



The Lord Is His Shepherd

Heritage Munyakuri was a child soldier in Congo — until he told his captors he would rather die than fight again. Now he's in Rochester, New York, a pastor to fellow refugees.

BY ABIGAIL PESTA '91

As a young boy, Heritage Murinda Munyakuri loved to watch airplanes cross the sky. At the first sound of the engine roaring above, he would drop to the ground, lying flat on his back so he could see the full path of the plane, until nothing but a white streak remained. From his mountaintop village in what is now the Democratic Republic of Congo, he imagined the world beyond. “I wondered, where are those planes going?” he says. Years later, he too would fly, to the other side of the globe.

His journey took him to Rochester, New York, where he saw his first snowfall, and carved out a new life. It's astounding he got there alive. He escaped a childhood of war, in which he was

snatched up to serve as a child soldier for rebel groups — three times. Twice he was forced to fight; the third time, he refused to pick up a gun. “I told them to kill me, I won't fight,” he says. “I had found Jesus.” His captors tried to coerce him, delivering vicious daily lashings. But he held firm, sticking to his faith. No more guns. No more fighting. His resolve finally set him free, but not for long. One unthinkable night, he saw his loved ones, his tribe, his entire world go up in flames, when his people were massacred by rebels wielding machetes, torches and guns.

He could have emerged a furious person. Instead, he changed his fate.

He became a pastor and now runs his own church in Rochester, where he welcomes other immigrants and refugees. When they land, disoriented and displaced, he uses his own experience to help them adapt. The remarkable story of how he did it, and the friends he found along the way, is a story of

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MEREDITH DAVENPORT

people from far corners of the planet coming together, learning from each other and moving forward as one. As America fights with itself over whether to close its doors to refugees, Munyakuri is a powerful reminder of what can happen when those doors remain open.

On an early August afternoon, Munyakuri watches his daughters Joy and Shalom splashing around in the sparkling waters of Canandaigua Lake, one of the larger and more stunning of the long, narrow Finger Lakes in central New York. Two of the very first friends he made in America, Cheri Trimble and Paul Miller, live in the scenic hills overlooking the lake, and they have invited the family for a cookout. Munyakuri, thin and muscular with an aura of calm, looks young for being in his mid-30s, which is surprising given what he has endured. Scars from bullet wounds mark his right arm; his left hand bears the deep slashes of a machete. While his girls frolic in an inner tube, he looks on from the shore as waves lap against the rocky sand. Then, speaking with a quiet serenity, he tells me about an alternate universe.

Growing up in the South Kivu province of Congo, high up in the mountains in a tropical region known as Minembwe, he had a happy childhood. His tribe, the Banyamulenge, raised cattle and farmed the land, and he helped his father milk the cows. Women cooked over an open fire and made flour by hand. Munyakuri walked for hours to and from school. “Kids came from all different villages; the teachers had to walk that distance, too,” he says. He and his friends entertained themselves by playing soccer, often with balls of wadded-up clothes tied with string, or running relay races, handing off sticks. The kids bathed in the river before school, even when the water was frigid; if they didn't, they risked getting hit with a stick by the teacher.

Munyakuri recalls how people in his tribe, across the mountain villages, welcomed each other into their homes, even if they were strangers. “I miss people being hospitable to others, loving them,” he says. “In my culture, if somebody was poor and had no cows, people would give them milk, give them a cow.” He imagined he might become a teacher one day. “It was the only thing I could think of,” he says. “The only dream you could have was to be a teacher.”

In the mid-1990s, when Munyakuri was around 12 years old, his father hiked down the mountain to the city of Uvira, thinking there might be more opportunities for the family there. The boy missed his father and set out to join him, traveling by foot for three days with other villagers who were heading to the city to sell goods. When he arrived at the big yellow house where his father was staying with an uncle, his father was alarmed. “He said, ‘You can't stay here. You have to go back! They're taking children from the streets.’” A rebel group run by revolutionary leader Laurent Kabila was forcing kids to serve as soldiers in a quest to oust President Mobutu Sese Seko, who had been in power some 30 years. The country was in a state of instability and chaos, with ethnic tensions boiling.

