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A LIBERATING FORCE

JESUIT WORLDWIDE LEARNING, REGIS DIPLOMAS AND THE LIFE-GIVING POWER OF EDUCATION IN AFRICAN REFUGEE CAMPS

In the far northern deserts of Kenya, there are two ways into the Kakuma Refugee Camp.

One is a 90-minute United Nations humanitarian flight aboard a large commercial plane.

Or, like on this boiling, mid-July day, it's an aging van with 10 passengers packed like sardines, making the 74-mile trip in three and a half hours. On a sometimes paved, sometimes dirt, always meandering road, the van speeds up, slows down, bounces up and down, then swerves off the highway and into the distant desert on its way to the 180,000-person refugee camp.

Every so often, a car with armed guards slingshots past the van. This is bandit territory, and the trip requires a fortified presence.

The route to Kakuma is as unnerving as it is uncomfortable. But for the passengers inside the van, this trip isn't just important, it's necessary.

Near the back, Regis University President John P. Fitzgibbons, S.J., sits with his trademark black brimmed hat swaying back and forth like a boat in white-cap weather.

Fitzgibbons is making his second trip to Kakuma — and fifth overall — for a Jesuit Worldwide Learning (JWL) graduation. JWL provides refugees around the world with the opportunity to earn a Regis University diploma.

Amidst the rattling, Fitzgibbons turns back to thank a lone soul in the last seat, stuck over the wheel well and bouncing around like a lost coin in the laundry.

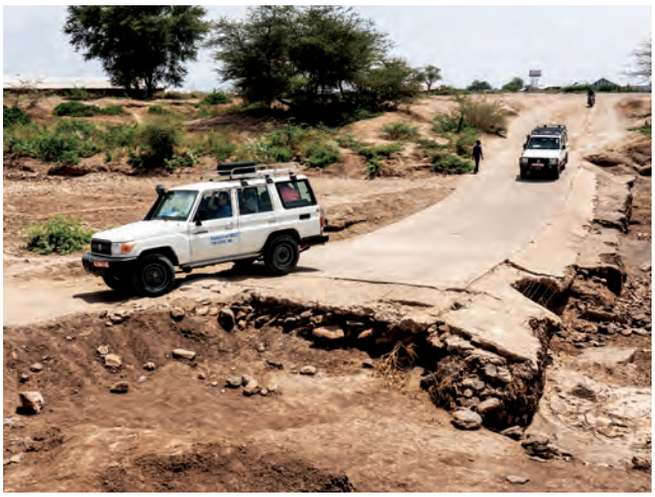
"Soon you'll get it," Fitzgibbons said. "This trip is one of the most important things we do. JWL is at the core of what Regis and the Jesuits are all about."

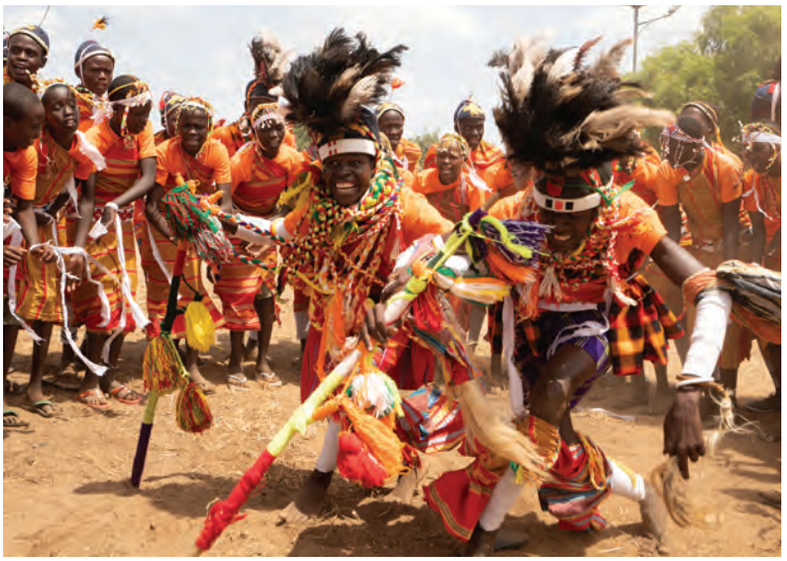
ORDINARY WORK IN EXTRAORDINARY PLACES

In 2006, Mary McFarland sat through innumerable technical presentations at an online learning conference in Denver. McFarland, then the dean of Gonzaga University's School of Professional Studies, already understood the power of online learning. It had changed her university's homogenous Spokane campus by introducing students from across the country into its classrooms.

