ahiska Turkish)**

Early in the morning—I remember we left early in the morning. I didn’t even say goodbye to my parents. I just took my children, my husband, and we left. I couldn’t say goodbye to them because of the quarantine. I couldn’t leave my house and travel to another village because the police were in control. That is why I didn’t say goodbye to anyone. They would let us go to Russia, but we couldn’t go to the next village. But, as long as it was a different country, you could go. They even gave us tickets for the airplane if we agreed to go to Russia.

All I took with me was one change of clothes—whatever we had on and maybe one dress for myself and one for each of the children. I also took one cup, and one spoon for each child and for each family member, one fork. I had money in the bank, but I didn’t even collect the money. Only after two years, when things had settled down, I came back and I was able to get the money.

**Topic 1—John  Burundi**

When I moved to Vermont I spent three days in the house. When I was watching through the window, I would see only white people, and I was wondering if one day I would be able to see another black person. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I didn’t know how I was going to go to the marketplace, and I didn’t know if I was ever going to find someone to talk to—because I didn’t know the language.

When I moved here there was a case manager at the Refugee Resettlement Program called, Wanza. He came to work with me and met me at the airport when I arrived. What he did—he contacted all of the African guys around and told them there was a new arrival—and that they should stop by and met me. So after three days somebody stopped by to say hi. That was a huge relief. Now when new people come I am able to drive them around and show them the town and share everything I know.
Topic 2—Victoria Sudan

It was hard to go to school full-time and to work full-time—and to do my homework. When I first started I didn’t have time to do my homework and I couldn’t get help because I went to school at 7:30 AM and I left at 2:00 PM. I didn’t have time because I had to be to work by 2:30 PM. So for the first year, I didn’t have time to get help at school and I didn’t have time to do my homework.

I work as a custodian. I have been working there now for three years. I work in Colchester, Mallets Bay, at the elementary school. I would go to Burlington High School and then when I was done school there in the afternoon, I would go to Colchester to work. I work there because my boss really cares about my school so much. And not everybody cares—few people care you know. He told me, “Victoria, I’m really proud of you being in school and you really work so hard and I know that you are so determined to be in school and that’s really great.” But, it was so hard to work without a car. I would take the bus to Burlington High School, but I did not have transportation from Burlington High School to Colchester. Every day I had to figure out how to get to work. When I was in school I would always have to ask myself, “How am I going to get to work—I don’t have a ride and I don’t have anybody to pick me up?” Sometimes my friends would give me a ride and sometimes I would have to take a Yellow Cab—it was $11.00 everyday from there to Colchester. So, that’s how I got there—until now, I got my own car. I got my license and now I can drive myself.

Topic 2—Alex Sudan

First of all, what I would like to talk about is the life of a refugee. The most important thing, even if you are a refugee or if you are just in a different country—what you need to have is your identity. You don’t need to forget your culture. Whatever culture you came from, or whatever background you came from, you should not be ashamed. You have to keep your originality. Physically somebody can change, but mentally you still remember home and where you came from.

Here in the United States you have the opportunity to practice your own culture or own background of where you lived. They aren’t taking that away from you, so you have that freedom. As soon as you become a refugee, you don’t have to say, “I am a refugee; I am in a foreign land; I have to behave like the others—how they behave.” You have to respect other people and their culture. If there is any conflict of interest between them, you have to figure out which one is really better for you, instead of jumping to something you didn’t know about, and at the end you come to regret it. Identity is important. You have to keep yourself and your confidence for what you are doing or what you are getting into.
Then in 1989 the politicians again started to spread around this old movement about how there were people from a different culture in their territory. So it started all over again, from the place we had moved once, now it came back again. It was the government of Uzbekistan. Even though the President of Uzbekistan was very friendly to the Turkish people, there was a majority working against him. So he was forced to follow the majority and they voted to make the foreign people leave—it didn’t apply just to the Turkish people, there were Russian people and they wanted them out too. They wanted only to preserve just the Uzbekistani people.

