News



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Washington, D.C. — February 26, 2019
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Mireille Twayigira, who escaped the Rwandan genocide at the age of three and lost most of her family to sickness while fleeing, made a compelling case for expanding refugee educational services during a Feb. 25 talk at Georgetown University.

"I'm a living example," said Twayigira, who went on from a refugee camp to earn a medical degree. "That's why I'm standing here advocating today."

At an event co-sponsored by Georgetown's Berkley Center for Religion, Peace, and World Affairs and Jesuit Refugee Service/USA (JRS), Twayigira, who serves as the JRS Refugee Education Advocate, told her life story in a presentation titled, "Full of Hope: One Refugee's Journey of Survival, Resilience, and Education." The talk was part of the JRS Global Education Initiative campaign to raise funds to expand and strengthen JRS educational services.

In 1994, Twayigira fled Rwanda for the Congo with her family when she was just three years old. By 1996, her father, mother, and younger sister had all passed away and she was again forced to flee violence with her grandparents, this time to Angola. By 2000, Twayigira and her grandfather moved into a refugee camp in Malawi where

she was enrolled in a JRS primary school.

Twayigira said that she and her classmates worked extremely hard and excelled in school because they knew "it was our only hope."

When her grandfather suddenly passed away in 2007, teachers helped raise money for Twayigira's tuition so she could continue to study at the secondary boarding school where she was enrolled. She received one of the highest scores in the country on her 12th grade exam, leading to a scholarship to study medicine in China. In 2016, she graduated as a medical doctor from China's Hebei University.

Throughout her presentation, Twayigira shared stories of hardship she encountered on her journey, including walking over 2,000 miles, begging for food scraps and making her own shoes out of leaves.

She said that she "started to see hope" in her story while studying in China and now wants to be a "beacon of hope" for others by sharing her story.

Twayigira argued that access to quality education is not only crucial for individual refugees, but "vital for everyone involved" because it builds self-reliance. She also said that policy makers, including in the U.S., should not fear accepting refugees into their country because there are many skilled refugees who are able to and want to contribute to the economy.

According to JRS, among refugee children, "only 61 percent are enrolled in primary school, 23 percent enrolled in secondary school, and just 1 percent are enrolled in tertiary education." Additionally, Twayigira raised the point that most countries that host refugees are "struggling to support their own communities and people in terms of education and healthcare."

Twayigira told the audience that if they want to help, they can support people and organizations working on this issue, like JRS.

"These are innocent refugees who actually have no choice in leaving their countries, but it always remains our choice to help," said Twayigira.

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