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An Immigrant Pursues the Education That He Was Denied in Mali

The Neediest Cases Fund

By EMILY PALMER_OCT. 24, 2017

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After his school closed because of the conflict in Mali, Moussa Konate came to New York seeking to continue his education. He has started taking classes at Hostos Community College in the Bronx and plans to study civil engineering.

Moussa Konate's mother told him not to worry. She told him he would not understand. She told him he was too young to know the truth about why his father had left one night as the family slept.

About a decade later, he has grown into a man and better understands what was then impossible to comprehend. His father had not wanted to leave. Refusing a government job in Mali, he fled to protect his family.

"You have to do what they ask, and if you don't, they will catch you and they will come for your family," Mr. Konate, 21, said. "And then they kill you, and they kill your kids. Why? Because if they just killed the dad, they know the children will grow up and do to them what was done to their father.

"That's why I feel bad," he continued. "When my dad left, I was too young to understand why he didn't come back. I'd tell my mom that even if he did come back, he wouldn't be my dad anymore. But now I understand, and I regret saying this."

Mr. Konate does not know if his father is still alive, but he is haunted by the stories of what happened to others who disobeyed the president. When a neighbor who was saving to build a youth shelter refused to give money to the government, his throat was slit, he said. Others were beaten to death.

The president, Amadou Toumani Touré, was [ousted](#) in a coup in 2012, but that did not improve Mr. Konate's circumstances. He watched through a window as rebels drove down the streets of Bamako, the capital. His school there was closed for six months, as jihadists forbid classes, a restriction that continues in the central and northern regions, according to a recent [Amnesty International report](#).

That same year, Mr. Konate's uncle, who had supported him and his mother, died; he also left behind his wife and five children. So in 2013, when a family friend suggested that Mr. Konate stay with her in New York City to finish his senior year of high school,

he accepted. But it was not the American experience he had imagined. She expected him to work, not go to school. He soon left her home, rented a room and worked odd jobs washing cars and delivering food for the next year.

Despite his rocky start in the city, Mr. Konate said last month that he did not regret the move.

“Always, always I was thinking, Maybe I want to go back to Mali,” he said. “But then I’d think about my life before, and I’d know that I couldn’t go back.”

At [Create Young Adult Residences](#), a transitional housing program in Harlem for men 18 to 25, he lifted his pant leg to reveal blotchy pink skin. Pointing to a long dark line crossing his arm, he noted, “This is from a knife.” They are the scars of doing business at a market in Bamako, where he worked to support his mother in his father’s absence.

The housing center is affiliated with [Catholic Charities Archdiocese of New York](#), one of the eight organizations supported by The New York Times [Neediest Cases](#) Fund. Mr. Konate has been living there since May.

Before finding that stability, he would spend his spare time on a bench in Central Park, marveling at the gleaming Manhattan buildings and chatting with African pedicab drivers and other passers-by.

“I’d see these people in the park, and they were so happy,” he said. “And I’d think, I don’t even know what I’m going to eat today. And I’d ask myself, When am I going to be happy like them?”

His opportunity came one day when a stranger approached his bench. Inspired by his story, she promised to help him enroll in school.

On March 16, 2015, a Monday morning, he finally walked up the gray stone steps of Harlem Renaissance High School and pushed through the double doors.

“I remember the date because that was a big day for me,” Mr. Konate recalled. “I was finally going back to school. I walked in that first day, and I said: ‘Thank God, I’m back in school. I’ll do my best to get my education.’”

He excelled in math. “Numbers made it easier — I didn’t need English to solve math,” said Mr. Konate, who did not learn English until he moved to New York.

He worked through the summer, performed autobiographical poetry at a spoken-word event and graduated in June 2016. Now he works night shifts as a busboy at a restaurant on Fifth Avenue in Manhattan, sending \$250 to \$400 a month to his mother and his uncle’s children in Mali.

This fall, Mr. Konate started taking classes part time at Hostos Community College in the Bronx; his tuition is covered by a scholarship. In August, Catholic Charities used \$360 from the Neediest Cases Fund to buy him college textbooks and a graphing

calculator. He plans to study civil engineering, an interest he developed working in construction in Mali, where he enjoyed “taking an idea and making something new,” he said. He also hopes to delve into human rights issues, with a particular interest in the [Young African Leaders Initiative](#) and [Unicef](#).

Mr. Konate has applied for a green card through the [Special Immigrant Juveniles program](#), which helps young foreigners who were abused, abandoned or neglected. He expects an interview with the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services within six months. Waiting, he follows the conflict back home closely.

“People don’t take the Mali war seriously,” he said. “They think Africa doesn’t have a story, but I have seen it.”