The Uzbekistani people reacted differently to this—some people did not agree with this decision—some people loved us. They were like family—they were our friends. But some people decided that we had to go. So what they started to burn our houses and damage our farms. They tried to make our lives miserable, thinking that we would go find somewhere else to live. In some cases, the local Uzbekistani people would hide Turkish people in their houses, because they could even be killed. I was pregnant when all of this was happening.

In all of the newspapers—and all of the conversations—we were hearing that the Turkish people had to go. We couldn’t live in a community where nobody wanted us. Unlike before when my parents left Georgia, this time they let us choose where to go. They just wanted us to choose our own place to go—and go. So again we closed our house, leaving everything but the luggage, and we left.

Before we left Uzbekistan we were in a quarantine status, meaning we couldn’t go into a different area. If you wanted to go visit someone in a different area you had to go into the police department to check in with them and tell them where you were going. We didn’t have any freedom at all.

My family was one of the first families that left Uzbekistan. When it started to get bad, I said we are living scared so we have to go—the sooner we leave the safer we will be. I was pregnant so I had to worry about my unborn child—and I already had two children. For a whole month we lived in fear. Every night we thought that we might be killed. It was a whole month of this situation. So we abandoned everything—we didn’t want to do that, but we couldn’t continue living this terrifying life. So we abandoned everything, and our neighbors took our animals and got our house.

Early in the morning— I remember we left early in the morning. I didn’t even say goodbye to my parents. I just took my children, my husband, and we left. I couldn’t say goodbye to them because of the quarantine. I couldn’t leave my house and travel to another village because the police were in control. That is why I didn’t say goodbye to anyone. They would let us go to Russia, but we couldn’t go to the next village. But, as
long as it was a different country, you could go. They even gave us tickets for the airplane if we agreed to go to Russia.

All I took with me was one change of clothes—whatever we had on and maybe one dress for myself and one for each of the children. I also took one cup, and one spoon for each child and for each family member, one fork. I had money in the bank, but I didn’t even collect the money. Only after two years, when things had settled down, I came back and I was able to get the money.

So again we were in a foreign land—Russian land—where we didn’t speak the language. After two months of living in Russia, the people from Uzbekistan looked for us and said, “Come back to us. We don’t wish you bad, it was just the government.” The reason why the Uzbekistani people came and looked for us after we left was because no one wanted to go work in the cotton fields. They missed us then because they needed a working class. Even the government admitted that it had been a bad idea, but the Turkish people were mad at them and we decided that we were not coming back.

We have a general rule—we say, “Never look back, only look forward.” So since this happened we decide to make the best of the situation. In general, we are very friendly people no matter what happens to us, but at that time we still didn’t have our Motherland. We were moving one place to another, and deep down we all missed it. Our hearts are in our Motherland.
Topic 1—John  *Burundi*

When I moved to Vermont I spent three days in the house. When I was watching through the window, I would see only white people, and I was wondering if one day I would be able to see another black person. I didn’t know what I was going to do. I didn’t know how I was going to go to the marketplace, and I didn’t know if I was ever going to find someone to talk to—because I didn’t know the language.

When I moved here there was a case manager at the Refugee Resettlement Program called, Wanza. He came to work with me and met me at the airport when I arrived. What he did—he contacted all of the African guys around and told them there was a new arrival—and that they should stop by and met me. So after three days somebody stopped by to say hi. That was a huge relief. Now when new people come I am able to drive them around and share everything I know.

The more time that goes by—I am just learning another culture. I can’t say I am losing all of my culture, but I am losing some of it. I’m not really worried about that because I am just trying to survive. If I can find a place to sleep and something to eat then that’s enough. That’s the most important thing. I consider this place my new home because I have found a place to sleep and something to eat. The only problem is having bills. There are a lot of bills and because we don’t know the language we are getting jobs that don’t pay enough money. At the end of the month, we are always under zero because we have to pay more than we make.

In the refugee camp, I didn’t make a lot of money, but I didn’t have any bills to pay, so I could live with that money. Here I make more compared to the refugee camp, but I still have a lot of bills to pay. There were also the friendships that I had in the camps. In the refugee camp we used to spend the whole evening sitting around and talking. Here I just spend my time at home. I can’t go to visit friends because of the language and also because everyone is working. Now that there are Burundian people coming that speak the same language—I am less lonely.