Midway through the conference, McFarland's life changed.

At one presentation, Rev. Michael Smith, S.J., explained how Australian Catholic University was using online technologies to help refugees on the Thailand-Burma border. The displaced people there, Smith said, were incredibly intelligent but literally watching their lives slip by.

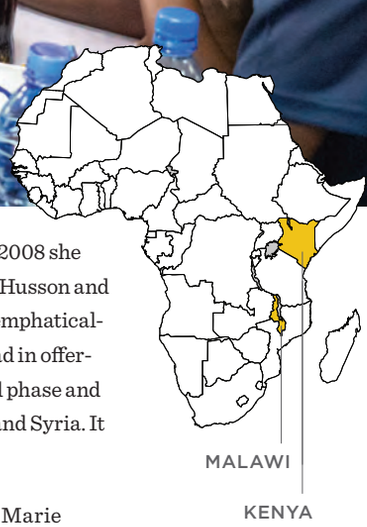




TOP LEFT: GRADUATES IN THE DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP CELEBRATE AFTER THEIR GRADUATION.

TOP RIGHT: A ROAD INSIDE THE KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP WAS WASHED OUT BY FLOODS.

BOTTOM RIGHT: TRADITIONAL TURKANA DANCERS PERFORM DURING THE KAKUMA GRADUATION CEREMONY.



"That made the hair stand up on the back of my neck," McFarland said.

As soon as Smith finished his presentation, McFarland had to know how she could help.

One year later, McFarland found herself at the refugee camp in Thailand, working with 21 students from 13 ethnic groups. She saw what education could do at this margin, and it started to change the way McFarland thought about higher education. It provided much more than subject knowledge; it was a way to understand others and overcome cultural differences. Here, thousands of miles from home, McFarland saw that education could bridge worldly differences.

"The hunger for education was palpable," McFarland said. "Education is a tremendous gift. It changes our thinking. It changes us so we can transform our lives and our community. I think this was the first time that I was so aware of it."

McFarland started looking for partners. By 2008 she found Regis University Academic Dean Bill Husson and then-President Michael Sheeran, S.J., who emphatically declared the University would take the lead in offering a diploma. By 2010, JWL entered its trial phase and opened its first locations in Kenya, Malawi and Syria. It began with 52 students and three faculty.

"I had no idea what it would become," said Marie Friedemann, who began as the first Regis liaison for JWL and continues as the Regis director of JWL today. "I should have known because of the vast number of refugees and the vast need for education. It was upsetting how refugees were being treated, and continue to be treated. We knew we needed to address this some way."

JWL has expanded to 24 sites worldwide — 11 of which offer the diploma — and has helped more than 5,000 refugees attend classes. The curriculum and program was revamped in 2014 to better fit the cultural contexts in which the students learn.

Today more than 220 students have earned a Regis diploma, which requires 30 credits of liberal arts studies and 15 more in a business, education or social work concentration. It generally takes students about three years to finish the program.

"It's not extraordinary. It's ordinary. It's what should happen," said Smith, who has served on JWL's board of directors. "Refugees should have the opportunity to study and make something of themselves. It's nothing that you wouldn't want for yourself."

TOP LEFT: REGIS PRESIDENT JOHN P. FITZGIBBONS, S.J., TALKS WITH REFUGEES INSIDE THE KAKUMA REFUGEE CAMP.

TOP RIGHT: KAKUMA VALEDICTORIAN GRACE MUVUNYI POSES FOR PICTURES FOLLOWING THE JESUIT WORLDWIDE LEARNING GRADUATION.

INNOVATION AND INSPIRATION

The Kakuma Refugee Camp is sprawling.

Opened in 1992 with the arrival of the young Sudanese refugees escaping civil war, the camp has grown exponentially. For decades people escaping famine, war and genocide have found refuge here, raising the population to around 180,000. With each influx the camp has added new living quarters — Kakuma 1, 2, 3 and 4 — and there is talk of adding a fifth.

