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An unexpected opportunity, a robust test

photography by ALAN STOREY

"I CANNOT CHANGE THE FACT that I lost my father at the age of six. I cannot change the fact that I do not know if my mother survived the war in Burundi. I cannot change the fact that the woman who raised me, my grandmother, is no longer with me. And I cannot change the fact that I am a refugee. Through it all, I have never used my life as an excuse. I have never once complained about the life I have lived. I have only used my past to make myself stronger. I can and I will achieve everything I want, including a college education."

Mireille Kibibi, on her Berry admissions essay



Mireille Kibibi was born in the turbulent nation of Burundi in Eastern Africa. She was 4 when her family fled home to the neighboring nation of Rwanda, where unspeakable genocide had just ended, to escape the violence now in Burundi. Her parents became separated on the journey, and she never saw her mother again. Her father died a few years later.

Raised mostly by her grandmother, Mireille lived for six years in Rwanda and then moved to Uganda before immigrating to the United States. Although she can speak, read and write to some extent in several languages, including Kinyarwanda, Swahili, French and English, her education was sporadic, including only three years of schooling in Rwanda and two years in Uganda

before being placed in a U.S. high school, where she earned a diploma in four years.

Mireille completed 36 credit hours during her first year at Berry, nearly all with a grade of A or B. She graduated in May with a degree in accounting and plans to earn either a master's degree in accounting or an M.B.A.

THE UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

Mireille arrived at Berry as part of a program that emerged unexpectedly. In July 2009, we embarked on what I have come to view as a robust test of Berry's core vision. We did not set out to conduct such a test, but one opportunity led to another, and we found ourselves having accepted the challenge of this test nonetheless. We would expose our cherished ideas and assumptions

to the "grave danger of refutation," as suggested by celebrated philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper. We would test the boundaries of our assumptions and their breaking points.

Berry seeks to graduate responsible adults who will improve the communities in which they live and work. Central to Berry's vision is a belief in the power of an academic residential community that combines rigorous academic preparation with firsthand experience through work, research, service, leadership and campus engagement. This vision forms the basis for our aspirations and our strategic planning efforts. This cherished idea is consistent with our enduring commitment to provide an integrated education of the head, heart and hands.



In her day, Martha Berry tested this integrated approach by making calculated investments in boys and girls who seemed trapped in a web of poverty but to whom she was attracted because of the “sparkle in their eyes.” Some were transformed by their experience at the Berry Schools; some did not make it through. The approach worked, but it was demanding and required that students develop *resolve* and *resiliency*.

Our test started with Naing Oo, a student in Atlanta whose family had fled Burma, a nation that now calls itself Myanmar. Naing learned about Berry at a college fair, and when Dr. Wayne Anderson, president of the Associated Colleges of the South (a consortium of 18 distinguished Southern colleges) was a guest at his family’s home for dinner, Naing “grilled” him about Berry, asking whether it would be a good fit.

Anderson wrote to me about Naing in September 2008, saying, “He’s a delightful and impressive young man, and I think Berry would be great for him and he would be great for Berry. ... He’s very thoughtful and articulate and has an interesting background to share. And he’s highly motivated – he wants to be the ambassador to Burma one day so he can provide help to that troubled nation.”

Anderson subsequently introduced me to Barbara Thompson, who at that time was involved with the Saturday School in Decatur, a school that provided English language support for students resettled in the Atlanta area who were refugees from war-torn nations. Thompson was a champion for

Naing, but also for several other students. She had a dream: She wanted to see students who had survived extraordinarily challenging life experiences have an opportunity to thrive and succeed in a residential academic community such as Berry.

At the same time, we were formulating, with Audrey Morgan, the Gate of Opportunity Scholarship Program as a means by which students could “work their way through college” with the prospect of graduating debt free. All of the pieces of the puzzle were on the table, ready to be assembled.

THE ROBUST TEST

Besides Naing, Thompson introduced us to five students from the Saturday School. A seventh refugee student emerged in our applicant pool. Five of the students visited campus in February 2009. I still remember how stunned they looked and how reserved they seemed as we walked to lunch. They were exceptionally polite and attentive but restrained. In retrospect, it is entirely understandable. They were overwhelmed by the campus and the rapid pace of discussion in English, which was for all of them a second, third or fourth language and one many didn’t begin to learn until middle school. They were uncomfortable because they lacked confidence.