I have five kids, seven people in my family in total. My oldest son is eleven, the second one is nine, the third one is six, the fourth is three, and the last one is six months. We are having a really good life because we are getting food—the government is helping us. The kids are going to school—my three year old is starting this year.

My message to the Vermont community would be first to thank them for welcoming us with a heart of serving and welcoming refugees. The second thing I would say is that the refugee concept is something that is a hard thing really to understand because being a refugee means suffering and broken hearted. There are a lot of things going on in a refugee’s mind based on what that person went through. If somebody comes to you with a question or is asking for service—even if you don’t speak the language, take the time just to listen to him. Even if you don’t understand a single word, try just to imagine what he is trying to tell you, because that person really needs help.
Topic 1—James Sudan

I was accepted for resettlement in 2002 and I came here in 2006 with my family. It took a long time to get here—they just took a long time. For me I think it was better for my family, but I wasn’t happy because I left my country. If I was by myself—it’s not a problem—I could have stayed. With my family I thought it was safer to go. I wanted to see this place to save my family.

When I first came here, when I first came to Vermont, I called southern Sudan and I talked to someone I knew from before I came here. He had passes so that he could go to southern Sudan. He was a business man. He said that I had to buy his ticket and he would go look for my family. When I first came here I got some money from the refugee office. I took half of that money and used it to buy the tickets. I thought that it was better to sleep outside here in Vermont than to have some doubt in my mind. I think it was important to do that—not important to feed myself or sleep in a good house. I had to do that because the man said if I sent the money for the tickets, he could go to help find my parents. They have many people over there who don’t know where their children are, and they are asking people like that guy who goes into southern Sudan and then comes back. So I just told him my name and my parents’ name, and he came back and told me that he found my mother and my mother’s relative.

When I heard about my mom I was thinking I would go back—but I have to wait because I want to take the training to become an electrical technician. I want to take that class this September and after I finish I want to go back in the Sudan. I just want to see what’s going on in southern Sudan. I want to see my mom. I want to go for one month and then come back. My mother said that she is not sure that James is still alive. She told the man that if he talked to me—tell me that she wants me to come see her before she dies.

It’s a hard way because I am worried about the government over there. It’s not safe because they haven’t forgotten me. They know where I am now. My plan I think I’m going to southern Sudan. It will be difficult, but I will try. I’m going to another country that’s close to the south and then I can walk there or find something to get me there. It will be hard to go there, but I have to go there. You know you cannot be happy if you have no parents and no relatives.

I don’t know why, but I have to go to see those people. And I don’t know what is going to happen after that. Right now, in the war, they say there is peace, but I don’t think that we have peace—not yet.
**Topic 2—Victoria  Sudan**

It was hard to go to school full-time and to work full-time—and to do my homework. When I first started I didn’t have time to do my homework and I couldn’t get help because I went to school at 7:30 AM and I left at 2:00 PM. I didn’t have time because I had to be to work by 2:30 PM. So for the first year, I didn’t have time to get help at school and I didn’t have time to do my homework.

I work as a custodian. I have been working there now for three years. I work in Colchester, Mallets Bay, at the elementary school. I would go to Burlington High School and then when I was done school there in the afternoon, I would go to Colchester to work. I work there because my boss really cares about my school so much. And not everybody cares—few people care you know. He told me, “Victoria, I’m really proud of you being in school and you really work so hard and I know that you are so determined to be in school and that’s really great.” But, it was so hard to work without a car. I would take the bus to Burlington High School, but I did not have transportation from Burlington High School to Colchester. Every day I had to figure out how to get to work. When I was in school I would always have to ask myself, “How am I going to get to work—I don’t have a ride and I don’t have anybody to pick me up?” Sometimes my friends would give me a ride and sometimes I would have to take a Yellow Cab—it was $11.00 everyday from there to Colchester. So, that’s how I got there—until now, I got my own car. I got my license and now I can drive myself.