Driving inside the camp, dirt roads are lined by sheet metal homes, makeshift businesses and refugees sitting around nearly every corner. Jarring sounds fill the spaces: Motor bike engines rev, open markets buzz with chatter and a drum beats. Nearby, children yell and scream during a pickup soccer game. The smells are overpowering as well. Something in the camp is always burning.

Outside of the arrival of a United Nations World Food Program truck, there isn't a lot of movement. It's hot, humid and dusty. The day's mission always includes finding shade and waiting for something to happen.

This day, though, there is excitement as adults and children follow the white Toyota Land Cruisers that have entered camp and then the JWL compound. People line up against the fences and barbed wire that surround most of the community organizations and schools — a wary reminder that among the refugee population, cultural differences can boil over despite a common hardship.

Inside the compound, it's the day before graduation at the Arrupe Learning Center where JWL students come to study and take classes. Thirty-three graduates — about a third of which are women — file into the main room and sit at nine tables.

Conversations start to reverberate off blue stucco walls. The 100-degree air is heavy and dust lingers. But it's here, a place where seemingly nobody wants to be, that innovation and inspiration reverberate from each table.

It's the best exhibit of the human spirit.

"Here we have opportunities," said Grace Muvunyi, the class valedictorian. "This is a place where you have a chance. It's a hidden treasure."

Each JWL graduate follows Muvunyi, detailing what the program has meant to them. There is Innocent Havyarimana, who owns a business making soap and shampoo that employs 18 fellow refugees. JWL didn't help him get a job, but the business classes helped him create opportunities for his community.

Other graduates took the social work classes and started a transitionary organization for refugees coming into the camp. It helps refugees understand cultural differences, what to expect inside the camp and how to transition from a seemingly normal life into one set inside the camp.

"If you're not ready, you can get to the point where you can lose your mind and become crazy," said Joelle Hangi, a JWL graduate and Congolese refugee. "You need someone to help guide you and to understand in a refugee camp there is only one way — forward."

Graduate Pascal Zigashane, of the Democratic Republic of Congo, used his diploma to start a community organization to teach social entrepreneurship. He also works with 30 kids in a life-skills program. Zigashane has nearly 20 employees and teaches another 24 students how to code.

Kakuma has a good many idle hands but through JWL's efforts, there is hope.

"Really," said Creighton University President Daniel Hendrickson, S.J., who participated in the graduation ceremony. "JWL represents the best of Jesuit higher education in the world."

MORE IS NEEDED

Days prior to the trip to Kakuma, Fitzgibbons was in Bilbao, Spain, near the birthplace of St. Ignatius Loyola, where leaders of the world's Jesuit universities engaged on critical social justice issues.

For Fitzgibbons, Bilbao was a recruitment trip.

