

Freedom Is A Wonderful Thing

As told to
David
Oliver Relin

AS THE DEBATE OVER IMMIGRATION policy continues, it's easy to forget one simple fact: The United States is a nation of immigrants. On this Fourth of July weekend, we introduce you to four remarkable Americans. These men and women came here in pursuit of dreams known to many of our own families: freedom from political oppression, liberty to worship without government interference, and the economic opportunity for which the U.S. has long been known. Their stories remind us that the words engraved at the base of the Statue of Liberty bear witness to a noble truth: For the tired, the poor, the world's huddled masses yearning to breathe free, America remains a powerful beacon of hope.

—The Editors

I Came for Religious Freedom

Ngawang Sangdrol, 29
Born: Lhasa, Tibet
Today: Student

Before I was born, the Chinese destroyed much of Tibetan culture. My parents sent me to a nunnery so I could study our Buddhist traditions, and when I was 13, I joined some people demonstrating for freedom of religion. All we did was chant "Long live the Dalai Lama" and "Free Tibet."

The police tied a rope around my neck, lashed



me to a tree and beat me. Then they put me in jail for nine months. I didn't understand what I had done. Every Tibetan loves the Dalai Lama and wants the freedom to praise him. After my release, I joined another demonstration. This time I was sentenced to three years in Drapchi Prison.

We were beaten and forbidden from practicing Buddhism. One time, the guards kicked me in the head and beat me until I fell unconscious. Later, I heard that another nun had thrown herself on me, to keep me from being killed. I had a good relationship

Ngawang Sangdrol, 29, found asylum in the U.S. after 11 years in a Tibetan prison.

"When I was 13, the police put me in jail for nine months."

with the other nuns there, and five of them were killed by our torturers.

At one point, some of us secretly recorded songs praising the Dalai Lama and telling people of our suffering, then smuggled a tape out. We hoped our families would hear our voices and learn that we were alive. But the tape traveled the world and people pressured China for our release. When the Chinese heard about it, they added six years to my sentence.

After 11 years in prison I was sent home, and in 2003, I was offered asylum in the U.S. At first I was afraid to travel to such a foreign place, but freedom is wonderful—I can't describe how wonderful. I live in New Jersey with two other nuns from the prison.

We begin each day with prayer and have photos of His Holiness the Dalai Lama on our walls, which is forbidden in Tibet. I am studying English. It is my duty to speak well enough to explain how my country is suffering, to tell the world that Tibetans deserve freedom too.

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I Fled Genocide and Oppression

Jean-Marie Kamatali, 39

Born: Kamembe, Rwanda

Today: Professor of Political Science in South Bend, Ind.

My whole life, I have tried to avoid politics. But in Rwanda, politics are impossible to escape. I was born in a village called Kamembe but moved



Jean-Marie Kamatali, 39, and his family at home in Indiana (l-r): son Nicolas, 4, wife Linda and daughters Kathleen, 16, and Julia, 2.

“I finally found a place to come home to.”

to the capital because of my parents’ mixed marriage. My father is a Hutu, and my mother is a Tutsi. We thought we would be safer in Kigali.

I was a bright student, but mostly I was lucky. I am the first person in my family to receive a college education. After graduating with a law degree, I refused to work for the Hutu government. I never joined any political party, because I sensed the danger. But in April 1994, there was no escaping danger. It came right to our door.

That month, the Hutu declared a campaign of genocide against all Tutsis and moderate Hutus. The militia came and said, “We will kill you mixed people later this month. For now, bury your dead.” Each night they dumped bodies near our home, and my father and I had to bury them in mass graves. It was very traumatizing. While we buried the bodies, my father and I never said a word. What was there to say?

My parents slipped out and hid in a shipping

container. I fled toward Congo—traveling by night, sleeping in ditches by day, until I was able to swim across the border. It was a long time before I learned that my parents had survived. But my mother’s entire family—my grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins—was wiped out.

I traveled to Austria, where I met my wife and earned a doctorate in law. In 2002, an organization called the Scholar Rescue Fund helped arrange work in America, and now we live in South Bend, Ind., with our three children. It is strange and wonderful to raise my children in such a safe place. Strange, because I still have dreams where people who died in Rwanda speak to me. I remember running for my life and sleeping in ditches and I can’t believe my journey led here.