His father packed a bag to send him home, but it was too late — he had been spotted. Munyakuri saw the rebels climbing over the fence around the house. They were coming for him.

“My dad tried to get them to take him, not me. He told them, ‘He's too young!’ They told him, ‘No, we don't need you. We can

train him to do whatever we want.’ My dad held onto me, but they grabbed me from him; when he let my hand go, I cried,” he says. “They put me on top of a pickup truck and drove away. My dad was running after me. I was crying; he was crying, too. They wanted me so bad, they would have killed him.”

He pauses and reflects on how he was robbed of time with his family, and how he sometimes hears them sharing memories that don't include him. He says, “Sometimes I feel like a stranger to my family.”

Munyakuri was spirited away to a dusty training camp in the town of Kiliba. “They took my shoes, my shirt,” he says. “It was terrifying, being there. It was like a prison.” The training began that night. The soldiers ordered him to run, fast, without his shoes, and his feet got cut from rocks and sticks. After that, his days consisted of following orders, running barefoot and shooting targets with a Kalashnikov rifle. “The guns were bigger than us,” he says. The kids were fed cooked corn, nothing more. “We lived like animals, not like human beings. They said, ‘If you go somewhere without an instructor's permission, we will shoot you.’ We had no choice. We had to do what they said: Stand up. Sit down. Sleep.”

At night, he slept outside on the ground with the other kids and dreamed of home. “I used to cry at night, remembering my dad, my family,” he says. “They said, ‘Why are you crying?’ I said, ‘I miss my family.’ They said, ‘We're your family now.’” To subdue and control the kids, “they gave us weed, but sometimes it made kids cry more, bringing back memories,” he says. He longed to escape, but knew the consequences if he failed. “We would see them carrying the dead bodies of kids. They would say, ‘This is what happens if you try to escape.’”

After three months of training, the soldiers handed him a uniform, shoes and a gun and sent him to the city of Bukavu. “Part of me was feeling excited; I felt like I had some authority,” he says.

That feeling changed quickly. “They told us we would be fighting against the government,” he says. The plan was to gain control of the region and topple President Mobutu. “They put us on the front line. If you tried to run, the officers would shoot



you. You had to fight until you die.” And so he stormed villages with the rebels, shooting not at anyone or anything in particular, just trying to stay alive. “Sometimes people would throw rockets at us. You lived each day thinking it would be your last. So many kids died fighting. They are dying and I am watching. I remember their names.”

Munyakuri fell ill, and the commander said he could sleep indoors, but the special treatment angered the sergeants, who punished him for it. “They dunked me in the water and started beating me with a wire,” he says. He decided then that he would flee, no matter the risk. He told his friends, and they said they would go, too. They feared that if they stayed behind, they could be blamed, and killed, since they belonged to the same tribe. One night, they grabbed their guns and snuck away in the dark.



‘They said, “You are becoming a soldier.” I said, “I will never take up a gun again. I know Jesus now. You will have to kill me.”’

Late-day shadows cross the hills at Canandaigua Lake, and Munyakuri’s friend Paul Miller fires up the grill. Everyone gathers around a table, laughing and chatting, a world away from the dark life Munyakuri once knew. Hamburgers, salads, potato chips and slices of watermelon appear. As the sun fades, the kids get their first taste of gooey, marshmallow-chocolate s’mores, melted over a fire.

Miller recalls how he first met Munyakuri and his family when they showed up at the New Hope Free Methodist Church in Rochester. He offered to drive the family back and forth to church. “They would pile in the car, laughing all the way,” he says. They hadn’t learned English yet, so Miller couldn’t understand what they were saying, but he was impressed by their warmth and humor. “I thought, these people really like each other,” he says with a laugh.

Later that evening, driving back to his home in suburban Rochester, Munyakuri continues his tale while the kids sleep in the back seat.

