

For Congolese Native, Education is Everything

Vinny Mwano Makes the Most of His Time at UNH

Thursday, March 20, 2014

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Every student who comes to UNH has a story. Few carry with them memories of gunfire. Vinny Mwano does, faintly now because it's been 14 years since the UNH junior left behind his homeland, the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But one never completely forgets a sound like that. Or what it meant.

For Mwano, it meant the death of his father, a high-ranking general who was caught in the political upheaval that deposed Mobutu Sese Seko and plunged the country into civil war. It meant two years of hiding, living in slums, witnessing the atrocities that war brings.

And it meant growing in gratitude, thankful for his young mother, Bernadette Mwano, who finally found a way to bring her four boys to America, and for the opportunities living here provides.

"I was only six when we left the Congo but I had grown up mentally. After my father was assassinated, it was a big reality check: things are going to be different now," Mwano says. "One of the biggest changes I noticed when we got here was walking to school. There wasn't any gunfire. The building next door wasn't on fire. We knew we were going to make it home alive.

"We came from a modern life. We were well-off. Education was stressed from the start. My father encouraged us. He was an educated man."

As is his mother, who went to trade school and learned to be a seamstress, and has raised her sons alone since coming to New Hampshire in 2000.

"She is the foundation of the family," Mwano says. "She has always emphasized the importance of education. I've always been into sports and dancing but education has been the focus of my life. If I want to be successful, I have to be educated."

He quotes Nelson Mandela: "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." He says he wants to be a part of that change, and it seems likely that he will. There is an alertness to him, an attentiveness and focus that makes him seem older than his 20 years.

"My main goal is to take full advantage of the resources presented to me within the university, in pursuit of one day working for a government foreign agency," Mwano says. A political science major, he has set his sights on trying to secure an internship at the Washington Center in Washington, D.C.

At UNH he has a work-study job with New and Emerging Media where he is involved in the ongoing development of UNH's mobile app suite and a variety of web projects, including the recent launch of the redesigned [UNH homepage](#). He also has a passion for video and photography that has led to shooting behind-the-scene footage for a UNH commercial, directing and editing a music video, and working as production assistant for Anashe Media Group in Boston. And, he teaches dance and conducts workshops with the group "MovementFromAbove."

“I love the art of movement. It shapes my life in so many ways,” Mwano says. “My whole family loves to dance. Other families play Scrabble or have movie nights; mine moves back the furniture and dances.”

A few years ago, that shared love landed the Mwano brothers a guest spot on “Dancing with the Stars” after a family friend sent the producers a video of them dancing, and told their life story. Their mother thought they were simply going as guests of the show; she had no idea her sons were going to perform for her.

Mwano was a senior in high school at the time. “I didn’t really care about the dancing. I want to make sure they got the story right; that they presented us and my mother as how we are,” he says.

The family spent three days in Los Angeles, staying in a hotel near the “Hollywood” sign. They went to Disneyland. “The whole trip was pretty surreal,” Mwano says. “I had a moment where I thought back to where I came from, and it was just surreal.”

The Mwanos first came to America in January. It was snowing when they got off the plane in New York and Mwano remembers thinking, “What is this world?” And then, he says, the sun came out.

“My mother had always said we are here because God has a plan for us. I might not know exactly what that is yet but I’m going to take full advantage of it,” Mwano says. “I know that I am meant to be here, and I love that feeling.”

You can watch a video above of the Mwano and his family on Dancing with the Stars.

Originally published by:

UNH Today

- WRITTEN BY:
[Staff writer](#) | Communications and Public Affairs

INCLUSION



University of New Hampshire

UNH Today is produced for the UNH community and for friends of UNH.

The stories are written by the staff of [UNH Communications and Public Affairs](#).

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