When I was a senior one of the teachers—she worked at the elementary school in Colchester—she asked me if I needed some help with my homework. Since I was having a hard time doing math, she asked me if she could help me at work during my break time. So, I talked to my boss—he is a really good person. He cares about refugees getting a good education because he knows that if you don’t go to school you will have a have a hard time reading. I asked him and he said, “Yeah, it’s ok. You can do your homework when you find someone to help you.” The teacher who helped me was named, Susan. She helped me from 2006 until I graduated. She would get done with the elementary school at 3:00 and then she would stay until 8:00 PM waiting for me so she could help me do my homework.

Yeah, it was so hard to do my homework when I needed to work and I had to sleep. I would usually only get like 3-4 hours everyday until the school was over. I couldn’t get enough sleep because I got out of work at 11:30 PM, and then I had to come home, and I had stuff to do, and I had to finish the rest of my homework. I couldn’t do all the homework together with Susan. We would do some, and then I would do some by myself when I got home.

I found out that it is important to go to school because most people here are educated. And we who are Africans, like the refugees, most of us are not in school. Most of us are not educated. Some of us—they can’t even speak English. It’s hard for someone to understand when you need help—or when you call someone, they don’t understand when you can’t speak English. I know it’s hard to do both work and school, but there’s no
help—you have to do it. If you say you only have to work, you are not going to get an education. If you say you only have to go to school, you cannot survive because you can’t afford to pay your rent. So, I decided to do both and I graduated this year. It was June 15, 2007. I am happy that I made it through and now I will be going to college.
Topic 2: Abdi Somalia

So eventually I came here to Vermont and started going to high school. I was sixteen. I was really excited to come to the United States. I was just wondering how the United States was going to look like. I didn’t know. I was thinking I’m not even going to see trees anymore. That’s what I was thinking—I was so curious about that. I didn’t think I was going to see sun anymore on the grass. I thought it was going to be big like New York City all over. That’s what I thought it was going to look like.

I also learned to speak English when I got here about four years ago. Actually, I wasn’t that good at English when I got here. They put me in high school because I was sixteen when I got here. That’s how they do it in Vermont. If you are older than fifteen, it doesn’t matter about the language; they put you in high school. So they put me in high school and I started from ninth grade. It wasn’t really that much fun because I was having trouble with the teachers. I wouldn’t ask them to go to the bathroom; I was just walking out the door and they were wondering where I was going. I couldn’t explain that I wanted to go to the bathroom.

I didn’t even know how to say, “Hi.” When a bunch of old people were talking to me I would just walk away. I didn’t know what to say to them and I was feeling embarrassed if I talked back to them. I didn’t know what they were saying, so whenever they started a conversation with me I started walking away. I was having a hard time when I got here with the language. I was taking some English classes—ESL [English as a Second Language] classes. They would teach us how to speak and also to write—a lot about spelling words. Actually, the most improvement I had with the language was hanging with my friends. We were the third Somali family to get here in the State of Vermont. So when I got here we didn’t have many Somalis, so I started hanging with two guys—one of them was Bosnian and the other kid was from Albania. We were only using English for the language—in our native languages we couldn’t understand each other. So I was talking to them everyday and I got used to it.

I was a little better when I had been here for five months. I was getting used to people—I was really scared of white people for some reason. The first one I saw was here when I got to Burlington the first night at the airport. I like it in Vermont. It’s a really nice place—living and also learning—the education. If you live in another states and you are older than eighteen, they don’t let you go to high school. But Vermont has a good law: until you are twenty-five you can still go to high school. I’ll be in twelfth grade this year. I have one more year and then I will be done. I’m planning on going to college too if I can afford that.
Topic 2: Alex Sudan

First of all, what I would like to talk about is the life of a refugee. The most important thing, even if you are a refugee or if you are just in a different country—what you need to have is your identity. You don't need to forget your culture. Whatever culture you came from, or whatever background you came from, you should not be ashamed. You have to keep your originality. Physically somebody can change, but mentally you still remember home and where you came from.