When he and his friends fled the rebels, he says, they used the skills they had learned as soldiers to survive. They walked by night and slept by day, trying to get home to his village without being spotted. “It was the rainy season, very cold, and we all had only one set of clothes,” he says. “We would get rained on, and the clothes would dry on us. We all got sick.” For food, they went to villages and said they were soldiers of Kabila, showing their guns. They didn’t want to fight, just to eat. Villagers, looking to avoid trouble, fed them and helped point the way home.

Remarkably, Munyakuri did make it back home. It took three months. And when he arrived, his tribe had vanished. “Everyone had left because of the war,” he says. He made his way to his grandfather’s banana plantation in Minembwe and stayed there for two weeks, feeling sick and drained, then went to find his father in Uvira. His entire family was living there now — his parents and six siblings — in the same house where he had been kidnapped. He had been gone for a year and a half. “Everyone was hugging and hugging me,” he says. For a fleeting moment, he felt safe. He knew he could be captured again, but he was suffering from malaria and needed help. His parents took him to a hospital.

In a week, the soldiers found him. Kabila was in power now, having toppled the government. Munyakuri was thrown in jail. “They beat me every morning,” he says, recalling how the men whipped him on the shores of the colossal Lake Tanganyika, getting him wet so the lashes would sting more. “They lay me down and whooped me until the blood shed all over my back.”

At night, he slept on a concrete floor. He was told he would serve three years in jail. After a year, an officer enlisted him to cook and clean for him, saying he could apply it to his jail sentence; later the boy began serving as a bodyguard for a general. By 1998, a rebellion had formed against Kabila as ethnic tensions soared. Kabila’s soldiers turned on Munyakuri and his people, the Banyamulenge, seeking to sweep the tribe from the country. The tribe had been living in Congo for more than a century, but it was deemed not truly Congolese because it had ancient roots in Rwanda. Now Munyakuri had to fight against the same men he had once fought alongside. Chaos reigned again. One day, he got attacked by a mob on the street. They slashed his hand with a machete and bludgeoned his eye with a stick. Badly injured, he could no longer fight. His father, who had been searching for him, found him and brought him home.

“I was all bloody,” he recalls. “I didn’t know how to talk to my family. They were like foreigners to me.” He stayed in his room, not wanting to be seen, and came out only when his mom called out, “Heritage, come and eat.” He remembers how his youngest sister, Deborah, a toddler at the time, would come into his room, gazing up at him. He hardly knew her. His father thought he would be safer outside of the country and helped him get to Burundi, where he stayed with a family friend. After seeing so much violence, Munyakuri says, “I didn’t know how to behave. Life was meaningless for me.”

In 2001, he found a way forward. It began at a church in Burundi. Sitting in the congregation one day, he heard the pastor ask, “Does anyone want to receive Jesus? If you do, you must leave everything behind. If you stand up now, you are going to walk back home with Jesus.” Munyakuri thought about those words. “I’m fighting with myself. Do I stand?” he says. “I decided yes.” He stood. People applauded. “Nobody had ever clapped their hands for me,” he says. “I thought, something is happening here.”

It became a defining moment. He went home and began praying. “I let it all go. I let it go because of Jesus. He was sweet; he was kind in my heart. I could come with all the pain and suffering and let him take it. He became the one person I could rely on when I had no solution. He knows the way. He knows all, better than me.”



Heritage and his wife, Monique, have four children: Joy is the eldest at age eight, followed by Shalom, Joshua and newborn baby girl Shalit. “They are my treasure in this world. They are my gold.”

With God’s help, he says, he saw a future. He saw it in America.

As he speaks, his faith is palpable. I had wondered how he could be so serene after such a ferocious past. I can see now that faith is how he found his peace.

Still, more battles remained. “I decided I needed to be with my family, even if I die,” he says. He tried to get home to Congo from Burundi but got seized at the border by rebels fighting the Kabila regime. “They said, ‘You are becoming a soldier.’ I said, ‘I will never take up a gun again. I know Jesus now. You will have to kill me.’” He was sent to jail in Uvira, and whipped with a cable every day for a week. He held firm. “They could have killed me,” he says. “I was ready.” When the commander saw that nothing would make him fight, he set him free. The man didn’t kill him, Munyakuri says, because they were from the same tribe.

