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Congoese Children to Reunite with Parents Sept. 10 Thanks to UNH Students, Congressional and Community Effort

Parents Living in Manchester Were Forced to Flee Because of Civil War

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September 3, 2004

DURHAM, N.H. – Children from the Congo separated from their parents for more than two years because of civil war will be reunited with their parents Sept. 10 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 bring the family back together.

Hubert and Helene Simwerayi of Manchester will be reunited with their children Friday, Sept. 10. The Simwerayi's five biological children will arrive in the United States on a 9:40 p.m. British Airways flight into Boston's Logan Airport. Their two adoptive children still are going through the immigration paperwork process and will remain on the African continent until immigration officials make a final decision on their relationship to the family.

The effort to reunite the Simwerayi family was started by Nina Glick-Schiller, professor of anthropology, and her students in October 2003.

"The depth of caring of our students and the important role public service plays in their lives are amazing" UNH President Ann Weaver Hart said. "They were moved by the injustice that they witnessed and wanted to make a difference for these new residents of the Granite State. They are role models not only for their peers but for people everywhere, and I am thrilled that their efforts, as well as those of the larger community, will result in the reuniting of this African family that has been through so much,".

In addition to the UNH student-led and communitywide effort, First District Congressman Jeb Bradley and his Manchester office staff have been instrumental in working with immigration officials in the United States and two African nations to ensure the children were reunited with their parents.

"I am incredibly pleased to see that Helene and Hubert finally will be reunited with their children," First District Congressman Jeb Bradley said. "I congratulate all of the people at UNH, especially Professor Nina Glick-Schiller and her students who took the initiative to reunite this family, as well as the Durham community effort organized by Dudley Dudley. They all have played key roles in helping bring this family back together. I wish the entire Simwerayi family the best and welcome the children to the Granite State."

In the fall of 2002, human rights worker Hubert 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 Glick-Schiller. She told her anthropology classes about the Simwerayis' situation, which resulted in the forming of the UNH Committee for Rights and Justice (CORAJ) in October 2003.

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

"From the beginning we were told 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, and we were very fortunate that an exception was made in this case."

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.

According to Dudley, a Durham community activist who has coordinated the humanitarian effort, 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 Congressman Bradley in April 2004. With the congressman's support, the children's applications were moved to the top of the application list. They were granted Humanitarian Parole in May 2004, and in late August 2004, visas for the five biological children were granted. CORAJ, Congressman Bradley's office and community activists still are working to bring the couple's two adoptive children to the United States.