

GLOBAL HEALTH IN ACTION

RESILIENCE

The Stories of
Everyday
Heroes



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RESILIENCE

re·sil·ience

noun

"Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands."

AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

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Behind every public health crisis is a real human story that details the ways global health issues and barriers to holistic care impact physical and mental health. Behind every description of a health concern or condition is a community member whose life has been changed in the face of illness or disability. Within these pages, the Global Health in Action team will be telling the stories of people who have been directly affected by public health issues and systemic obstacles to care through the eyes of the individuals on the front lines of these crises.

This semester, our team used narrative-style journalism to share personal stories collected through in-depth interviews with real people. You will have the opportunity to hear from your next-door neighbors about the implications of immigration policy, life living with HIV, and domestic violence, among many more poignant narratives. This issue of Global Health in Action highlights the resilience of people all around the world in the face of ongoing health challenges and disparities. We hope it inspires you to advocate for change and raise awareness of health inequities in your own community.

- McKenna Kaufman and Makenzie Hicks
Chief Editors

"I AM POWERFUL"

Born in the Philippines and raised in Macon, Georgia, Mercer alumnus Raymond Partolan shares his experience finding his voice as a former undocumented immigrant.

By McKenna Kaufman

As an elementary schooler, Raymond Partolan loved playing in the woods behind his family's apartment building in Macon, Georgia. He loved how cold the creek felt on his feet and ankles as he waded through the water. He enjoyed catching frogs, gathering stray sticks and branches, and hearing the rustle of the brush and leaves as his best friend and next-door neighbor played nearby under the trees.

Raymond loved being a kid and a self-proclaimed "Georgia boy." His afternoons after school were spent playing with his Playstation One, reading books, watching movies and spending time with his younger brother and parents.

Despite his vibrant and comfortable home life, school was not always a safe place for Raymond, an Asian American child growing up in the Deep South. He recalls some of his earliest memories of having racist language hurled at him while other classmates told him to "go back to China," a country nearly 2,000 miles away from the Partolan family's country of origin—The Philippines.

While much of Raymond's extended family calls The Philippines home, Raymond had only spent one year of his life living in The Philippines, a country he has "zero recollection" of. His father, a physical therapist, and his mother, a paralegal at a law firm, had moved with Raymond to the United States in 1994, hoping to find new opportunities and a place to raise their young family.

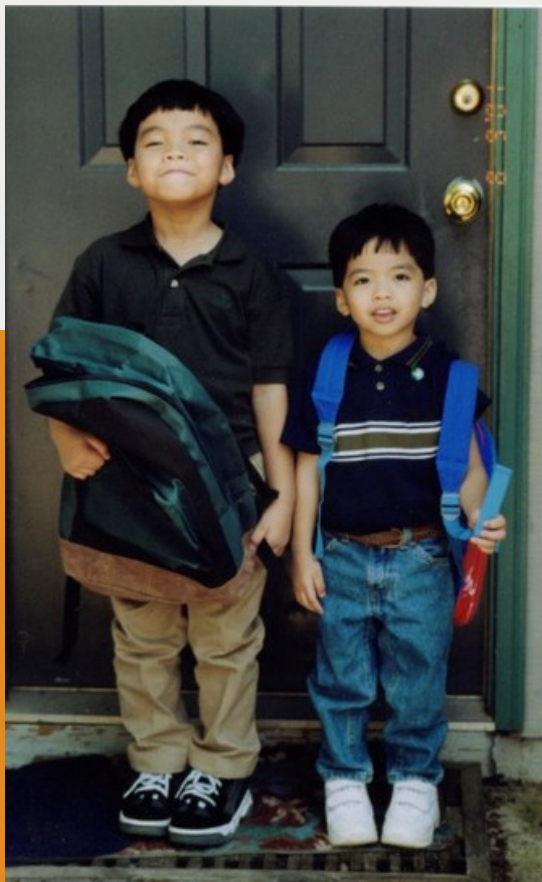
In 2003, it came time for the Partolans to replace their father's work visa, and the rest of the family's "dependent" status with green cards, which would guarantee their permanent residency and their permission to live in the United States long-term.

"In order for us to obtain our green cards, my dad had to pass this English competency exam called the TOEFL, the Test of English as a Foreign Language," Raymond said. "He was able to pass every section of that test, except for the speaking section. He retook the test over and over and over again, and unfortunately, he just never could get a passing score."

Their green card applications were denied, and Raymond's family "started living in fear every single day of being arrested and deported" back to the Philippines, he said.



Left Photo: Raymond (age 8) and his younger brother (age 4) in 2001.



Raymond was only 10 years old and undocumented.