Back home, Munyakuri tried to get to know his family again. And he prayed. He wanted to go back to school, and his father enrolled him. But his education would be cut short once more.

In 2004, amid the growing ethnic battles in Congo, the Banyamulenge were forced to flee the country. Munyakuri and his family jumped in a van, bound for a refugee camp across the border in Burundi. Along the way, an angry crowd stopped the vehicle at a blockade and robbed the family of the few things they had managed to grab. They were lucky to get out alive, Munyakuri says, remembering the mob’s fury as they surrounded and rocked the van. One man reached through the window and struck his sister Deborah in the face, terrifying the young girl.

At the refugee camp in Burundi, on the outskirts of the town of Gatumba, hundreds of members of the tribe converged, exhausted, distressed, suddenly homeless. They slept in rudimentary tents — separate tents for men and women — and sat through the long days with nothing to do. Food consisted mainly of beans and corn flour.

It turned out, the tribe wasn’t wanted in Gatumba, either.

On the night of August 13, 2004, as everyone lay down to sleep, gunshots rang out in the distance. “At first we thought someone must be stealing cows,” Munyakuri says. “Then bullets started coming through the tent like rain. Bullets, they sound like water coming down. People were getting shot. Everyone started crying, running. It was a terrible scene. No one had time to care for anyone.” Munyakuri tried to help people escape from a slit in the back of a tent and got shot, his arm exploding. Rebels burst in with torches and guns. “They had gasoline. They poured gas on people and burned them. I saw people getting burned alive.”

Wearing only his underwear since he had taken off his clothes to sleep, Munyakuri raced barefoot through the camp, which was now engulfed in flames. He saw unthinkable atrocities: people on fire, a pregnant woman slashed in the stomach. He managed to make it to a nearby field. There he found his mother, riddled with bullets. In shock, and rapidly losing blood, they searched together for their family in the night. “I couldn’t cry; I couldn’t even see at times,” he says. “I kept hearing the guns, people crying. So many people I knew died that night.” As dawn broke, he found his father and his siblings, but not all of them.

His youngest sister, six-year-old Deborah, had not made it out alive.

In a shady park in downtown Rochester, Munyakuri sits with his cousin Moses Ruboneka, describing how the family struggled to survive after the massacre. As he talks, his daughter Joy calls him on the phone, wondering when he’ll be home; she misses her dad and wants to Facetime with him. Munyakuri and his wife, Monique, have four children: Joy is the eldest at age eight, followed by Shalom, Joshua and newborn baby girl Shalit. He warmly reassures his daughter, saying he’ll be home soon. Afterward he tells me, “I love my children; they are my treasure in this world. They are my gold.”



Then he returns to his tale. Traumatized and stateless, his family owned nothing after the attack. They had lost their beloved Deborah and many other relatives and friends. “Emotionally, physically, mentally, we were in terrible shape,” he says. “We had no money, no nothing. We were outsiders. We had no country we could call home.” Crammed into a tiny shack in Rwanda, he recalls, “what we knew was prayer and God. I kept on praying and praying. God kept speaking to my heart. He gave me courage.” Again he saw himself coming to America despite the seemingly impossible circumstances. “God told me,” he says. “He had a plan for my life.”

In 2005, his prophetic vision took shape. His father heard about a United Nations program that was resettling survivors of the Gatumba massacre. The family began interviewing with officials, a long and emotional process as they recounted the loved ones they had lost.

Two years later, Heritage Munyakuri became the first member of his family to fly to America. He had flown only once before, in a small army plane. This time, the plane was enormous and unexpectedly cold; no one had warned him about the arctic air conditioning, he recalls with a smile. “We flew through the day, through the night,” he says. “I thought about how I used to look up in the sky. I thought, maybe there are kids looking up at me now, wondering where I’m going.” He landed in London, seeing the lights of the city from the air, then flew on to his new life in New York.

