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Interview with Aline Kamariza

Aline Kamariza

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Aline Kamariza was interviewed over Zoom on April 10th, 2021, by Jess Annen, Naomi Botchway, and Angelina Wade.

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[6:17] AW: Where did you grow up?

AK: I was born and raised, for a couple years, in Congo. In a place called Bujumbura. That's where I was born and raised.

JA: And how old were you when you left the Congo?

AK: I left when I was, I believe, two, three.

[7:00] JA: How old were you when you became a refugee?

AK: We became refugees in the process of - when we were coming to the United States, so I was probably five, six.

JA: Where do you live now, if I can ask?

AK: I live in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

[7:29] AW: Where did you flee upon becoming a refugee?

AK: After we went in Congo, we went to the Gatumba place, and then we were there, and then the war happened, and then we went to Rwanda, and we stayed there for a couple years - no, first I went to Kenya. I was injured, so I was in the hospital. I went in Kenya, I was in Kenya for, I would say six months, seven months. And then from Kenya I went to meet my family - they were all in Rwanda at the time while I was in the hospital in Kenya. We stayed in Rwanda for like, a year and a half, and then we went back to Burundi to start the process to come to the United States.

[8:36] AW: Where did you come when you came to the US? Did you come directly to New Mexico, or were you somewhere else?

AK: No we landed in Denver, Colorado. And we were there for four and a half years, and then we moved here. So we've been here in the states thirteen years.

JA: What made it so your family decided to leave the Congo, your home country?

AK: Most of the time it was because they were running away from war. Because there was war happening and we were getting kicked out of our own places.

[9:31] AW: How would you describe the general atmosphere in the refugee camp? Was it peaceful, or contentious, or chaotic?

AK: When I was in the refugee camp in Burundi, I was pretty young, so I wasn't aware of a lot of things. I don't remember a lot, but I do remember I didn't think it was bad, maybe because I was young, and I wasn't aware of anything happening. If I saw something bad happen, I wouldn't really look at it as bad. If that makes sense.

[10:18] JA: Before violence started happening - I mean you didn't know any different, so it just seemed kind of normal, to be there?

AK: Yeah, it was when we got out of Congo, we were running the whole time, so I didn't really experience violence in the way like - I don't remember seeing violence until Gatumba happened. So the whole time, I just remember us running from different places to different places to be safe.

[11:09] JA: How would you describe the experience of Gatumba?

AK: Gatumba was actually the first... everytime I talk about Gatumba, my mom always says that, "this is not the first time that I've seen a war." This was my first, violence experience that I've seen. It was a life-changing thing. I don't know if Espe told you guys my history - I got shot in Gatumba, and then they burned me on my whole back, and then I lost a lot of family members, and I also lost my parents there, that day. It's pretty traumatizing.

[12:05] JA: How old were you at this time?

AK: When we were in Gatumba I was five, living with - I don't know if she told you guys how it was set up - it was a lot of different tents. So in a tent, there would be a family, in my tent there was my dad, me, my brother - who was at the time one. And then we had another tent with my grandma, and my cousins, and her mom - my aunt.

[13:00] AW: What challenges did you face right after the violence?

AK: After the violence, I was again, very - I mean, I wouldn't say I was very young, because I remember some of the things that happened. I remember after that whole

attack finished, I was unconscious for a few days, and I didn't wake up until a few days later, and I was by myself, and somebody apparently had dragged me from the scene, and taken me to a hospital, and my grandma at the time was trying to look for me - she didn't know where I was, and she didn't find me until a couple weeks later. So I was alone the whole time, confused where I was - still traumatized, I guess, from the event.

[14:05] JA: You remember the day of pretty well, before and after the whole violence started?

AK: It's funny, because I don't remember much about Africa, but that day I can recall from the morning that we woke up till the violence happen, and then later on that night, before I got unconscious and was found on the road. I can recall that whole day.

[14:35] JA: And so you said you had family die because of it, right?

AK: A lot.

JA: Some people you knew, family friends that...

