

Building Home in London

By Shamsar Sinha

Born in Kinshasa, Congo, Joseph migrated to London as a refugee at the age of eight. Being so young, he does not remember much about the migration process. Joseph is now 18 years old and has UK citizen status. We first met in a 'greasy spoon' about ten minutes from Angel tube station. A 'greasy spoon' is a café/restaurant known for serving fried and grilled food at relatively cheap prices. We order chips and the Turkish speaking staff are looking ready to close up for the night. As we talk I learn that upon arriving in the UK, Joseph lived with his aunt and uncle in a hostel in Finsbury Park. He quickly made friends at school and was popular. The café closes and we are asked to leave. I suggest we take a walk around the local streets and continue our conversation. Joseph says he is very well known in the area. Almost on cue we turn the corner of a street near his youth club, and a white boy comes up to him and engages him in friendly conversation. He is not the last person to talk to him while we are walking together. It is a dark and cold night and we walk round the local high rise council estate blocks. Often seen as places of danger, while walking with him, his neighbourhood seems friendly.

Whilst making friends seemed easy and school was good, Joseph says life at home was hard. Consequently he used to spend a lot of time on the streets. He talks about his football team and two youth workers he met at the youth club who supported him with advice and guidance. He marvels at how far he has come. Joseph loves football. Life was hard for him, but he found enjoyment and joy playing it. In fact, he says it can teach you things, which he found valuable amidst the troubles he was dealing with. Joseph talks about his ambitions. He is a talented footballer who has had trials with clubs including Chelsea and the club he supports, Arsenal. He was doing well over the period of his trials at Arsenal, but eventually his home life was so unsettling that he could not do his football skills justice. If he does not become a football player he may coach football. He aims to open a football academy in Congo one day, although he is sure that he wants to make his life here.

At our first meeting I learn that he has had a troubled family life and spent a lot of time on the streets. I have a feeling that there are potentially sensitive issues he might wish to talk about. However, I do not know exactly what to ask about or how. So about a month later I meet him at a coffee shop. I give him a camera and converse with him about Liverpool's 2005 Champions League win and Zinedine Zidane's football skills. I ask him if he would like to take ten photos of places or things that are important to him for

us to talk about when we next meet. I am hoping that the process of taking photos will involve him making observations about his own life. Further, that taking the photos will mean he plays a role in shaping what we talk about.

About three weeks later, I meet Joseph together with Professor Les Back (also from the London-based EUMARGINS research team). Joseph has taken 36 photos, and it seems like he has had fun with the camera. He talks us through his photos. I quickly note how topics and places are mentioned that I would never have thought to explore.

Joseph did not feel welcome at his auntie and uncle's house. He used to spend much of his time hanging out and having fun on the streets. Joseph takes pleasure in recalling a game he used to play. We enjoy the story too. Joseph says:

When I was outside, when I was not at home, I was outside, like this is the place basically, me and my friend came and basically we hide like when its night time, we hide here, and basically, we jus pick up um, there's a apple tree up there, we pick um, its bad but it was fun, we pick out apples and we start throwing at the cars when it goes past. So that yeah, basically that's how I enjoyed myself, in a way, having fun.

Here is the park where he and his friend used to play when they were around twelve years old. The photo shows both the apple tree and the fence he used to hide behind while throwing the fruit.



A big treat for Joseph was eating chicken and chips. To get the money for the meal he used to collect Morrisons (a UK supermarket chain) shopping trolleys. He would walk down the street, dock one trolley into another, collect the money and spend it on chicken and chips at the 'Chicken Spot'. Laughing and smiling, he says he made a lot of money.



The 'Chicken Spot'

Joseph was 11 or 12 years old when he started staying over at friends' houses because he did not feel comfortable at home. Despite this disruption he points out how he never missed school. Nonetheless, he would only return home when it was Sunday or Monday.

He says;

Mostly like Friday I used to like come from school, I could never sleep, like from Friday jus', get out of my house, So if my aunt says like, 'where was you?', I jus' say 'I didn't feel like being here'.