When he stepped out into the wintry Rochester air, he says, “everywhere on the ground, it was white.” Social workers from the Catholic Family Center greeted him with an interpreter. “They told me, ‘It’s snow.’ I said, ‘It’s cold here. Is it like this all the time?’ They said yes.” He laughs. “It was like a movie. I thought, is this me, here? I remember thinking, I’m going to have white friends!” The only white people he had seen in Congo worked for international organizations such as the UN.

The next morning, he encountered his first bowl of cereal, which he thought was a weird way to drink milk. Soon after, he went shopping at Walmart with one of the social workers. To communicate, “he showed me pictures of food, and I would point to what I wanted,” he says. The store looked enormous and pristine compared with the outdoor markets back home, he says. “I

thought, how do you know where to find things here?” Another mystery: young men who wore too-big, falling-down pants.

The rest of his family arrived in the following weeks — his parents, three sisters, two brothers — and they all stayed in a run-down, inner-city house. They were the only members of their tribe in town, and they felt mystified, wondering how to navigate their new world. “I thought, how do you live here? How do you get a job?” he recalls. “How does this work?” The social workers helped him find work at a recycling center, where he took apart home appliances to recycle the parts. He started picking up some English on the job and befriended other new immigrants. One day they went food shopping at a dollar store, where one of his new friends bought a box with a picture of a cake on it, thinking there would be cake inside. But it was a powdered mix. That gave them a good laugh.

Munyakuri decided he wouldn’t earn enough money to make a decent living with just the one job, so he took a second job at a grocery store loading boxes. He worked from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. at his first job, and from 5 to midnight at his second. “I was sleeping about four hours a night,” he says. And then he went looking for a church. The family had attended a Free Methodist church in Congo, and hoped to find one in Rochester. A Congolese taxi driver mentioned the New Hope Free Methodist Church, and one Sunday, Munyakuri and his family walked in the door.

Pastor Linda Adams remembers that moment. Now a bishop based in Michigan, Adams speaks with me by phone, describing



‘I can look up in the sky,
as I did with the airplanes,
and see that God is almighty.
I never thought I could fly.
God listens to his people
when they pray.’

the unforgettable day she met the family. “They showed up, all very tall and dignified. The men were wearing suits. The women were wearing their brightly colored African dresses and headpieces. There were 250 eyes on them. Americans don’t dress up for church anymore!” she says, laughing. “After the service, Heritage and his father, Prudence, approached me. Heritage had learned some English, and he translated for his father, who said, ‘We are orphans. We have no mother, no father, no motherland, no fatherland. The Free Methodist church is our family, and you are our mother.’”

A surprised Adams replied, “Well, welcome home.” “She has such a good heart,” Munyakuri says, recalling how Adams came to visit the family the next day. Adams says it’s typical for a pastor to make a call on a new family, spending a few minutes. But the family made a day of it, cooking a meal and circling around her in prayer.

Adams says Munyakuri was a “prayer warrior” in those early days. “He would come and pray for eight hours at a time, processing what he had been through, crying, praying, sometimes shouting.” His family introduced a more “emotive” layer to the church, she says. During services they would stand up, burst into prayer, walk around the room — a new concept for the rest of the congregants, who tended to sit quietly and close their eyes to pray. The family “had been holding on for dear life, and it made their faith virile.”

They also brought a rich new world of song to the church, singing traditional hymns from their tribe. “They energized our worship,” Adams says. Eventually they formed a new choir, teaching the kids in the church to sing their songs in their native language; later the group sang around the region, with the family members telling stories of their tribe.

“I can tell you the reason we are the people we are today is because we found this community,” Munyakuri says. Adams says she feels the same about them, telling me, “They are a blessing.”

Adams could see early on that Munyakuri had “the calling,” and she asked if he might want to become a pastor. “I knew it was the plan of God,” he says, but he wondered if he would be fit to do the job. He took on the challenge and immersed himself in study, training under Adams and taking courses at the Northeastern Seminary in Rochester, eventually becoming an assistant pastor at the church.