"A PERIOD OF AWAKENING"

This fear followed Raymond through high school as he competed with his school's Academic Team, played in the orchestra, and founded the first Rubik's Cube Club on campus. He watched his classmates get driver's licenses, get their first job, and plan for college, things he was unsure he would ever be able to do because of his undocumented status.

"This all really boiled over to a point when the fall of my junior year of high school, I actually tried to take my own life, because I had just lost my will to live, I lost my drive, my motivation to continue being on this planet," Raymond said. "I felt like this country didn't want me here, and there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it."

Raymond described his close encounter with death and his struggle planning for college as a "period of awakening" in his life, igniting his passion for advocacy and for inspiring change in the United States' "broken immigration system." He began sharing his story and his struggles with his immigration status with his friends and teachers, even speaking to crowds of students and community members at larger events.

In the months following Raymond's suicide attempt, the University System of Georgia's Board of Regents introduced two new policies: one barring undocumented students from attending the five most selective colleges in the state and a second requiring undocumented students living in Georgia to pay out-of-state tuition at in-state schools. The barriers to receiving a college degree seemed even more insurmountable for Raymond, who now felt confined to only applying to private institutions where the tuition was equal for all students regardless of immigration status.

He applied to 14 private colleges and universities during his senior year of high school before deciding to attend Mercer University to study Political Science and Spanish as a Presidential Scholar with plans of attending Law School. Raymond graduated high school with his classmates as the

class Salutatorian and prepared to start college classes in his hometown of Macon.

When Raymond was 19 years old, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program was implemented by President Barack Obama, making Raymond eligible for work authorization and a driver's license and protecting him from deportation for two years. He got a job and moved into a house down the street from Mercer's campus, eager to start "building a life for himself," he said.

"At the time, I was feeling such a huge deal of resentment towards my family. Specifically, my mom and dad. I kept asking myself, how could my parents put me in this impossible situation? How could my dad fail to pass this English test resulting in us losing our status and becoming undocumented?" Raymond said. "So at the time, I just wanted to get as far away as I could from my family."

Raymond remembers his years as an undergraduate student as a "magical experience." His community involvement continued and grew as a college student, as he engaged with his classmates at Mercer by being a Peer Advisor and competing on the Mock Trial Team. He was elected President of SGA as a Junior, making him the first Asian-American and undocumented student to serve in the role.

"When I was on Mercer's SGA, I used the opportunity to work with Mercer's administration to try and develop impactful and innovative programs to support undocumented students at Mercer," Raymond said. "After I started publicly sharing my story and talking to people about my lack of immigration status, more and more people started coming out and telling me that they too, were undocumented."

Raymond's advocacy efforts as a young person expanded outside of his college campus to include engaging in community organizing projects with other undocumented people in the Atlanta area. In 2013, when Raymond was a Sophomore in

Top Photo: Raymond graduated from Central High School in Macon, Georgia in 2011 as his class Salutatorian.

Bottom Photo: Raymond graduated from Mercer University in 2015 with degrees in political science and Spanish.



After working at Asian Americans Advancing Justice - Atlanta and as an immigration paralegal, Raymond stepped into the role of National Field Director with APIAVote.

college, he was involved in a lawsuit against the state of Georgia urging them to reverse their policy on in-state tuition for undocumented students. While this lawsuit was unsuccessful, Raymond says it was what first thrust him into the advocacy space and established his desire to pursue a career in community organizing.

"For the first time in my life, I felt like I had agency. I felt like I had initiative and I felt like I had some kind of control over the way things went down in my life," Raymond said. "I had control over whether I was going to stand up and fight for myself and for my family and for our community, or if I was just going to sit back and watch other people make decisions that affected me without me having a seat at the table."

After graduating from Mercer in 2015, Raymond decided to put his dream of going to Law School to study Immigration Law on hold, as the state of Georgia does not allow undocumented people to receive proper licensure to practice. Instead, he accepted a full-time position with Asian Americans Advancing Justice -

"For the first time in my life, I felt like I had agency. I felt like I had initiative and I felt like I had some kind of control over the way things went down in my life."

Atlanta, a non-profit law and advocacy organization centered around protecting the rights of Asian communities in Georgia and the southeastern United States.

"When I first started appearing in newspapers and on television news programs to share my story, my mother, disagreeing with my approach to bettering the conditions for myself and my family, shut me out for several months. We didn't speak," Raymond said.

While Raymond's father, a former activist himself, supported Raymond in his advocacy, his relationship with his parents remained strained



as his mother came to terms with the publicity he was receiving, something she warned Raymond against as a child and young adult.

"Over time, my parents' support only grew. They'd look out for me on TV and record the programs on which I appeared," Raymond said. "They'd save the magazines and the newspapers that discussed our family's story."