AK: Everybody in that tent - I mean the refugee place in Gatumba was pretty close. We all knew each other, and as a community - especially in our community - we're all very close. Let's say our tent neighbor was our pastor, so we knew him, and then three tents over was another family who lives in New York - we knew them. Everybody who was in that area, we all knew each other. Because we were very close, because we've been running with each other since back in Congo. And even before Congo, when I was born, they were all together.

[Interruption]

[16:08] JA: What challenges did you experience right after that, once you woke up in the hospital?

AK: I guess the challenges I get as I stayed in was being lonely - I was alone the whole time. Another challenge, during when I was in the hospital, the next day they all went back to the scene - a lot of the community members - to try to identify the bodies as to let families know. So, I also didn't find out that my parents had passed until like, three weeks later, because, again, they were burning bodies, they were shooting - so it was kind of hard to point who's who, at the scene. So that was another challenge. I didn't get that closure from my mom. I did... I was with my dad at the time that he passed - he actually got shot right in front of me. And we were together. [Pauses] Sorry. And the

bullet that hit him also hit me on my foot at the time. So I got that closure from him. As for my mom, I didn't get that closure, so that was also a challenge.

[17:59] NB: How do you feel like you've been able to reconcile with that? Or do you feel like you're still trying to grapple-

AK: -I think it's a challenge everyday, and everyday as I'm getting older, I do question a lot of the things that happened, and I question why it happened - why us, why my family, why this - I have a lot of "whys." I mean I'm not - I don't know how to get the answers and I don't know where to start, even, to get the answers. So, I just move forward.

[interruption]

[19:10] AW: How do you feel justice should've been imparted, after that violence?

AK: The person who was responsible for that whole thing - I guess the leader - I feel like, should've gotten - I don't even know what punishment he should get, I haven't even thought about that. I always think about in the US, if something happens like that, there's punishment, but how come this man - who was responsible for all this - is still just roaming around in the street, walking like a regular person. Acting like nothing happened. Why is he free, and then there's people in prison for some really dumb stuff. And I'm like, this man is really just walking in the street, living his life, like nothing happened.

[20:28] NB: I don't know if you've answered this before, but could you have seen this coming? As you're looking back, did you notice any patterns or trends of how they treated you guys, or anything in that matter?

AK: I stated, we grew up running from war, and I don't think I realized that until I was older and I've started looking back on these situations. Well I think it was going to happen at some point, if it wasn't me, it was going to happen to somebody else in my community - because again, we grew up running, so this was a regular thing. And before I was even born, there was another war that happened, where my grandma talks about it. So, it's a pattern, I feel like, it's a pattern in our community. And it's a pattern that's still going on today, so if it wasn't going to happen to me, someone else would've went through it.

[21:41] JA: You feel like justice hasn't been served, because no one's been punished for any of what's happened? Whose responsibility is it to bring him to justice - do you think survivors need to tell stories, what do you think needs to be happening there?

AK: I feel like survivors have been telling stories. For years, we have people in Belgium, who even went back to Burundi to tell their stories to the government, and it seems like - so we're saying so much testimonies, but nobody's listening or nobody's doing anything about it. So I don't know how long we can keep telling the same story.

[Interruption]

AK: Yeah, I feel like the survivors are doing their part - I mean, I don't know much about politics, but I feel like, at some point, the government needs to do something - especially the Burundian government - but it seems like they've ignored that, they've let that pass, they were mourning that day of, but after that they said, "let's just continue with our day." But some of us - we can't continue with our day because that was the day that turned our world upside down.

[24:16] AW: What do you think needs to occur in order for justice to be fully achieved? You talked about the leader being punished - is there anything else that you feel like should happen?

AK: I don't necessarily think he should be punished punished, I think about this a lot, and I think about what if one day, I walked up to him, what would I say, or how would I respond, and would I want an apology. I feel like he doesn't even realize the effect that he made on us. The trauma that he caused us - a lot of us. And the way that he changed their lives. I just feel like - it might sound dumb, but a simple apology would do. But we didn't even get anything. Nothing at all.

[25:36] JA: So how would you say, in the - has it been fifteen years since the massacre, however many years - how has your life been different, because of Gatumba?