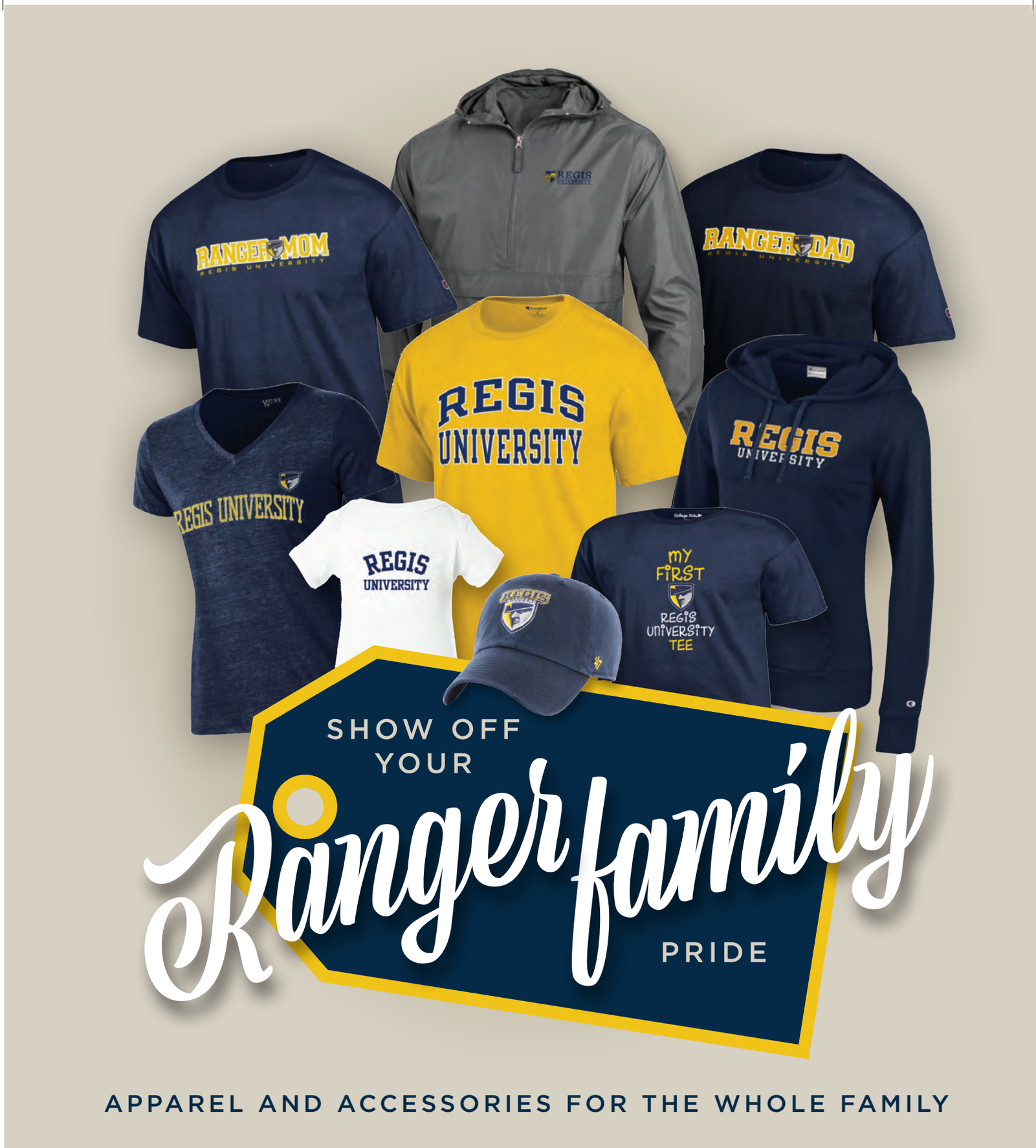
Regis has piloted the liberal arts diploma since JWL's inception and has professors who teach in the program. In coordination with Creighton, Regis will offer an associate's degree in Healthy Lifestyle Management in the fall of 2019 for the first time. Each school will offer at least 20 scholarships to help JWL graduates continue studying in the camp and complete an associate's degree.

Of the 28 Jesuit universities and colleges in the United States, only a handful participate in the JWL program. With more than 65 million people forcibly displaced worldwide, the need for education at the margins has never been greater.

And the thirst for education has never been stronger. For the latest cohort in Kakuma, 308 refugees applied for 66 positions. In the Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi, there were more than 400 applicants, but only enough resources to educate 59 students. This year JWL enrolled its largest cohort ever, as 192 students at 11 sites began the program. Half of those are women.

TOP LEFT: INNOCENT HAVYARIMANA HELPED START A SOAP AND SHAMPOO BUSINESS WITH THE HELP OF JWL.

BOTTOM LEFT: REFUGEES IN MALAWI PUMP WATER FROM A WELL IN THE DZALEKA REFUGEE CAMP.