The window in Joseph's friends flat. It is the green door in the brown and white building. He would spend some nights and weekends in the flat.

One day when he was 11 or 12, Joseph's auntie had a nightmare about being murdered. She thought it was him who had killed her in the dream. His auntie took this as a sign that he was going to. She went down to where he and his friends were playing. Sending him home she spoke to his friends about him and said:

A lot of stuff, bad stuff. When I went home she actually threatened me with knife, if I have any dream from you, if I have any bad dream from you, I will kill you.

Joseph left his house and went for a walk by the canal. He found a bench where he sat down to take it all in.

He says:

I went out the house, I was so angry; I didn't know where to go where to start, what's next for me.



The place where Joseph and friends played when his auntie came.

Things got so bad that one weekend he planned to see his friends, enjoy his time and then commit suicide by poisoning himself. His auntie contacted the police because she did not know where he was and they caught him in time.

Despite these troubles, Joseph has managed to rebuild his life with the help of friends as well as youth and social services professionals all coming from a diverse set of ethnic groups. He is currently studying Sport Leadership at college as well as training to be a fitness instructor. He wants to become a qualified football coach if in the end he does not make it as a professional footballer. Sport helped him make friends and develop his confidence as well as teaching him resilience and teamwork. He values these lessons. While Joseph may not always have felt supported by his family, he seems to have found

a group of people who may not be biologically related to him but who support him anyway. While the youth and social services are often maligned in the public imagination, here they helped provide a network of advice, support and resources that other migrants appear to lack to their detriment. Joseph spent some time in a foster home in West Ham where he made a good friend. This friend took him to football games at West Ham and they used to watch Match of the Day together (a football highlights programme). Joseph reports that this friend is now doing well and has moved into his own place. He thinks his friend is Ethiopian and came to the UK at a young age. He also made friends with a girl from Ethiopia there and a boy from Burundi.



The bench where Joseph sat down to take it all in.

Joseph had a mentor from the social services; a British-born white man. Joseph appreciates the perspective of his mentor, and remains in regular contact with him even though he is now over 18. He also has a close friend (another participant in this research) who was born in Ghana. Like Joseph he has had professional football trials. Another friend of Joseph is from Jamaica; they went to the same school. When he called round before school his family would offer him breakfast. Joseph also maintains contact with three youth workers. One is a black man who may or may not be a migrant from one of the Caribbean Islands (Joseph is unsure when I ask him). Another is a white woman who is born and brought up in North London. And then there is a British born Ghanaian youth worker whom Joseph has known since he was around eleven years old.

Joseph's foster mum is from Sierra Leone. She is supporting him while he is at college, but Joseph tries to contribute by working a couple of hours every Friday. After Christmas he went on holiday to Sierra Leone with his foster mum where he went clubbing and played football. Joseph wants to rebuild a relationship with his auntie and uncle. Joseph is grateful that his uncle brought him over from Congo especially because this meant leaving one of his sons there and this seems one reason he is keen to maintain a relationship with him. He likes his foster mum but she is against this and sometimes he feels she does not understand. Joseph complains about having to stand there and listen to her lecturing him and puts this down to African culture where the mum is always right.

When meeting Joseph to show him this piece he wants to highlight the inspiration he got from role models who helped strengthen his belief that one can meet challenges and survive adversity. Joseph's favourite player is Thierry Henry but he also mentions Patrick Viera who came from Senegal to France as a migrant there and made a life for himself. Tupac was a rapper murdered at a young age who was also carving out a career as an actor at the time of his death. Denzel Washington is an actor whom Joseph admires not only for his acting but sees him as a strong and happily married family man.

Joseph has experienced deep troubles but is putting his life together and building home in London. He feels attached to people who may not be biologically related to him but which are a family. They might come from different parts of the world but they make him feel like he belongs here - even if he does fancy the idea of building a residence in Sierra Leone one day.