Two years ago, Raymond finally received his Lawful Permanent Resident status, two years after his parents, and looks forward to the day he can cast his first ballot and possibly run for public office.

"People find that funny because my entire job, my career, revolves around voting in elections, and I've never cast a ballot in a U.S. election in my life," Raymond said. "I become eligible for citizenship in about three years, so at that point, I'm going to apply to be a citizen, and I am just so excited for when I get to register to vote."

Raymond currently works as a National Field Director for APIAVote, continuing his work mobilizing Asian American voters. He lives in Syracuse, New York with his fiancée, Marisol, another DACA recipient from Mexico whom he met through their shared experiences and passion for immigration advocacy work, and their 3 ½ -year-old Yorkipoo. They bought their first house together, which Raymond enjoys fixing up and decorating, he said.

Nearly 30 years after his parents made the long journey from the Philippines to the United States in September 2022, Raymond and his family traveled to the Philippines,

giving him the chance to meet his extended family and see his birthplace for the first time.

"It brought my immediate family closer together and allowed me to deepen my relationship with my parents," Raymond said. "I saw, first-hand, why they decided to move our family to the United States and now feel a great deal of gratitude towards them."

This "Georgia boy" has built a community and life for himself that spans from Georgia, to upstate New York, to across the ocean in the Philippines, accomplishing the dreams of a 17-year-old Raymond and continuing the hobbies of 8-year-old Raymond.

Now, Raymond spends his free time reading, playing video games, and spending time outdoors, just as he did as an elementary schooler growing up in the Deep South. Amidst a life fraught with change and uncertainty, some things remain consistent and comforting, reflecting Raymond's goals for his career as an advocate for immigrant communities.

"What I really set out to do was to create an environment where undocumented young people felt supported and empowered," Raymond said. "As an Asian American, I am powerful, and I and my community have so many things to offer this nation and the world."

"KEEP LIVING FOR YOU"

Motivational interviewer and HIV+ activist Gregory Harris shares his journey of coming to terms with his past, embracing his identity, and giving back to his local community.

By Aaliyah Deen Sesay

"Life does not stop here. The choice is yours." This is the lasting message Gregory Harris left me with after my interview with him. Greg is many things. He is a member of the Macon community. He is a gay Black LGBTQ+ activist, living with HIV in America. He is a dog lover with two gorgeous pups of his own. He's all these things, but most of all, he's a person like me and you. He had a rough upbringing, but he overcame his trauma and obstacles and chose to turn his life toward helping others. This is his story.

Greg's biological mother was addicted to drugs for most of his life, so she gave him and his siblings away around the time they were born. He was only a few months old when he went to live with his godmother, but he came to know and love her as his own flesh and blood.

Life with his godmother was good, stable. Growing up in the 90s, he knew there were certain things you couldn't talk about. Like the fact that he liked girls... and boys. His godmother was a stud, so he thought, out of everybody, she would understand. But when he tried to come out to her, the next couple of days were filled with spankings. He knew he wouldn't try to express himself again for a long time.

His godmother's mom passed away in 2002, and Greg's biological mother waltzed back into his life, uprooting him from a loving, stable family. They went from pillar to post, moved in with male friends, stayed in rehabs, substance abuse centers, and even the salvation army. At some point, Greg's mother realized all that instability wasn't good for him, so she gave custody of him to his great aunt. It was a step up from living with his mom. But once again, Greg was in an environment where he couldn't be himself.

People used to make fun of the way he walked, the way he talked, the way he dressed. Greg sometimes got picked on by people he didn't even know. Sometimes, he would cry because he felt so hopeless and alone. Greg didn't get to do things normal high schoolers did; he missed out on joining chorus and theater and going to prom. He didn't get to experiment



and figure out his identity because he didn't fit the heteronormative male vision. He was constantly othered.

Looking back, Greg holds a lot of resentment toward his family. Especially the fact that they still teach hurtful things to his younger cousins, molding them to do exactly what was done to him. Greg believes that if his family loved him the way that he wanted to be loved, he would be further in life than he is at the moment, and he's doing pretty good. As a gay man, all he wanted from family, friends, and the rest of the world was to be accepted. The way Greg's family treated him shaped his adult life, hindering Greg from being his authentic self up until he found out he was living with HIV.

In 2015, Greg was living in Hampton, Virginia. Moving to Virginia was an eye-opening experience for Greg; there was an entirely different culture for gay men than in Georgia. He received a lot of attention, the attention he'd been missing in the Deep South, and with this new environment came a new Greg. He recalls being sexually assaulted as

a youth and as an adult, particularly during his time in the Navy, but Greg believes HIV was transmitted to him through unsafe sexual practices and promiscuity during his early days in Virginia.