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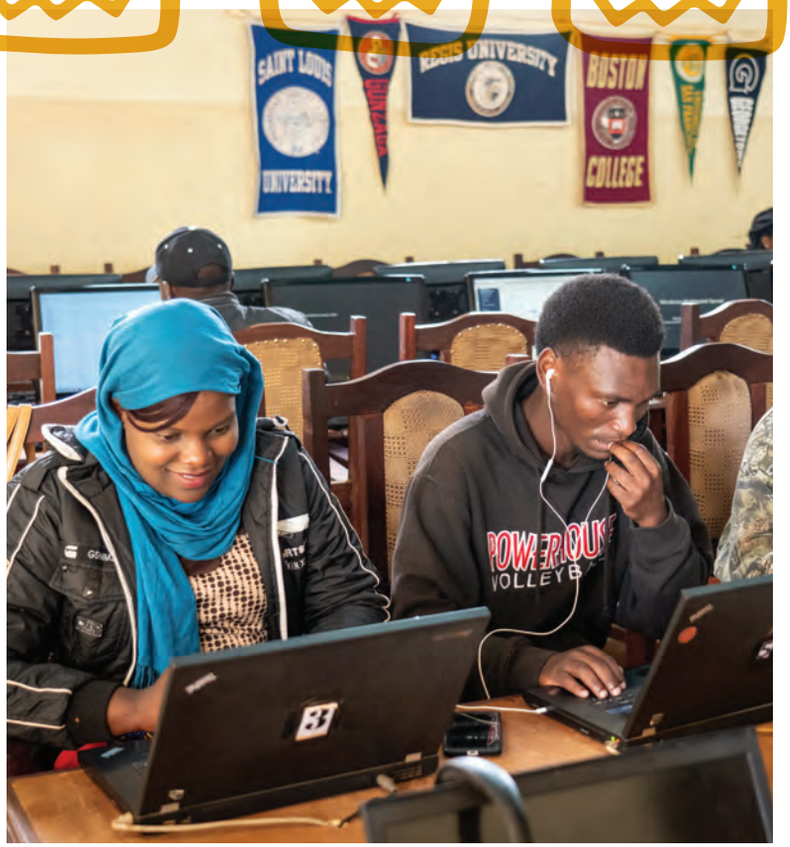


"From a president's point of view, what makes this transformation so important is not only seeing a refugee lifted out of a hopeless situation and into a life filled with hope and possibility," Fitzgibbons told those assembled in Bilbao, "but it is also important that this is a reciprocal experience impacting not just those who are our students, but everyone involved in this education."

HOPE IS HERE

Elie Balyahamwabo and Jacques Baeni arrived in the Dzaleka Refugee Camp from the Democratic Republic of Congo years ago.

Balyahamwabo worked for an organization that developed communities with women and children. He was attacked twice by a militia because of his work but stayed because the work was so important. When his brother was killed by the militia, however, he was forced to flee.

Baeni was a human rights activist studying law when violence forced him to leave.

Inside the camp, each noticed similar obstacles limiting refugees' abilities to thrive.

They observed refugees who were critical thinkers wanting to learn and to improve their community, and they met others who were hopeless and on the verge of giving up.

"They are dipping themselves back into poverty," Balyahamwabo said about the latter group.

