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UNH Media Relations

June 8, 2004

DURHAM, N.H. – Seven children from the Congo separated from their parents for two years because of civil war have been awarded Humanitarian Parole thanks in large part to a year-long effort by an anthropology professor at the University of New Hampshire and her students, who were determined to reunite the family in Manchester.

“Thanks to your pertinent actions and your compassion toward the most deprived, today we have the joy and courage to continue the perpetual battle for life because, indeed, our dream has become a reality. That is, the reunification with our children,” Hubert Simwerayi said at a reception Monday, June 7, at UNH.

In the fall of 2002, human rights worker Simwerayi, a bank employee, and his wife Helene, a teacher, were forced to flee the Democratic Republic of the Congo without their children after militia seized their city of Goma. While the parents waited several weeks to get the money for their children’s flight out of the Congo, they learned that the children’s visas had expired. A separation that the Simwerayi’s thought would last only weeks has turned into years.

Soon after they arrived in Manchester the Simwerayis were in church praying for someone to help when they met Nina Glick-Schiller, an anthropology professor at UNH. Glick-Schiller told her anthropology classes about the Simwerayis’ situation, which resulted in the forming of the UNH Committee for Rights and Justice (CORAJ) in spring 2003.

Glick-Schiller and Kelli Swazey, a senior at UNH and head of CORAJ, immediately began working to complete an application for Humanitarian Parole, which would give the Simwerayi children legal immigrant status in the United States.

“We were told from the beginning that Humanitarian Parole is very rarely granted,” Swazey said. “There has to be extenuating circumstances in order to make an exception to the regular visa process. We were very lucky. There has been a huge community effort, and the support from Marti Jones in Rep. Jeb Bradley’s office has been crucial to this process.”

In addition, Glick-Schiller and the 20 students on the committee began working with local charity Danny’s Team and concerned citizens to gather donations for travel expenses and

signatures for a petition requesting the children's visa applications be moved to the top of the application list.

"The numbers show that people see injustice in the world and want to make a difference, Glick-Schiller said. It's great to see New Hampshire residents reaching out to an African family and saying, 'We want you here with us,'"

Dudley Dudley, a Durham community activist who has helped coordinate the humanitarian effort, said the response from the New Hampshire community has been "phenomenal." Local residents are covering the costs of the children's airplane fares, interviews at the U.S. embassy and passports. The family has received pro bono legal help from a Manchester law firm, assistance finding a larger apartment, a discounted vehicle from a Manchester auto dealership, and numerous donations of household items.

More than 700 community members signed the petition, which was submitted to First District Congressman Jeb Bradley in April 2004. The committee also has received support from Sen. Judd Gregg and Sen. John Sununu to expedite the visa application process.

"From the first time that we sent out the petitions, we have had an ongoing interest in the project. People have been very generous and very eager to hear what's happening," Dudley said. "It's quite amazing to see how hard people are working to get the children here."

As a result of these efforts, the children's applications were moved to the top of the application list and in the last few weeks, they were granted Humanitarian Parole.

"We were incredibly pleased to have been able to assist in the granting of Humanitarian Parole for Hubert and Helene's children, and look forward to continuing to work with CORAJ and members of the local community to make sure that this family reunion happens as soon as possible," Bradley said.

CORAJ, Congressman Bradley's office and community activists are working to bring the children to the United States from Uganda, where they recently were moved after a cousin with whom they were staying in the Congo was murdered. Danny's Team paid the bus fare for the children to escape to Kampala, Uganda, and for an apartment there until they can immigrate to the United States.

"We're just excited to be at the stage where we're planning to bring them home. It's been a long process," Swazey said.

Those wishing to contribute to the Simwerayi family should contact Swazey via e-mail at kswazey@cisunix.unh.edu. CORAJ also is seeking students, faculty and community members who would like to help work on immigrant issues in New Hampshire.