"Well Gregory," the nurse said, "I have some news for you. It's bad news but then good news. Bad news: you have HIV. Good news: we have medication that you can take to prolong your life." At this time, Greg was a medical assistant, and he was aware of the science behind HIV, as well as how HIV medication worked. Many people don't know this, but you can be on a one, two, or three-pill regiment. Being on two or three pills doesn't mean your diagnosis is worse, necessarily; rather it means that the medication in one pill isn't working, so you need to use a combination of medicines.



After a few months, Greg started thinking about getting tested, but he kept putting it off. One day, he decided enough was enough. He drove to the store, bought a home kit, and it tested positive for HIV. He didn't quite believe the results, and he didn't tell anybody at first. Then he started getting sick. Eventually, he went to a clinic for confirmation.

Living with the actual disease wasn't so bad, but what Greg didn't expect was the backlash. He didn't hang around certain people because of the negative views they had about HIV. He lost a lot of friends. Despite taking his medication and managing his illness, he couldn't escape the negative connotation that accompanied living with HIV.

"I won't let anybody define what kind of man I want to be."

In 2017, Greg had an altercation with a former employer. He was working at a pediatric office in Virginia, and the medication he was taking at the time made him feel nauseous.

Some mornings, Greg would call out of work because he wasn't feeling well. Some afternoons, the nausea overwhelmed him, and he would leave early. He didn't know what was

going on, but he figured it was the medication. Greg mentioned it to his doctor, who was in the process of changing it, when one day, his employer, Mrs. Dillon, called Greg into her office.

The conversation went a little something like this: Mrs. Dillon wanted to know why Greg wasn't at work as much, and he told her it was because of the medication he was on. Greg mentioned he was in the process of changing it. She claimed she understood the situation and asked what medication he was taking. Based on her medical experience, Greg knew that if he told her what medication he was taking, Mrs. Dillon would know he was living with HIV. He was scared, but he held out hope.

Mrs. Dillon, to Greg's surprise, expressed her discontent and referenced the fact that on Greg's application, he said he didn't have any illnesses that would prevent him from working. To this, Greg replied, "My illness doesn't prevent me from doing my job."

What she said next enraged Greg to the point where his palms started sweating, and he started shaking. He had never felt so indignant, so humiliated, so besmirched, but he had to maintain his composure because he was in her office. She said "Your diagnosis is a hindrance to our facility or a liability, to be more politically correct. If you were to prick yourself with a needle, and then go to inject a vaccine into one of my patients, you would be putting the patient in harm's way."

It took everything in Greg not to react the way he wanted to because, in the span of 30 seconds, that woman had insulted his intelligence, discredited his education, and diminished his training. She called him incompetent when he had never done anything remotely compromising.

Greg went home distraught, called his mom, his friends, and filed for unemployment. He contacted the EEOC – Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and filed for the intent to sue, which he won. Just when Greg thought he was making headway, Mrs. Dillon tried to get his unemployment denied. At one point, she called him directly, stating, "When I hired you, you seemed like the nicest person and now you want to sue me."

Greg was stunned. Here was a woman who took away his means of supporting himself, dragged his name through the mud, and said that he can't use her as a reference on future medical-related job applications, asking him why he had the audacity to feel slighted.

Eventually, Greg got a new job working at a pediatric office in Newport, where he worked for three years. No one had an issue with his HIV, which goes to show that his former employer was simply prejudiced.

Despite some negative experiences, Greg believes that living with HIV has been positive overall. Greg spent a lot of time thinking about everything that characterized his experience with HIV, and so after 4 years in 2019, he finally came out publicly with his status. A lot of people were touched by the video he made, and he was ecstatic that he could use his experiences to help other people navigate theirs.

Now, Greg is a motivational interviewer. He utilizes his skills to find out what motivates people in their lives, and he encourages them to live and take their medication. He finds peace in it. It is as if he's one voice in a weary world because all it takes to change someone's world is to really listen to them. It always amazes him how he can change lives just by being his authentic self.

If living with HIV is the worst thing that the gay community could have offered him, Greg overcame that. He emphasized "Life does not stop here. Keep pushing. Keep striving. You can still do exactly what you planned – go to college, become a nurse, become a doctor, whatever the case may be. Life does not stop here. The choice is yours."