Now I teach courses on human rights. I tell my students that terrible things like genocide take place if people aren’t aware of what’s happening in the rest of the world. In America you can feel the freedom. You can breathe. Returning from a conference in Europe recently, an immigration officer at the airport told me: “Welcome home.” I don’t know why it touched me so much. Maybe at that moment, after so much time running, I felt I had finally found a place to come home to.

My Parents Sought Opportunity

Srinija “Ninj” Srinivasan, 34

Born: Chandigarh, India

Today: Editor-in-Chief of Yahoo!

Growing up in Kansas, I got pretty used to people stumbling over my name. Then a volleyball coach nicknamed me “Ninj,” and it stuck. In some ways, my family was traditionally Indian. My parents had an arranged marriage. But my mother came from a very progressive family and was highly educated. My mom has always been a role model for me. She has an insatiable curiosity that I hope I inherited.

I was born in Chandigarh, India, but when I was 3 months old, we moved to Lawrence, where

my father became a math professor at the University of Kansas. He wanted us to have every opportunity. Being Indian-American in Kansas made my family very close. We felt like “we’re all in this together.” I think that’s the reason I chose to work in an industry where everything is connected.

I followed my siblings to Stanford University. In college, I tried to figure out where I fit in American culture. I studied Japanese and spent six months in Japan. It was there I met Jerry Yang and David Filo.

In 1995, Jerry and David asked me to join them in a venture called Yahoo!. We felt we were yahoos, be-

“In a place where people come together from everywhere on earth, anything is possible.”

cause we didn’t really know what we were doing. But they had a vision of where the online world was going and asked me to organize the sorting system for a table of contents to the Internet. It’s not like we said, “We’re going to create a hierarchy for the sum total of human knowledge.” We just wanted to help bring the In-

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Srinija Srinivasan, 34, moved from India to Kansas to Silicon Valley.

PHOTOS BY STEVE LISS (KAMATALI) AND JIM HUGHES (SRINIVASAN) FOR PARADE



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ternet to life. I think we've done that.

The Web has incredible power to bring the world together. I've tried to help provide people with the context to understand that information. And I think it's fitting that a woman born in India, raised in Kansas and living in California is part of that process. I think Silicon Valley culture could only happen here. In a place where all of these people come together from everywhere on earth, anything is possible.

We Escaped Extreme Poverty

Dr. Erick Miranda, 30
Born: Morelos, Mexico
Today: Graduate of Harvard Medical School

I was born into extreme poverty. My parents lived in a shack in Morelos, Mexico. Whatever fish my dad caught was the food for the day. My grandpar-

The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog. The fox



“No matter where you come from or how poor you are, there is a path open to you here.”

ents were migrant workers. When I was 3 weeks old, my grandmother came to have a look at me. I was this little, malnourished thing, and she said, “He’s going to die if you stay here.” She took me across the border the next day, and my parents followed as soon as they could.

Technically, I was an illegal alien, but I felt like an American even before I became a citizen in 1995. Immigrant life for my parents was hard. My parents divorced when I was 4. My mom has been waiting tables at the same Mexican restaurant for 25 years. She didn’t even finish eighth grade. But she’s a wise woman who’s devoted herself to giving her kids a chance at a better life. When I got to kindergarten, I couldn’t even speak English. But I learned quickly and, by second grade, something clicked and I took off.

I made it to college at U.C.-Irvine and got into every medical school I applied to. But when I got the letter from Harvard, I broke down and cried. My dream had come true! I have a profound sense of debt to this country.

In medical school, I ran a mentoring program for African-American and Latino kids in Boston. Now I’m back in L.A., doing my residency at the L.A. County/USC emergency medical center, which caters predominately to poor blacks and Latinos. I can see the relief on people’s faces when they explain their problems to a Spanish-speaking doctor. Everyone who comes to America knows about the opportunity here. No matter where you come from or how poor you are, there is a path open to you here if you can navigate poverty’s obstacle course. I’m proof that the American dream is alive and well.



LENDING A HAND

A new life in America requires support. The **Scholar Rescue Fund** has provided safe haven for persecuted educators from 36 countries since its inception in 2002; **Paul and Daisy Soros Fellowships for New Americans** help gifted children of immigrant families attend graduate school; and the **International Campaign for Tibet** advocates on behalf of political and religious refugees. For details, visit www.parade.com.

PHOTO BY DOROTHY LOW FOR PARADE



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