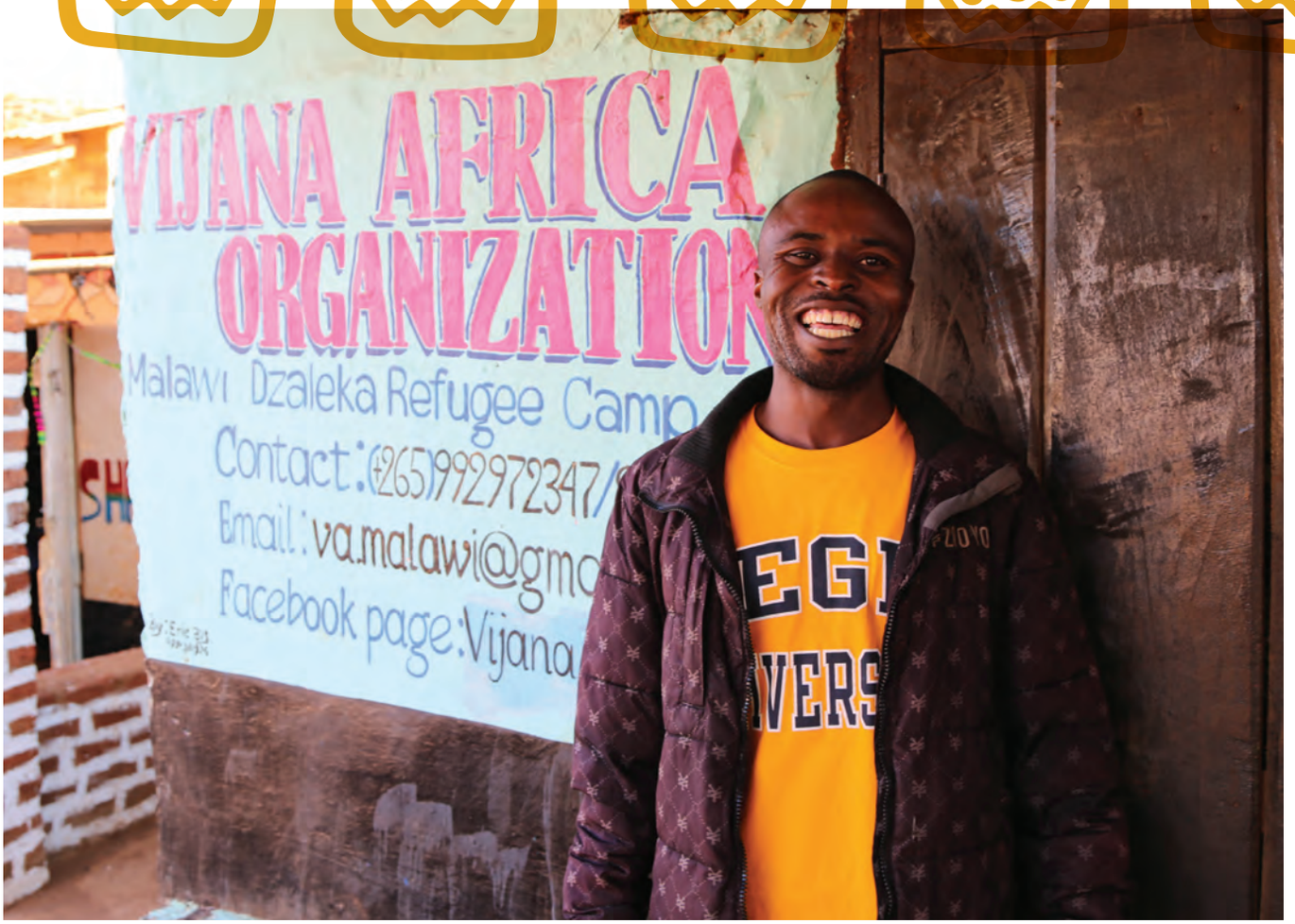
The two knew they needed to help the refugees change their mentality. After taking a peace-building course through JWL, they created Vijana Africa, or "Youth of Africa."

The organization provides youth with leadership and conflict-resolution training and teaches them how to share the lessons with members of their camp communities. Recently, the two JWL graduates expanded Vijana Africa to help single and disabled women in the camp be more self-reliant. In the new program, women receive a couple of rabbits to breed; later, they may trade the offspring for food or other camp goods.

TOP LEFT: REFUGEES PILE INTO A VAN AFTER THE JWL GRADUATION IN MALAWI.

MIDDLE LEFT: REFUGEES IN A JWL COMPUTER LAB IN MALAWI.

TOP RIGHT: ELIE BALYAHAMWABO STANDS OUTSIDE VIJANA AFRICA, A COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATION THAT HELPS REFUGEES INSIDE THE DZALEKA CAMP.



"This work is so important," said Akonkwa Machara, a beneficiary who fled the Congo after she was attacked and her husband and two children were murdered. "I started with one rabbit and today I have close to 12. I've taught other women on how they can raise these rabbits."

In the end, that's the idea of JWL.

Most JWL graduates remain in the camps many years after graduation. Earning a diploma doesn't necessarily assist a refugee to relocate elsewhere — of the 20 million refugees the UN Refugee Agency worked with in 2017, fewer than half a percent were relocated — and it doesn't guarantee further education.

JWL's hope is that graduates will share what they've learned with others in their respective camp to improve lives there. It provides the groundwork for graduates to become contemplatives in action by creating organizations like Vijana Africa that make a difference.

It provides hope in a place of so much hopelessness. It engages refugees and provides a sense of purpose in a place where it often feels as if time has stopped still. It bestows an identity of academic accomplishment and esteem on people who are without a country and feel ignored by the world.

"It's life giving," Balyahamwabo said. "People think refugees don't have value or can't do anything. That's not the case. JWL helps remind people that refugees are people who are important and who matter."