Imagine growing up in a nation torn by conflict in which schools were not always available, even at the elementary level. Imagine fleeing the war zone and resettling in a nearby country – as an outsider and unwanted refugee – and having to learn a

new language. Imagine finally arriving in America in early middle school, perhaps separated from parents or siblings, and being placed in an urban housing project with its own set of challenging living circumstances. School is now available, but you are placed, knowing little to no English, into sixth grade or higher because of your age.

By and large, this is the story of our seven students. The amazing part of the story is that they all found a way to graduate from high school. How many of us could have graduated from high school in a foreign country in a foreign language in five years? And imagine the challenge if our schooling up to that point in our native language had been disrupted and inconsistent.

The great strength of these seven students is their resolve and resiliency. We never doubted their work ethic. We knew they were talented intellectually – how else could they have made it through high school under such trying circumstances? But this talent was not reflected in the traditional predictors of success in college. None of the students had the SAT verbal scores normally expected for admission to Berry. All of them had endured wrenching transitions, and most had suffered the ravages of war. All of them yearned for an opportunity to attend Berry College. None had the financial resources to make that possible.

Naing applied for and was accepted as one of the members of the first class of Gate of Opportunity Scholars. Fittingly, his Gate sponsors and mentors are Marti Berry Walstad and Randy Berry, members of the



Fatima Boston-Ali

Birthplace: Afghanistan

Challenge: At age 7, fled with family to Pakistan; two brothers were separated from the family on the journey and were lost for many years.

U.S. Starting Grade: End of 6

Grades Missed: Most of 6

Other Languages (in whole or part):

Farsi, Urdu, Pashto

Major: Accounting

Campus Work: Research assistant in business; administrative assistant for academic services; Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program

Future Plans: Work in the Atlanta area



Kartee Johnson

Birthplace: Liberia

Challenge: After death of his father, fled to harsh life in Guinea to escape Liberian civil war. Mother died just before family was to relocate to U.S. He and four siblings came alone.

U.S. Starting Grade: 11

Grades Missed: None

Other Languages (in whole or part):

French

Major: Biology, French

Campus Work: Research assistant in biology

Future Plans: Physician assistant (PA)



Mireille Kibibi

Birthplace: Burundi

Challenge: As family returned to native Rwanda, mother became separated and was never seen again. Father died a few years later. Moved to Uganda and then to U.S. with grandmother and other relatives.

U.S. Starting Grade: 9

Grades Missed: 4, 5, 8

Other Languages (in whole or part):

Kinyarwanda, Luganda, Swahili, French

Major: Accounting

Campus Work: Administrative assistant; research assistant; library student supervisor

Future Plans: Master's degree in accounting or business administration

Board of Trustees and the grandniece and grandnephew of Martha Berry.

The college was left with the difficult decision as to which of the other six students to admit and support. Remember, this decision came in spring 2009, when the nation was still reeling from the economic meltdown of 2008. In the end, we were simply unable to turn away any of these students because of their compelling personal histories. In choosing to accept all of them, we were fairly certain that only three or four would graduate; we assumed several might not make it to the second year. It is not that we did not want them to succeed; rather, the odds were long and the challenges daunting. And so Berry put its vision and approach to the test, embracing the “grave danger of refutation.”

THE PROGRAM

Moving quickly, Associate Provost Andy Bressette set up an innovative program for the seven students, drawing on elements of the Gate of Opportunity Program but adding two summer courses that would serve as a “bridge” for the students. Thus, they became known as the bridge students.

The students arrived on July 1, 2009, and were assigned to campus jobs. Most worked with the grounds crew that first summer, a job that included pressure washing windows

at the Virginia Webb House (president’s home) and other buildings. I still smile when I think of Lima Naseri grappling with the force of the pressurized hose.

The summer courses were Oral Communication and World Religions, both of which met general education requirements. These courses, challenging even for native English speakers, were selected deliberately to ensure that the students would have a healthy dose of reading, writing and speaking during that initial summer. The faculty in these two courses had a heart for helping students with global and trying backgrounds, which meant

helping them prepare for the rigors of the fall semester. An upper-class student, Will Watkins (10C), served as a trusted mentor for the students, someone they could turn to with questions and concerns, whether academic or relational.