"THE MODERN SUPERWOMAN"

By Shaan Prasad

Dr. Delgerzul Lodoisamba grew up to two extremely proud and intelligent parents, with her mother getting her engineering degree from Hungary and her father getting a masters degree in Nuclear Physics in Russia. Yet, they did totally emphasize obtaining knowledge, but instead laid the foundation of forming her own values and identities. Surrounding her were individuals who wanted to leave Mongolia, and live abroad in beautiful countries with economies that are better than Mongolia. To most people, Mongolia is already forsaken, and any opportunity to leave is a good one. But not Dr. Lodoisamba. Her father encouraged and emphasized that her identity was shaped by Mongolia, and that it is her responsibility to help her community and people of her homeland. Her mother instilled in her a confidence in self, and to never think of yourself as lesser than anyone, especially in terms of gender. Her mind and views cultivated within this environment, growing throughout her years of education as her parents encouraged Dr. Lodoisamba to experience the world. Along with these perspectives, she encountered different people from different walks of life.

During her highschool education in Mongolian-Turkish boarding school, she was living among Turkish students. At that time, most of the girls living in the school came from the city, but there were those who came from the countryside. At 16, she saw city girls bullying a girl from the countryside, and came to the defense of the girl.

She realized: all girls are not like her. People can come from different backgrounds and circumstances, and the observed lack of respect for this fact was something that she vowed never to do. Individuals, she figured, sometimes are not able to defend themselves.

Dr. Lodoisamba knew that if there was injustice, she had the obligation to fight, to stand up for what is right. Through this transformation, she found to think outside of herself, and

instead think on the behalf of others. This laid the foundation for much of her career and activism.

After high school, Dr. Lodoisamba went to Guangzhou University in China to pursue a medical degree in traditional medicine. Although Mongolia utilizes western medicine, because she had a governmental scholarship, she wanted to absorb all the knowledge that she could. And it was difficult, to say the least. She had to learn the Chinese language while learning traditional medicine at the same time. At one point, she had taken 10 classes in one semester, in which all the exams were very difficult. Even 40% of her class dropped out in their first year. Despite these difficulties, she learned to speak the Chinese language fluently and gained knowledge of many specialties of traditional medicine, like acupuncture and Tai Chi (physical exercise). This hard work reinforced her vision to become a doctor to help others, no matter what obstacles were in the way. And she never forgot what her parents told her, and came back often regularly to practice in private clinics, trying to implement her lessons to help Mongolian citizens.

When she attained a medical degree, she found that her traditional medical knowledge did not fit well with the westernized medical system of Mongolia. Thus, she repositioned herself as a public health specialist, where her extroverted nature can be better seen. Through this change, she began to pursue knowledge and learn in other parts of the world. Her masters in public health came from studying abroad in the University Catholique de Louvain in Belgium. During her stay there, he describes that her dormitory would be near the common kitchen, where it was utilized by practicing Muslims to cook for and observe Ramadan. This cooking came often in the middle of the night, interrupting her sleep. At first, she was annoyed; why would these people be cooking in the middle of the night while she is trying to get rest after a long day?

But instead of thinking in this way,



she turned outward; this is an important part of these students' faith, and she must respect their culture and accept them for who they are.

This view echoed her encounter in boarding school and grew within her, with a fundamental understanding that it is natural to have differences, but is important to respect them. After her masters at Belgium, she finished her masters of public health, with a specialty in environmental health in Mongolia. She continued adding to her education, went to Korea to obtain her PhD. Through these travels, she is learning new languages, new approaches to public health, and the places of the world.

During this time, she is told by her friends, "Stay there, don't come back." Yet, in developing her mindset and views of herself and the world during her time abroad, deep down she never forgot to come back to her homeland, and to work to give a better future for it.

"In developing her mindset and views of herself and the world during her time abroad, deep down she never forgot to come back to her homeland and to work to give a better future for it."

Her involvement in environmental activism came to a pivotal moment one day in the square of the capital city of Ulaanbaatar. A woman sent out a Facebook notice for a protest against the government to take action on environmental pollution, as the woman's kids were adversely affected by this pollution. The government did not answer to the people, even if they have credentials or if they are renowned, so Dr. Lodoisamba gravitated toward this woman's call for action. She, along with six or seven others, designed what message they would deliver to the government and how to spread this. On the day during the protest, she was called to the stage. When she got to that platform, her emotions welled up inside of her. Maybe it was her master's thesis on the adverse effects of the environment on Mongolians, or the relative laziness of the government to do anything about it. But she shouted her heart out, recounting how people are dying because of this issue surrounding the entire country and its citizens. At this moment, she knew what her mission was: to spread awareness of environmental pollution and become an activist.



child's exposure and take care of her, all the while being separated from her husband and two other children. Her mission is so important to her that she sacrificed her time as a parent to pursue it.

