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NEWS LOCAL

REFUGEE

Henri Boyi says moving to Canada transformed him



By Emanuela Campanella, The London Free Press
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Henri Boyi of London some of the art objects he has from Rwanda. He has been named one of Canada's top 25 immigrants. (MORRIS LAMONT, The London Free Press)

Henri Boyi vividly remembers growing up on a farm, herding cattle, in a commune in Burundi, in Africa.

His village gave him a sense of community that stuck, as he built a new life for he and his family in the unfamiliarity of London.

The first Burundians in London, Boyi and his family arrived in Canada as refugees a year after his homeland was wracked by genocide, the 1993 mass killings of Tutsis by the majority Hutus. The same tensions fuelled ethnic slaughter in neighbouring Rwanda.

Today, more than 20 years later, Boyi is a Western University professor so recognized for humanitarian work at home and abroad,

notably in Rwanda, that he was recently named one of the Royal Bank of Canada's Top 25 Canadian immigrants for his community contributions.

"Wherever I am, I cherish the idea of belonging to a community and doing what I can do for the community," Boyi said.

Boyi said moving to Canada transformed him.

"We got the warmest welcome we could think of. When I got here in a totally new community where I didn't know anyone, it was very heart-warming to see people cared."

As a professor in Western's French studies department since 1995, Boyi has inspired many.

He designed a course that focuses on understanding Rwandan culture and history surrounding the early 1990s genocide in the east African country.

Students get a chance to travel with Boyi to Rwanda for five weeks, to learn about "a shared humanity."

"He loves his students and what he does. One of things that really inspired me was his passion. He has so much faith and so much to give," Boyi's student Clarisse Fata said, a Western health science major.

"He really liked to push people and he sees something special in everyone," she said.

As part of the course, students together with Boyi volunteer at orphanages, nurseries and schools.

In the past, they've also worked with street children who lost their parents to the Rwandan genocide.

"When they feel that they can sit down with other people and play with other kids again and see even a stranger give them a hug, to me that is the best thing we can do for a human being in need," Boyi said.

Boyi, a father of two boys and one girl, has also worked to help settle Burundian refugees in London.

Since Boyi arrived in the city two decades ago, the local Burundian community has flourished. He's been involved with the Cross Cultural Learner Centre and Burundian Canadian Cultural Association of London.

A teacher at the University of Burundi before coming to Canada, Boyi also studied in the United States, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Cornell University.

Boyi planned to return to Burundi after his American studies but the genocide changed that and they arrived instead in Canada as refugees.

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