THE RESULTS

All of the students struggled in their first summer and in their first year. Dr. Jeffrey Lidke’s first exam in World Religions was a harsh awakening, but the students describe with affection how he encouraged them and provided individualized assistance. The language demands were relentless in courses

Fakhria Hussain

Birthplace: Afghanistan

Challenge: Family took bus to Pakistan after father was killed; bus intercepted and one brother taken (reunited with family after 10 years). Another brother drowned on her first day at Berry. Missed nearly all early education.

U.S. Starting Grade: 7

Grades Missed: 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8

Other Languages (in whole or part): Farsi, Urdu, Spanish

Major: Early childhood development and family studies

Campus Work: Child Development Center; internship with Rome-Floyd County Commission on Children

Future Plans: Applying for an internship with the Atlanta International Rescue Committee





Lima Naseri

Birthplace: Afghanistan

Challenge: Family fled Afghanistan for Iran, Russia and then Belarus where she lived for seven years. Placed in 9th grade in the U.S. even though she didn't know the English alphabet.

U.S. Starting Grade: 9

Grades Missed: 6, 7, 8

Other Languages (in whole or part):

Russian, Persian

Major: Accounting

Campus Work: Grounds crew; financial aid; resident assistant for three years

Future Plans: Possibly an M.B.A.; work with Peace Corps in follow up to inspirational experience in Costa Rica



PAUL O'MARA

Naing Oo

Birthplace: Burma

Challenge: Came to U.S. at age 12 after his father emigrated from Burma three years earlier to establish a new life for his family.

U.S. Starting Grade: 6

Grades Missed: None

Other Languages (in whole or part):

Burmese

Major: International relations

Campus Work: Resident assistant for three years

Future Plans: Chief of Missions in Burma; starting a school like Berry in Burma



Ehsan Rabbani

Birthplace: Afghanistan

Challenge: Fled to Pakistan with family at age 1 and then moved to Iran and Azerbaijan before coming to the U.S.

U.S. Starting Grade: 7

Grades Missed: 5, 6

Other Languages (in whole or part):

Farsi, Urdu

Major: Psychology

Campus Work: Child Development Center; Alumni Center facilities assistant

Future Plans: Master's degree in government; work for an agency helping the underprivileged

that required extensive reading and writing, such as American Politics, Cellular Biology and Cultural Anthropology. Speaking up in class was stressful and something to be avoided if possible. Readings were complicated by the fact that the students often did not understand context that others took for granted – who Martin Luther King Jr. was in relation to the American civil rights movement, for example.

A doctoral student from Georgia State University, Eliana Hirano, heard about our program and decided to write her 292-page dissertation on these seven students. She reports on the different strategies that the students used in that first year (tutors, writing center) to adapt to the demands of these courses. She concluded that “the supportive atmosphere at [the] College and the tremendous motivation driving these participants were key in determining the successful use of most of the resources available.” (I am pleased to report that Dr. Hirano has now joined Berry's faculty teaching in the area of linguistics and second-language acquisition.)

With the exception of one student who dropped one course, all seven students passed all of their courses in the first year. More importantly, all seven will graduate in 2013. Five did so in May; one will graduate in August and another in December. Each

completed a regular course of study, contributed more than 4,000 hours of work, and participated fully in the life of the college. Each has been an integral part of the Berry community.

It has been heartening to see the breadth and depth of relationships the bridge students formed at Berry and the help and support they received from the college community. It has also been astounding to see the breadth and depth of experiences they have acquired while at Berry. Several have studied abroad, two served as residence hall assistants, two worked as research assistants for faculty, and one was a varsity athlete. Along the way, the college learned that it must find ways to be flexible within the structure of such a program so that students can make the most of their

individual Berry experience. The turning points for these students – their most powerful learning experiences – came in ways that were often unexpected yet consistent with and significant for their evolving stories.

Each of these remarkable students passed a robust test in graduating from college. And Berry passed a robust test as well. We have demonstrated that combining the power of the Berry community with an open Gate of Opportunity results in a special type of magic, even for students facing the most overwhelming challenges. All seven students are now naturalized citizens of the U.S. They are graduating with a commitment to improve the communities in which they live and work. They are resolute and resilient. They have succeeded, and so have we. **B**

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