Even now, she goes through many challenges. Her current job does not have a stable salary to provide for her family, so she must do other jobs to supplement her income. She needs to take care of her three children (and now grandchildren), and instilling the values she grew up with to her children has been difficult. And of course, the existential question she asks during her interventions in NGOs and research: What am I doing? Am I doing enough? Yet, even through these obstacles, she does not waver. She trains individuals to protect themselves, protests the government to take action, appears on radio and TV, and uses her 100,000 amassed followers to spread her message and knowledge, and even works on a COVID-19 project funded by the World Bank. She prides herself on breaking the view that Mongolia is not worth saving, where she contributes to local businesses. Balancing her hectic work and family life work, as she was raised to be strong and confident, but also understanding and compassionate. She knows that her blood, sweat, and tears are worth it, because she is doing this out of love for her home and its people, and that is all there is to it.

So when you hear the many accolades, honors, and achievements of Dr. Delgerzul Lodoisamba, realize that she did not earn them without sacrifice, loss, or effort. She had the resilience and strength of her parents, the compassion and kindness from her international experiences, as well as extensive

education and knowledge to get to where she is today. Resilience comes in many forms, but none can disagree that Dr. Delgerzul Lodoisamba is one of the most resilient individuals on the forefront of global health today.



Dr. Lodoisamba visiting the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy.

"I'm still holding my strength very strong because, from a young age, my parents showed me that your country is your love."

During adulthood and motherhood, she had to maintain being a parent while also trying to further her mission. While pregnant with her third child, because the pollution in the capital of Ulaanbaatar is very high, she had to move from her home in the capital to the countryside. As a result, she was apart from her husband and two other children during the winter season, and would only occasionally be together during the summer. With her workplace being 50-60 kilometers away from her countryside home, she had to commute longer as well as vigilantly manage the finances to pay for food and lodging. Even with her child grew to three years old, Dr. Lodoisamba would go every weekend back to the countryside to limit her

FROM ISRAELI OCCUPATION TO FINDING HIS VOCATION

By Suha Mohiuddin

Dr. Hani Khoury was in elementary school when he first began playing marbles with his friends from the neighborhood. Each time they would come to visit, he would welcome them into his backyard, as he crawled with the weight of his body on his hands and knees, sometimes winning many marbles and often arguing over who had more.

School started promptly at 8:30 AM and each morning was the same. His mom would wake him up, dress him, feed him breakfast, and walk with him to school. But each morning, he would fall to the ground at every attempt at walking. "Mama, stop walking," he'd have to say so she would slow down and allow him to breathe normally again.

At 10:30 was break time, when his mom would bring him a nutritious snack, hoping that a good diet would surely make her son stronger. This was also the time he would want to go to the playground, but he was confronted with a large obstacle for him at the time: a staircase. It wasn't easy going to school with other children, all who were indoctrinated by the stigma of being different. Dr. Khoury's inability to walk properly changed his entire outlook on life, and he began to question, "Why me?" each time he would fall to the ground and have to pick himself back up again.

See, Dr. Khoury knew from a very young age that something was wrong. He knew something about him was different from others. He knew each time he would watch his peers play basketball as he sat on the sidelines that something about him was different, but no doctors could diagnose him. Doctors named his condition as some type of muscular dystrophy, even though it could have been any of the forty on the list. Much later, in 1983, he was given the diagnosis of Spinal Muscular Atrophy (SMA), a genetic disease that

affects his spinal cord and muscles with a gradual weakness over time, a disease that would at some point require a wheelchair.

His family was unable to afford a wheelchair, and Dr. Khoury, living in a society where even using a wheelchair was looked down upon, knew life would be difficult. His parents began to feel the weight of it all, feeling only guilt that they brought their son into such a world where he would struggle.

Compounding his disability was the fact that he lived in Israeli-occupied Palestine, only two years old when the war began. He noticed the very same neighborhood he played marbles in would soon become a destination of heavy surveillance from Israeli soldiers. His homeland turned into a territory that made raising the Palestinian flag a crime, a territory that completely washed away his own identity. From Israeli occupation to finding his vocation, Dr. Hani Khoury, professor of Mathematics here at Mercer University, has not only learned of, but he has mastered courage, adaptability, and resilience.

"I was growing up, until the age of 18, under the pressures of both, the physical condition as well as the political climate," says Dr. Khoury, "Israeli occupation does not allow for any kind of civil society or civil rule to take place, to prosper. Everything is managed by the military, not by civil society, not by Palestinian institutions."

For 18 years of his life, Dr. Khoury lived in a society where occupation controlled everything. "Occupation controls the livelihood, controls what comes in and goes out, controls travel, controls money flow, taxes, educational systems," says Dr. Khoury.



But, despite conflicts, the land of Palestine itself was a rich and diverse intersection of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Dr. Khoury was able to develop friendships with his community, in ways where Palestinians and Israelis could have fun and forget about who their “enemies” should be. Aside from friendships, religion helped Dr. Khoury truly come to an understanding of himself. He was often told, “God made you this way” and was left to deal with the consequences of his disability. He often questioned whether God existed and why He created him differently than others. However, it was the same pondering about religion that helped him come to his current beliefs of secularism, where he knew no injustice should or could be justified through the platform of religion.