Here in the United States you have the opportunity to practice your own culture or own background of where you lived. They aren't taking that away from you, so you have that freedom. As soon as you become a refugee, you don't have to say, “I am a refugee; I am in a foreign land; I have to behave like the others—how they behave.” You have to respect other people and their culture. If there is any conflict of interest between them, you have to figure out which one is really better for you, instead of jumping to something you didn’t know about, and at the end you come to regret it. Identity is important. You have to keep yourself and your confidence for what you are doing or what you are getting into.

You have to study another culture before you accept it. Then after a long time, if you have anything to share, you don’t need to keep it to yourself. You have to give it out to other people—to let them know about you yourself. You have to take in and give out. That’s how the language is made easy for you and for others. Even if you are a small part of the community—how are those people going to judge you, how will they know you? You came to the community, you can be a stranger or when you get into the community you can say, “I’m a stranger; how can I make a friendship; how can I get the social life; how can I get integrated into the community?” The best way is to speak up. Otherwise, nobody will know what I have; nobody will know how much I knew; nobody will know what I need—what kind of help I need, or what can I give. Communicate to other people. When you speak up, those things get better and it makes it easier.

When our community have a gathering together, we share what we have and educate other people. We get together and we have workshops. We have a lot of activities that we do—cultural activities. We do singing, dancing, and storytelling sometimes. We do that a lot. Also, if there is another gathering we team up together with the local community here, people from the church and other people in the community who are friendly and want to get involved with the refugees—and we gather with them together. That’s how we learned quick and easy how to be able to be in the community.

When I got here myself, the only difficulty was just the way I had to get around. When you get here, you don’t have your own car and you have to use the public transportation. There are times, mostly late at night, when the last buses may end at 10:00 something—that’s the end of the bus. If you work the night shift, and you come home at 11:00, there is no bus. And especially during the wintertime, it’s not easy to wait at the bus stop or to catch the other buses. So there are a lot of variables right there. But, in other places where we came from, you can walk on foot. It’s no problem. And you can see other
people in the street walking, so that will encourage you also to walk. If you are just on
the road by yourself, you can’t get anywhere because it is so far.

The thing that helped me mostly when I got here first—I worked with the refugee
program, as the case manager’s assistant. That is why I learned everything fast and
quick. I copied everything to make it easier for me, because whenever you deal with
something on a daily basis, you will be able to know what are the mistakes and what
needs to be done, and how you handle all those cases.

The Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program supports you for eight months. After that
they either get you employed or you are enrolled in a school. So you have to keep on
moving in general life, you have to be stable and get what you need. The VRRP—they
are busy. You are not the only one case that they are getting, so every week they will get
new people. They have to receive the new people and start helping them, so you have to
at least be active enough to get involved in whatever in the community is available.

Also, the other thing for refugees to be successful—you have to respect the rules and
regulations. You have to avoid the law. Whatever needs to be done, that has to be the
way it is. Sometimes people think something is easy and simple. For example, if you
don’t have a license, you shouldn’t be driving a car without a license. If you have a
permit, you have to have somebody with a license there with you to guide you on what
you need to do. Sometimes if you create a crime it will affect your status—your refugee
status. After a longtime, when you apply for citizenship, all of those things will come
back to you.

Well, you see some people sometimes—it takes them a long time to get adjusted to the
culture. Like in some places, in other countries, if somebody needs something from you,
you may bribe them or give them money, and they will let you go. In some places that is
normal. Here you give somebody money and it’s against the law. Everybody here is
very restricted on the law, but in other countries you can bribe and nobody cares. If the
police pull you over and you give them something, you are good to go—but here you
give them something and you go to jail.

That’s why we have to sympathize with other people to know what are their cultural
backgrounds. Sit together and discuss—find out the differences. That’s what we did in
the past with the police, the electric company, and the other social service providers.
During our first two to three months, we have conferences and they came in to give some
workshops to the communities. That’s how people learn.
Topic 1: David and Jean-Luc  Rwanda

David: Can you imagine if all the government—in one night—got killed and then in the morning you had to make another government?