AK: So after Gatumba, I got shot and burned. I'm twenty-two years old right now, and I would say about 70 percent of my life was spent in the hospital, with surgeries on surgeries on surgeries - from my leg. Everytime I walk, I still limp. I remember after Gatumba we were in Kenya - I was in Kenya, actually. I was in Kenya alone until my aunt joined me, she got shot on the head. We were in the hospital together in Kenya, and then, after Kenya, we went back to Rwanda - and I was still in the hospital, because I couldn't walk, like a long time. I wasn't fully able to walk until like a year later, and even if I was walking I'll have crutches.

And then, we came to the US - I think it was for better doctors, it had better doctors. We lived in Denver, and I just remember surgery after surgery. I didn't go to school, until like - I came to the United States when I was in third grade, but most of the

time I wasn't in school because I was in surgery - I was getting another surgery, or another surgery, or I'd go to another state to get a surgery.

And then besides surgeries, I feel like, it took some part of me mentally. Because, like at time you didn't really think about it until later on in my life, when I got to the United States, and I would start having nightmares, and bad dreams. And then, I started going to therapy, and then, I continue with therapy until - I don't think I left therapy until I was in junior year of high school. I always tell people about therapy, and a lot of our community members - especially elderly people - they didn't take up therapy because to them, they don't feel right just speaking to a random person. They'd rather speak to God. They're more religious people. That's the effects.

[29:08] NB: For students like us - we're young and we're in college and we're interviewing - what would be your message, or your key takeaway that you would want us to takeaway from this experience.

AK: My brain is having like, a brain freeze. I don't have anything right now, I'm sorry.

[30:17] NB: That's ok. What is, I guess, some of the lessons you've learned in therapy?

AK: At the beginning of it, it was mostly just in elementary school, it was how to get over the trauma, I guess, and to overcome it. And then, as I get later on into it, I feel like I had the three stages. I remember I was trying to get through the trauma, I was trying to get to acceptance, and then later on, I was trying to get into moving on with my life. As in high school, as college came by, getting ready to move on to college - and then I remember I would get to some point, and I would just close my eyes, and I'm like, "wow, I'm actually going to college." I'm going to college, and I started thinking about it, and I was like, if you put the same girl who was in that tent that night and you tell her she was going to graduate high school, attend college, she would not believe you. But here I was, about to do it. And then now, four years later, I'm about to graduate college, now.

[31:56] AW: What college are you attending?

NB: Right now, I go to the University of New Mexico.

AW: What are you studying?

AK: I am an elementary education major.

NB: Congratulations on almost graduating.

AK: Thank you.

[32:20] JA: Did anyone ever help you with funding, or anything, for your surgeries, and your therapy, and things after you left?

AK: When we got here, we got Medicaid. And I know Medicaid did most of the surgery. I wasn't really sure where the finances were coming from, but in my head I thought it was just Medicaid doing it. I haven't really thought about where it was coming from, because I thought it all a part of Medicaid.

And I feel like, we also came to the United States, for me to get better. So I feel like, they already knew the situation, they knew that I'm going to need surgeries on surgeries, and I feel like they covered that. I don't know if that makes sense.

[33:43] NB: Do you see any patterns, in New Mexico, that you're seeing back home, that you're like - I don't know if I'm phrasing this right - but you mentioned that it was the pattern of your life to run away, and so you're used to those patterns. Do you see any of that in the US society - in your society that you live in right now? What are some patterns or mechanisms that you notice that we do, that, is kind of troublesome, or that you can see can lead to an event like that - does that make sense?

AK: Yeah it does. I don't really see the patterns, in New Mexico, then in the US, everytime you tell somebody - especially when we were in Africa - we were like, "we're going to the US", we're like, "oh my God it's a better life. This is never happening again." I mean when I say we were... "no war is ever going to happen again", but we thought in our heads, this was the peaceful place and nothing can happen to us. We'll finally be free, we'll get an education like everybody else, we'll - you know, just a better life. So I haven't really seen a pattern of anything bad here that I saw back home, but then again, I feel like if I was a little older, at the time that all this was happening - I was like, my twenties or something - maybe I would've seen something. But I was only five, and I just saw us running all the time, so I was not sure why we were running, but I knew we were running for something.