In a life where he felt he had little control over not only his environment, but his own body, one thing he felt he did have control over was his education. Each time he questioned what his disability meant of his future in terms of education and health, his mother’s reassurance was the biggest motivator to get him through. His mother had always told him he was very smart even when he felt he lacked something. He knew if he excelled in academics, something better was on its way for him. After showing proof of his acceptance to any university in the United States and an I-20 form, he was given permission to leave Palestine, but of course, that does not mean he could

Dr. Khoury on his Mercer on Mission trip to Jordan in 2013.



leave his eighteen years of memories behind. So, he packed his hopes of a better future and a fulfilling life into his suitcase as he traveled to a place that was more promising for him, a place that could protect the rights of disabled people, a place that could guarantee more accessibility, a place like New York.

Life in New York opened him up to many opportunities. He had access to all that he did not in Palestine: public transportation, a prospering learning environment, and an electric wheelchair. But alongside these advantages were the barriers he had to overcome: learning English, living on his own, and relying on others to help him with daily activities in an individualistic community and fast-paced environment. “I had to structure my entire week: who’s coming, what time, make sure transportation is on time, and if it’s not, find a backup,” says Dr. Khoury. However, he believes that with each difficulty comes an opportunity. “It may not be easy at all, it may be extremely difficult, but there’s always an alternative,” he says, “I am sure I can make things work out.”

Had he not allowed himself to struggle, he would not have seen the environment where he really thrives: a classroom. “There’s nothing like the climate of a class, a climate of learning, of sharing knowledge, of researching, of searching the truth,” he says. From a very young age, he had thought he wanted to teach, but after college, he knew he had found his vocation.

Now, Dr. Khoury has written an autobiography entitled, “Giving Up is Not an Option” recounting all of his memories from growing up in Palestine and his journey to



Dr. Khoury in front of the gates of the Old City of Jerusalem, the Damascus Gate, in 2018.

becoming the resilient person he has now become. He has even created a nonprofit organization under his mother’s name, the Laurice Khoury Foundation for the Support of Disabled Palestinian Students. He hopes that this organization will provide help with tuition and other financial support for students with disabilities at colleges all across Palestine. In his free time, you can find Dr. Khoury outside gardening, traveling, reading books, painting, and collecting stamps.

“We don’t see a lot of emphasis on what unites us as human beings, and there is a lot.”

Now living in Macon, Georgia as a mathematics professor at Mercer University with his wife Diane and 6 kids, Dr. Khoury lives the very same dream that a young boy once playing marbles in Palestine had dreamed of living. He is proof of why giving up is not an option. He says, “There is always a way to achieve your dreams. The question is, ‘How hard are you willing to work?’”

THE JOURNEY TO OASIS

By **Tori Jackson**

"Anyone can accomplish anything. Speak life into every situation and remember the intercommunication within yourself is the major factor of who you are." These are the best words of advice from the inspirational Irene Njoki. Irene was born in Kenya and raised in a town called Nakuru with both parents and four older sisters. Although Irene grew up with all sisters, this did not stop her from partaking in extravagant adventures with the neighborhood boys on a bicycle named "black mamba." Growing up Irene held herself as a very independent young girl who would chuckle at the young boys who would try to be her boyfriend. Spirits of joy and adventure infiltrated Irene as a child as she would play in the open fields with her friends, and excitement would fill the atmosphere as Irene and her sisters would crowd around the television on Fridays to watch Casper the Friendly Ghost and Chuck Norris. Irene was extremely close-knit with her family and valued the feelings of connection with her sisters growing up as they would sing together in their house and church.

However, Irene learned to grow up quickly, as her father left her family when she was around age 15. Anger, confusion, and betrayal ran through Irene's veins upon hearing about her father's departure: "my father was a man of his word, and I could not understand why he would leave the ones he said he loved." Irene's mother would not talk to any of her daughters about where their father had gone. Irene especially struggled, being the last born, because she was the most present around her mother, and she believed that if her father truly loved her and her sisters, he would not have left.

Irene and her mother would take their feelings of anger and frustration out on each other through means of arguing; further, sometimes Irene's mother would even get physically violent with her. These circumstances created a hostile atmosphere that Irene was itching to get out of.

Irene's husband was the first man she had ever loved, and she knows for a fact that he loved her dearly. On the other hand, Irene's mother was not very fond of her husband, and she made this very clear to Irene through means of violence. This left Irene feeling alone and violated; thus, Irene fled her home to live with her future husband. Soon after, Irene found out she was pregnant.

