

Through the lens of a Congolese refugee: How a young photographer captures Chicago

The clicks of classical piano keys softly ring from a loudspeaker over echoes from heavy boots dragging across colorful tiles at Green Element Resale in Edgewater, where one second-hand store employee, Patrick Reponse, 25, said thumping sounds often remind him of the deafening sounds of dropping bombs and gunshots.

They are reminders of the night Reponse's life changed at 5 years old.

"He's one of the most sensible guys I've ever worked with considering all he's been through," said Brian Haag, owner of Green Element Resale.

20 years later, years of trauma have sparked Reponse's ultimate passion: photography.

"It's something I rely on every day to keep me going," Reponse said.

Reponse lived at a refugee camp in Burundi with his mother, his then-9-year-old brother, Espoire Habimana, and his father, Fidèle Rumuriza, after fleeing his home country, the Democratic Republic of Congo, in 2004.

"That is when I was forced to grow up," Reponse said.

Screaming machine guns woke Reponse one night while in one of the 19 cloth tents where families of up to six refugees settled. One of the bullets fatally struck his mother, and Reponse sprinted naked away from the gunfire into a dark forest, hiding there until sunrise.

"I did not think I would see any of them ever again," he said.

He was reunited at the camp, now covered in gray ash and smells of burning bodies, with his father and brother that morning.

The family of three traveled a few hundred miles away to live with a family friend in Rwanda where RefugeeOne, an organization that helps asylum-seekers and refugees, sponsored their flight to the U.S. in 2007.

The Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and rebellion militant groups have fought each other for control of the land since the Rwandan genocide of 1994. But, the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees](#) reported an uptick in civilian deaths in 2022.

Now, the U.S. Department of State found that more Congolese refugees have settled in the U.S. than any other refugee group as of 2024.

Reponse said he felt that he would “get another chance at life” in the U.S. as he looked out the window of the plane as it descended at Chicago O’Hare International Airport. He quickly settled in Rogers Park with his father and brother.

As he said he started to feel more comfortable in the neighborhood, Reponse joined soccer and track at Alcott College Prep in 2014.

“I just wanted to learn and be part of the community,” he said.

It was there that a photography instructor from OneGoal, a student mentorship program, spoke to his class about photojournalism. Reponse said he was so passionate that the instructor lent him a personal camera for the weekend.

It was the first time he had touched a camera.

Reponse used his first paycheck working as a busboy at a local restaurant to buy his first MacBook Air laptop and a black Canon EOS 70D handheld camera.

“That was the first time I realized I have an opportunity to make something that I would’ve never had in Congo,” he said.

Reponse said he remembered walking with the momentum of a sea of masked protestors up West Sunnyside Avenue in Uptown during Black Lives Matter demonstrations in 2020.

He said his favorite picture from that day is a picture of a young white woman and young a Black man marching while holding hands with tears rolling down their faces.

“I’ve seen a lot of hatred in my country, but when I capture people fighting for each other instead of against each other, I feel fulfilled,” Reponse said.

Response said he struggled to find photojournalism jobs after graduating college in 2023, so he uses his full time job at Green Element Resale to help others.

Loyola University Chicago student Hussain Mohammad, 22, has worked with Reponse for two years at the store.

Mohammad said Reponse has taught customers the story behind items they are looking at in the store, some of which are decades old.

“He’s also always somehow behind me waiting to help with what I’m doing. He’s so hardworking,” Mohammad said.

“As long as I help people, I am okay,” Reponse said as he handed a worn cardboard box full of baby clothes to Mohammad.

Though very little remains of the home he left in Congo over a decade ago, Reponse said recycling belongings that community members drop off at the store preserves the memories that remain within each item.

During his time off from work, Reponse said he hopes to publish his pictures in a photography gallery.

“In 20 years, I will look back on the pictures I took with a different understanding just like our customers buy items with a new understanding than their previous owners,” he said.

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Patrick Reponse, 25, stands in front of the entrance of Green Element Resale at 6241 N. Broadway St. in Edgewater on Nov. 25, 2024.
(Medill Reports/Anneliese Cornejo Garcia)