

Woman's success in U.S. benefits school in Uganda



Joanita Senoga fled her native Uganda and arrived in Virginia with \$50 and no place to stay.

By [Bill Lohmann](#) | TIMES-DISPATCH COLUMNIST

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Imagine yourself friendless and penniless in a strange country, sleeping in a tool shed or hanging out at a hospital emergency room just to have a roof over your head.

You stop strangers on the street and ask if you might do their laundry or rake their leaves, just to put a few dollars in your pocket.

Such circumstances would be enough to make some of us curl up and hide from the world.

Joanita B. [Senoga](#) simply stiffened her resolve and went forward.

This was her life after she arrived in Richmond from [Uganda](#) in 1996, having left two young daughters with her mother to flee political unrest and the prospect of a forced marriage.

Difficult as things were, [Senoga](#) came to [America](#) for opportunity, and that's what she got.

"I remember saying to myself, 'It's just a bump in the road. Just keep going. Tomorrow will be a better day,'" [Senoga](#) recalled when we met last week. "But some days I look back and say, 'I really don't know how I did it, but somehow I did.'"

It's not so much of a mystery. [Senoga](#) had the good fortune of meeting a lot of generous, good-hearted people who encouraged her and helped her along the way. But it really comes down to this: She is blessed with a warm heart and a relentless spirit.

And in the back of her mind always was this:

"I remembered the school. I love those people. I can't give up."

What none of her early American friends knew was that [Senoga](#) was [a teacher](#) in her homeland. Senoga's parents had provided her an education, and she later started her own school to educate impoverished children who couldn't afford to attend what passes for public schools in [Uganda](#).

By coming to [America](#), she hoped to finance the school that she'd started with a handful of children gathered on the front porch of her parents' home. Word spread, the need being great. More children came, and the Circle of [Peace School](#) in Makindye grew into larger if not plusher accommodations: an old house with a series of temporary structures with dirt floors.

The [school](#) has moved again and now enrolls more than 200 students, including several dozen orphans who live there. [A fundraiser](#) is scheduled for Saturday at Innsbrook. Proceeds will help pay the last installment on the purchase of land for the [school](#). New buildings are on the horizon.

But that doesn't begin to tell you how [Senoga](#), 39, even got to this place.

Soon after arriving in the [U.S.](#), she came to [Virginia](#) to attend a Christian conference. On the bus ride here, her belongings were stolen. All she had left was [\\$50](#) and her passport.

After the conference, she earned room and board as [a private nurse](#) but, when that ended, she found herself on the street. St. Andrew's [Episcopal Church](#) in [Oregon Hill](#) gave her a job as [a custodian](#), cleaning the [church](#) and its adjoining school. She made enough money to get a place of her own and to bring her girls over after a five-year separation.

"The amazing part is you never really ever saw her down," said [Betty Allen](#), who befriended [Senoga](#) at St. Andrew's. "She was always upbeat and positive . . . that things were going to work out.

"She's resourceful. When one door closes, she kicks another one open."

[Senoga](#) cleaned houses on the side and, at one job, she met [Richard Leatherman](#), who taught at the [University of Richmond's School of Continuing Studies](#). In conversation, she mentioned she had been [a teacher](#). [Leatherman](#) encouraged her to return to school at UR.

For four years, she attended class sandwiched between cleaning houses and working at [UR's Boatwright Memorial Library](#). She graduated in 2006. She started work on a master's degree but has paused to work two jobs -- [night supervisor](#) at the [library and weekend receptionist](#) at the Roslyn Conference and [Retreat Center](#) -- so she can raise more money for Circle of [Peace School](#)

and support her girls, Josie, a junior at UR, and Jemi, a student at [St. Catherine's School](#). Both girls are on scholarship.

Having built a life here, it would be easy and understandable if she moved on and devoted less attention to Circle of Peace.

Not a chance, she said.

"I can't turn my back on those people," she said. "They are my people. I have to look back and see where I came from.

"They deserve a better life. Just imagine if you didn't know how to read or write. Do you think you would know how to do anything?"

Contact [Bill Lohmann](#) at wlohmann@timesdispatch.com or (804) 649-6639. Follow [him](#) at <http://twitter.com/wlohmann>