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An Escape Towards Education



Twenty-seven years ago, Joseph Kappia and his family fled their homeland of Liberia and decided to come to the United States in order to seek protection and refuge. Kappia was a local journalist for his local newspaper, the *Liberian Observer*, in Liberia and was very popular amongst his readers. But due to the investigated reports of corruption inside the Liberian government, Kappia decided to retire from writing as he received death threats due to his findings and releasing of those confidential files. Also, Charles Taylor, a former Liberian politician, led the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in an invasion of Liberia, thus beginning a civil war that would last more than seven years.

Kappia admits, “I was very scared for not only myself, but for my family, as well. If I hadn’t decided to to come to the United States, I probably wouldn’t be alive right now.” Kappia’s decision paid off, as his family resided in an apartment in the Willow Glen neighborhood of San Jose. But once Kappia and his family stepped onto American soil,

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everything was different from the way he lived in Liberia. “Everything from the food, clothing, and the language was not what I was accustomed to in Liberia.” He points out that the custom of eating food with a fork and knife was odd to him at first, “Back in Liberia, I always ate with my hands because they were simply finger foods. But once I started to eat food with a fork and knife, I realized that cutleries are the best invention that was ever made,” he adds. “But I don’t regret on going to the occasional McDonald’s run in order to get my finger foods,” he says.

Kappia had no job experience other than writing when he came to America. So he decided to go college and attended San Jose State University in 1990 to receive his Master of Arts degree in mass communications and returned to San Jose State in 2008 to receive his Master of Arts degree in school administration and supervision. He explains, “In my culture, education is a priority in a family. Usually the higher income families will go to college, especially if it’s in the U.S. because you’ll be considered of a higher status.” Kappia is the first person in his family to attend college, and says it’s a huge milestone for not only himself but for his siblings. He claims, “Going to college proved to my brothers and sisters that anyone can go to college and that it should encourage them to follow my footsteps and pursue a higher education in order to get a career for themselves.”

As Kappia started to receive his degrees, he was wondering what he should do with them. Should he go back to writing, as he did in Liberia? Should he have a public relations job with his mass communications degree? Well, he decided to go on what he called “an unusual route,” as

he decided to go into the teaching field. As Kappia grew up, he never once thought about having a career in teaching. But in 2009, he started teaching English at Lincoln High School to Freshmen and Senior students. He believes, “Education is the most important asset [that] I have received. And I want to teach these students to know that all of the information they learn in my class will benefit them in their future, whether it’s inside or outside of the classroom.”

When you first step into his classroom, you’ll notice many posters on the wall consisting of Black African-American heroes such as Jackie Robinson, Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama. He explains that these people were very motivational to him, “I was always a person that needed motivation. When I see these public figures do things that are making a difference in the world, I feel as though I should do that as well, and I guess that means that it’s my duty to educate students on being a better person inside and outside of the classroom.” Over his seven years of teaching, he always likes to tell stories of his past to his students. He wants to provide the students a motivational speech in order to encourage them to push forward during the low times of their life because he has experienced first hand what it’s like to be scared and dispirited due to his escape of an internal warfare in Liberia. He points out that, “A lot of these kids are in low spirits and are in an emotional state, especially high school students because they have a lot to deal with in their mind, whether it’s school, sports, relationships and even taking care of their family.” He then adds, “If students understand where I come from, they feel as though I am one of them and not just some bossy person that tells them what to do everyday. A personal connection with my students is a crucial aspect in my teaching methods.”

Although Kappia had fled from Liberia, he definitely hasn't gotten away from the culture he identifies with. As I interviewed him, he wore an extravagant outfit consisting of bright blue colors on his shirt and a head wrap that matched his top. He says his clothing is a traditional type of outfit that he wears every Friday to class to show respect and remembrance of who he is and where he came from. He explains, "In my culture, Liberians are more likely to dress in a typical Western style, like a t-shirt and a pair of jeans, but in more rural areas we tend to wear more traditional West African attire. Traditionally men wear short or long pants with a loose round-neck shirt." He emphasizes the importance of wearing his native outfits as he says, "Every Friday I come to school wearing my traditional outfit because I am not afraid to show my true self."

Another aspect that most people will notice of Kappia is his love of music. He listens to a wide variety of music genres such as Rock, Hip-Hop, Latin, and his traditional native music called Kissi, which consists of rhythmic sound of drumming and whistling. He argues that music is a way that can connect people from all over the world. He notes, "Some of my favorite music is from Michael Jackson. He always had a funky beat and had a story to tell in his lyrics." He goes on to say, "His music was a bridge between Black and White people because it made us come together in unity and had us dancing all through the night." Kappia likes to play his music to his students during passing periods and during his lunch through the boombox he has in his classroom. If you're lucky, you may even see him bust a move. "I'm a terrible dancer, but music just makes me want to dance and makes me feel young again," as he laughs in embarrassment.

As I shadow his teaching, he shouts the question, “Do you want to go to college?!” to his students. His students reply back, “Yes, I want to go to college!” I then asked why he does this and he explains, “It's our tribal call.” “I want to have my students to be as energized as possible about their future,” Kappia said. “I want every student of mine to have goal of attending any sort of college. Whether it's a community college or a private school. I want my students to expand their horizon and be able to achieve and experience things that they would have never imagined was possible for them.”

Kappia claims, “If I [had] never gone to college, I don't think I would be teaching to the hundreds of kids I do today. And I want these kids to know that college isn't just another hurdle they have to overcome. It's a pathway in order to get a career for their future.”

As the day ends and the clock strikes three, Kappia bids farewell to his last class of students.

“Do you want to go to college?!”

“Yes, I want to go to college!”

Kappia's face slowly starts to grin as his day is coming to a close. He then drives off in his 06' sedan as his family awaits him at their house. “Maybe McDonald's is on the menu for dinner,” he says with a smile.