Jean-Luc: In 1994, things were starting to get worse. Then the President got killed and the genocide started. I was not in Kigali. David was there with my mom and sister, but I was at school at the time. I was supposed to go home Friday, but the President was killed Wednesday, so I was stuck at school with all my friends and classmates. They put all of us in the cafeteria and closed the door. These guys walked around the windows with machetes, talking at the door, “We want to come inside! You are hiding people!” The school director had asked everyone to put on their uniforms so we could not be identified. They were looking for Tutsis.

In the capital, that was a very bad time. There were many things going wrong—you could not understand what was happening. Those people were there to kill. When the genocide started they went everywhere in the town and started to kill people. Today you can see the pictures—see the movies. People made documentaries about the people that were getting training. We did not know for what, but we saw the result when the President died and they started to kill people. People were getting trained to fight—trained to kill.

I was at school for a month. After three weeks the director had to call the authorities. They sent three soldiers to keep the school safe. When those soldiers came—after three days—the director came and said, “All those kids who have military parents, there is a car coming by and I want those kids to leave.” So, I had to get in the car, but that was really scary because on the road I saw corpses—corpses all around on the road. By that time the genocide was pretty much done. That was something I never quite understood, being fourteen years old and seeing corpses. I couldn’t understand why, why people were doing that. I didn’t know that I was Hutu, or that my friends were Tutsi. I knew that we were just friends—we were Rwandese.

I remember when the genocide began, when we moved out of Kigali. The genocide started on April 6th, and we went to my grandmother’s village on the 11th. Then we went to a military camp, because my father had been in the army and people knew him. We asked for protection. We got an apartment with two bedrooms, and Jean-Luc, he came to meet us. We spent a month in this military camp. There was a guy who had a passage to get out of Rwanda. He had a truck. At that time he was a priest in the army, he helped us get out of Rwanda to go into Bukavu, Zaire.

We didn’t live in the refugee camp because my mom had friends in Bukavu. So, we stayed in their house for two years and a half. We had to move again because a war started in that region [First Congo War, aka. Kabila Rebellion]. The Tutsi soldiers,
under the cover of the Kabila rebellion, were destroying the refugee camps and killing people. So we had to move—and move—and move—across the Congo by just walking for six months.

When we left the town, I was with my mom and Jean-Luc. We had to put Mom in the back of a car to get her to the next camp, Kashusha. Jean-Luc and I, we had to walk thirty miles. We spent a night walking the thirty miles. Then we spent three weeks in the camp before the Kabila attacked. When they attacked the camp, it was Saturday in the morning. We just ran. I took my mom and my young sister. My mom had the baby on her back.

There were a hundred thousand people walking. Some people were going that way—some people were going straight—some people were going back—so I didn’t know exactly where to go. David and the others took the way in the forest, and I thought they couldn’t have taken that way. So I took the road, and we got separated.

My mom and I went through the forest and reached the road to Bunyokili. There was a guy there who had been tried by my father. The guy had been sent out of the army, and he went home. It wasn’t my father who made the decision, but according to the stuff he had done, and what the other soldiers said, they made the decision to kick him out of the army. He recognized me, and he recognized my mother. And the guy decided just to kill me, just in the road in this town called, Bunyokili. When he saw me—he made a story—he says I am Tutsi, I’m from Rwanda, I come to get information and to bring back—and so those guys have to kill me. I was going to die, I was going to die because they had made everything—they dug for me. There was a pastor who saved my life. The pastor came and he heard the story and he asked me if that was real, because if it was not a real story then I had to show them that it was not real. I have to show something—show my card to show that I’m not Tutsi, that I’m not in the rebellion, and I didn’t come to get information. He said, “Ask this guy for his ID and his mother’s passport to check if he really is his son.” Because in the passport in Rwanda they put the name of the husband and the children, so my name was in her passport, and my ID was carrying my name. I showed them both documents and that was proof that I was the child of the Cornel, my father. [David and Jean-Luc’s father was a prominent Hutu cornel for the army of the Rwandan government prior to the genocide.] So the guy didn’t have a reason to kill me...I was not a Tutsi from the rebellion come to get information. That was my bad night. I’ll never forget that. I saw the way they dug for me and I can remember that place. We had to move, and Jean-Luc met us after two months.