Shock resonated through Irene's body because she knew she could not go to her mother with this information without facing punishment. Although her partner was supportive, Irene took the advice of one of her friends and got an abortion. The procedure was done by a quake doctor who inserted a root into Irene's vagina and told her to come back in 2 days. It was a miracle that Irene survived this incident, and the whole situation left her in a tremendous amount of physical and emotional pain: "I left that place empty-handed, empty-hearted, and with a great pain in my heart."

Further, Irene got married right out of high school in Kenya at age 22. This was a pivotal moment for Irene because she was happy and excited for this next chapter of her life. However, it was not a peaceful environment for long as Irene became a victim of domestic violence. Irene's husband had



frequent, violent outbursts for no apparent reason, and this sent Irene into a spiral of asking why and crying out about what did she do to deserve this. A tremendous burden hung over Irene during this time because she felt humiliated, hated, and shocked; further, Irene often tried to rationalize her husband's behavior, believing it to be some kind of mistake, meaning her husband just continually made mistakes and no one was perfect. Irene would walk away after being beaten by her husband with fear and shame while trying to convince herself that her husband was a good man to her and her family.

"Irene was extremely close-knit with her family and valued the feelings of connection with her sisters growing up as they would sing together in their house and church."



"I knew I had to stand strong for my boys."

looking at her husband differently, and she started learning that he was causing her pain because of the pain he was in. After therapy had no success with her husband, Irene grew very discouraged and often asked her husband why.

Her husband never changed, and in 2018 Irene mustered up the courage to leave her husband. It was at this moment Irene felt an overwhelming release of freedom, and a great peace fell over Irene. She felt that she mattered.

From her experiences in therapy, Irene chose to receive an education in psychology. Irene believed that with her newfound degree, she could help many women open their eyes in the ways that her eyes were opened. Further, Irene opened a shelter for women who have experienced domestic violence or are experiencing domestic violence named "Oasis." "Oasis is a shelter of hope. As the name defines, the shelter is water found in a dry place: an oasis. An oasis that brings hope into our dry lives. I was inspired by my own life if I can have hope, other women can be hopeful." Through the shelter, Irene learned more about herself through the real-life stories of other women. Feelings of inspiration and jubilee fill Irene as she is amazed by the woman she interacts with every day.

In the end, Irene now cherishes peace, and she feels an overwhelming sense of peace within herself, within her boys, and within everyone in every situation around her. Irene becomes more empowered every day by the women she encounters through Oasis. "I am empowered. No man can look down on me." This is a quote from just one of the women Irene has impacted, and Irene gets encouraged by every story. If Irene could go back, all she would say to her younger self is to "never be afraid to start again." Everyone makes a wrong turn or a mistake, but you are always enough just the way you are.



This abuse went on for 13 years, and the only light that kept Irene strong was her kids. The love that Irene had for her kids was greater than any pain she ever endured, and the inner fighter inside of Irene gave her the endurance she needed to survive her marriage: "I knew I had to stand strong for my boys." Although Irene stayed strong for her boys, she was full of anger and resentment. She needed a distraction. Irene found this distraction in jewelry making, and she started making jewelry with amber beads and paper beads. This hobby brought a "cooling" to Irene's mind.

Eventually, Irene started to go to therapy with her husband. Counseling in Kenya was not looked highly upon, but Irene reached a point where she knew "she needed help." It was in therapy that Irene finally started to feel a sense of relief because she started to understand her husband's actions were not a reflection of her. Irene started



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PODCASTS

- **Shatterproof: Thriving After Domestic Abuse**, Mickie Zada
- **Many US Immigrants May Defer Health Care to Avoid Ice**, Health Podyyssey Podcast

BOOKS

- **The Lemon Tree**, by Sandy Tolan
- **The Question of Palestine**, by Edward Said
- **Stigma: An Ethnography of Mental Illness and HIV/AIDS in China**, by Jinhua Goo
- **Holding on: African American Women Surviving HIV/AIDS**, by Alyson O'Daniel
- **Dear America: Notes of an Undocumented Citizen**, by Jose Antonio Vargas

MOVIES

- **5 Broken Cameras** (2011)
- **The Lazarus Effect** (2015)
- **Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt** (1989)
- **Immigration Battle**, by Shari Robertson and Michael Camerini for PBS

ORGANIZATIONS

- **Hope Center**



SPECIAL THANKS



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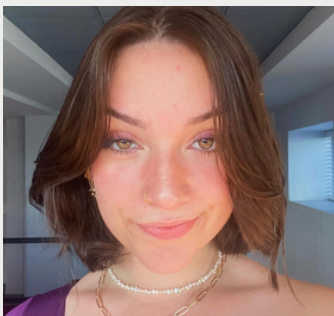
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