Over time, more immigrants and refugees began arriving in Rochester from Rwanda, Burundi and Congo. The Catholic social workers alerted Munyakuri when they landed, and he invited them to the church and helped them adapt to life in America. Using his personal experience, he guided them through challenges both practical and personal. He continues to do so today. “I help them get a job, take the bus, pay the electric bill. The hardest thing is to find a job. I learned the computer so I could help them apply online,” he says. “I also let them know they can talk to me.” His promise to listen is crucial for people who arrive feeling disoriented and traumatized from war. “In my country, we don’t have counseling; people don’t talk about their pain. But they can trust me as their pastor. They tell me the things they faced in life, and I use my story to help heal them. They say, ‘If God was able to help you, maybe I can get through it.’”

In 2010, Munyakuri returned to Africa and met the woman who would become his wife. Monique and he had connected through a friend a year earlier and had talked on the phone all year, growing close despite living a world away. When he landed in her native Rwanda, “she was standing at the airport with friends. She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen,” he says, “and she was very calm.”

Monique was equally impressed. “He was smart, beautiful, happy, and he had a nice smile,” she tells me. “The first time I met him, I just loved him.” She knew the two would wed. He stayed for several months, and they married in Rwanda. Then he returned home, and with the help of Cheri Trimble and Paul Miller, began working with an immigration lawyer to get Monique to America. It took three years. Munyakuri says the day she arrived was “the most joyful day of my life.”

In 2015, he was ordained. And he realized it was time to lead a church of his own.

On a Sunday morning in summer, the El Shaddai Free Methodist Church in Rochester is throbbing with song. This is Munyakuri’s church. A choir of men and women, some in traditional African dress, are singing and swaying onstage in a small auditorium, with each song building to a rousing crescendo. Red and green laser lights dot the walls. The choir sings dozens of songs to the snappy beat of an electric organ, gaining momentum with each song, until everyone onstage is all-out dancing. The entire congregation is on its feet now, singing, dancing, clapping. Young girls in lacy dresses and shiny shoes jump up and down. A woman kicks off her heels, dancing harder.

Munyakuri stands in the front row with me, watching the choir and translating the songs, which are sung in Kinyarwanda, a common language for his congregation, many of whom are from Congo and Rwanda. The songs focus on becoming a better person, praising God. Soon Munyakuri jumps up and takes the stage to join in the energetic dancing.

Starting his own church was a risk. He had to give up a steady paycheck as an assistant pastor at the New Hope church to try to make a go of it as a pastor. He also had to find a place to hold services. Munyakuri says he trusted that “God would open the door.” Soon a friend connected him with a man who owned a cavernous, red-brick building that needed work, and who gave Munyakuri some money to fix it up so the space could be used to hold services.

The church’s name is Hebrew for “God Almighty,” Munyakuri tells me, explaining why he chose it: “I can look up in the sky, as I did with the airplanes, and see that God is almighty. I never thought I could fly. God listens to his people when they pray. I know it. I have seen it. I have experienced it. Nobody can stop prayers.”

At the service, Munyakuri stands and speaks passionately to the congregation about the history of the Bible. He is a storyteller weaving a detailed yarn, and people listen intently. Monique, who has been busy all weekend tending to her newborn girl, walks up and stands before him for a moment as he speaks, raising her hands, closing her eyes, and calling out, “Hallelujah!” Others wander up and shout an occasional, “Amen!” All the while, a young man plays the electric organ in the background. As Munyakuri winds up, the choir takes the stage again, kneeling, raising their hands above their heads and breaking into song. Then the entire congregation comes forward and gathers around the stage, singing and dancing.

After the service, which lasts about three hours, Munyakuri talks with some of the men about their lives. Later he tells me, “Sometimes I ask God, ‘Why would you choose a broken person like me to be your vessel?’” Whatever the reason, he feels grateful. Challenges remain. For one, the church’s future is uncertain. Munyakuri is not sure how long he will be able to use the space for services as the building might get sold, but he believes God will help him find a way. He dreams big. He wants to spread his message of peace and acceptance beyond Rochester. And he wants immigrants who come to America to know that they belong here, that they have a future.

“I tell them, ‘This is your country. This is my country. You can do this.’” □