When you move to a refugee camp, you have just to say, “Do you know this person, do you know this person, do you know this person”—and finally I found them. David and I caught cholera in that refugee camp. We spent four days in isolation. We survived, but many people died. In the big tents with twenty people, every five minutes somebody would die. They would just come take the body—take the body. After a couple weeks we had to walk again. The rebellion was coming to that refugee camp. Because at this stage the soldiers didn’t have the option to bring people back to Rwanda, they wanted just to
kill, “You didn’t want to go back, now it’s time to die.” So now they were just walking and killing people.

To get across the Congo River everything began in Mubutu, when we got to a bridge. That was a very small bridge. You can’t image—you’ve got the bridge, you’ve got like a million people fighting to get to the bridge, and nobody can see the bridge. No, you can’t see it. In your mind the bridge is full of people, but when you get close you see that nobody is walking on the bridge.

At the entrance to the bridge there were soldiers with sticks, just hitting people. They said, “You have to have organization! Make small groups!” Because the bridge was so small, if everybody went onto the bridge it was going to collapse.

When I saw the bridge I went back. I was worried—I didn’t know where Jean-Luc and Mom were. I was just crying you know. I went back into the people and when I got in the middle there was too much pressure. There was a guy carrying a baby that was newborn—the same day. And I saw the baby was starting to die, and there was too much pressure on me too. So I see the baby start to die—the baby was dying! I just took the guy, and I started to move, “Get out of the way, the baby’s going to die.” I pushed the guy—I pushed the guy and people started to make room to give us the way. And we moved—we moved—we moved. I pushed the guy—pushed the guy, and we just—we went and we got out.

The thing is I had to make my way through those people, so I made myself like a security guy. I took a stick and said, “Move! Move! Move!” I had to move through the people. You say, “People, move!” But they can’t move because there were so many people—carrying stuff on their heads, everybody standing, people making noise. So you have to start going through peoples’ legs. We were getting scared because we could hear bombs.

I saw a guy, a friend of my uncle’s who was in the army. He was carrying his family, trying to get his family over the bridge. When we went together to the bridge, a guy came to protect us. When we got in the middle of the bridge, I saw Jean-Luc in the front of the people, and I told the guy, “Hey, Jean-Luc is over there.” He got him and Jean-Luc crossed the bridge. After we crossed the bridge, we spent five to ten minutes getting some rest, and then we said, “Ok, we hope Mom and the other people we came with crossed the bridge.” We took a walk to the top of a hill, trying to find if anyone had crossed the bridge. When we got to the top, we heard people start to shoot—BANG! BANG! BANG!—around us they were shooting. So we started to run. We ran, ran, ran. At that time when you heard people shooting, the best thing was to run, and think about stuff later. So we ran, and I saw a guy, a guy I knew. I asked him, “Did you see my mom.” He said, “Yeah I don’t know, somebody started to shoot on the bridge, and we didn’t know why, but I think your mom is dead.” He said that, and we started to cry—Jean-Luc and me. We cried—ran and cried. We spent three days walking, walking away. We walked like 100 miles, from Mubutu to a small town located at 100 kilometers from Kisanghi. We needed to stop to sleep—we hadn’t slept those three days. When we got there—the day after—Mom came with our sister and the baby. They said they
reached the bridge when the shooting started. My mom held my sister and they jumped in the river.

At this time, you are running after time. Time is the most important thing you got. If you want to survive, you have to run. You have to run—to run—and to run. The people behind you have cars—have food—have everything. You don’t have food. You don’t have a car. They know where they’re going. You don’t know where you are going. So you have to run, even if you run the wrong direction—just run! You have to be running because you have just one day before them. Just one day. So, we spent two weeks in the forest. The goal was to reach this town called, Opala. Our sister went with another group of people, and we were on our own—me, Jean-Luc, Mom, and Arnold (my young brother, nine months old). Jean-Luc, he would be on the front, Mom in the middle, and me on the back. That was our style to walk in the forest. Just walking—night, day, night, day, night. We went to Ikela. We found our uncle there. We spent just one night, all the next day, and then that same night we had to walk during the night because we had to escape the Congo soldiers. We had to walk at night to escape them—quiet, no light, nothing, just walking. After that, we walked all the way until we reached Boende. From there my uncle and the other guys decided to steal canoes so we could take the water because the river was going in the same direction that we wanted to go. We had three big boats and we started just to follow the river. This was my first time to paddle. We spent 11 days on the river, every night coming to a small village to find something to eat.

Somewhere we met this guy who came with a big boat to take refugees. Somewhere close to Mbandaka, he came to take refugees. So we got on that boat. The boat couldn’t go to the shore, so refugees had to come to the boat. We had to pay money to people from the village to bring us to the boat. Many people died trying to swim to the boat.

From Mbandaka we came to Inebu. It was a navy base where they were training navy soldiers. And from there my uncle had to pay people so we could cross the Congo River in the night. We went to a small island, and then from there we crossed to the other side, to Liranga—to the Congo Brazzaville.

On the other side of the Congo River, where we spent eight months, we built a small house. We went into the forest and cut the trees. We built the house with mud, and we put this plastic stuff on the top. So anytime it rained, David and me would go outside and hold the plastic because the wind would blow it away.

We spent almost a year—anytime it rained—we were outside in the rain holding the plastic. We could hold the whole night. You know the good thing is the human body can adapt to any situation when you stand a long time. Take the Jews when they were in the concentration camps. At the end, everything became normal. Life, it’s normal. It’s normal to live in a concentration camp. It’s normal to sleep this way. It’s normal to wear these clothes. Everything becomes normal. We forgot that we had a life. We forget that we slept in a house. We forget that we had electricity. That was a dream. It was like one day we dreamt we have a good life. That was a dream. We forgot that we had been to school. We became like savages, like animals.
We moved to the capital of Congo—Brazzaville. We spend two months in the refugee camp. We joined our younger sister, with the guy who took her by force. From there we moved from the refugee camp to the city. My mom started to sell in the market, the public market, to get something to eat. We started to get back into life because we started to learn again to wear clothes, and to shave, and to put on cologne. To come through the high commission of refugees my Mom had to apply for asylum. She had to wait four years, interviewing everyday. She lost hope—she regained hope—and after four years they transferred our situation to Geneva. In Geneva they had to ask if there were any countries that wanted to take us. The United States accepted to take us. In November 2004, we moved to the United States.

And so among all those situations our life changed. We started to see things differently—we started to see life differently. We started to love without expecting something back—we started to give without expecting something back. We started to love—we started to share all we have. All these experiences became something good for us, because I’m not ashamed anymore to say that I’m from Rwanda. I’m not ashamed to share my story, because this story makes me strong, and proud to be who I am…

We lost a lot of friends in the genocide. On our mother’s side, we lost our uncles, cousins, and nephews. Almost all of our childhood friends died in the genocide. You know things changed. When you grow up and you know you survived because you had a different name or because you were from another ethnic group—this is not fair. So my friend died because he was from another ethnic group, and I survived because I was from the other ethnic group? This is not fair, you know.

We just learn from our experience. Our life is not static—it’s dynamic—it’s moving. If somebody needs your help, give your help because you don’t know tomorrow if you’re the one who’s going to need the help.

The thing we know is that we never change the world like this…[snapping his fingers]. We just contribute to what other people did, or are doing right now. The whole thing from this story is just that people have to understand that humans need more value. We are not materials. We are not something people use and just put in the garbage. We are humans, and in all our lives there are so many things connected. They are nature—they are our family. All society is connected to us, and people have to understand that respecting one person is respecting a society. I think that sharing our story is a way to show that even going through a hard time—losing family, friends—even after that people still have hope, and still try to do something to help humanity to be more human. So that’s all.