

Julius. You're Home Here.

From the streets of Kenya and a Refugee Camp, how one National Beef employee found freedom, hope and a new home through a long, painful, winding road.

When is the last time you saw a quarter laying in the street or under a booth at a restaurant?

Did you pick it up? Walk right by it? Think it wasn't worth the effort?

How about a dime?

A nickel?

Is five cents worth the time and effort to stop you in your tracks? To alter your life? To provide for your most basic needs?

For Iowa Premium Safety Coordinator, Nshangalume Buroko, or Julius, as our friends in Tama know him, that nickel that everyone walks right past is a harsh and stark reminder of what life used to look like for him.

Five cents doesn't mean much in the grand scheme of American life, but it meant life and death, survival and hope for Julius and his sister in the dusty, cracked desert of the Kakuma Refugee Camp, in the Rift Valley of Kenya.

His is a story you'd expect to see in a movie, read about in Time Magazine, or frankly, not believe because it's too hard and painful to wrap your mind around.

A story of resilience, determination, hope against all hope, and love that can cross the stormiest of seas and the darkest of nights.

It's the story of Julius, current Safety Coordinator in Tama. Former Congo Refugee.



Julius at home in the Congo with his extended family

Julius' story began like many kids across the world. Happy, loving family. Supportive parents. Playful siblings.

Born in the country of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Africa, in 1982, as the 9th child out of 12, Julius' family was well...full. Of love, of promise, of joy.

Five boys. Seven girls. Two parents who adored those 12 kids and worked like crazy to provide a better life for them. During Julius' early years, the Congo was tough but not war-torn. Disadvantaged, but not desperate.

Located in Central Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo has a population of nearly 92 million people, is the second-largest African country by area, and the 11th largest country in the world.

Dad worked for the Department of Mines and Geology. Mom was a primary school teacher.

They didn't have plenty, but they had enough.

At five years old, Julius went off to school with dreams of becoming a priest, a job where he could spread the love of his family to his homeland.

The family moved around a bit, in search of better opportunities, and throughout it all, Julius' hunger for education and impact continued to grow, as he grew.

But by 1997, when Julius was 15, things took a horribly tragic turn.

A proud, but politically divisive country, could no longer contain the brewing divides that bubbled up through the cracks.

The Congo's first Civil War erupted across the country, leaving millions in shambles, including Julius and his family.

This gritty, resilient, loving family, in an instant became fractured and splintered. Togetherness became a memory as the 14 family members scattered for safety...and their lives.

"When the war started, it changed so many things..." Julius recalled. "It changed everything. So many families were impacted, we didn't know where the other members of our family were, we just followed masses of people towards safety. It was crazy. Because of the war, I couldn't achieve my dreams in the Congo."

This intact, beautiful family of 14, in an instant, became as unsettled as you can imagine. Screams, uncertainty, brutality.

Julius happened to grab his younger sister in the chaos. The two of them remained together, but had no idea what happened to mom, dad, and their other siblings.

"In our escape, as we fled our home country in terror and fear, we ended up in Nairobi, the capital of Kenya. We had nothing to our name, literally nothing. So we slept on the streets for almost a month. We assumed all of our family members were dead," Julius remembered.

Once her big brother, now Julius shifted into his sister's caretaker, provider, and figurative father. Protecting her on the streets, working odd jobs for a few measly scraps of food, planning ways to see if any family members survived the horror.

He was 15. A burden no young man should ever have to bear.

His sister was 11. A reality no young girl should ever have to experience.

But here they were, on the streets, in the cold, without food, without money, but with a fierce will to live. And love that carried them through.

To call it luck may sound too glamorous, but with some good fortune, the Office of the United Nation's High Commissioner of Refugees found them on the streets of Nairobi and offered them a better life.

The upgrade?

An invitation to a Kenyan Refugee Camp.

Hardly the life of luxury, but it WAS a life with a shelter. And some semblance of safety.

"I was confused, I didn't know what to do at the time, I didn't know where to go," Julius painfully explained. "I had to look out for her so much, that I sometimes forgot myself. She was so weak and scared in the beginning, and she was getting sick."

The move to the refugee camp provided some small measure of normalcy, bleak as it was.

The UN provided beans and rice to every member in the refugee camp. But the supposed two-week ration barely provided enough food for one person for three days, let alone two people.

"It was not easy," Julius matter-of-factly described. "It was a really unsettled life."



But even though the deck was stacked massively against him, Julius set out to change his course. And that of his sister.

Not okay with slipping into a defeated mindset, Julius began looking for work.

“There, I started life from zero. But I knew there had to be a better path. And I had to be strong, because I could not show my sister there was a problem.”

He'd leave the camp at pre-dawn hours to cut hair in a barbershop, and then to buy clothes in Nairobi and hustle them to South Sudan or Kenya.

He got arrested for an expired visa, but that didn't deter him. He found work with the Center for Disease Control doing HIV and AIDS counseling and testing.

He got a job as a Counselor at the International Rescue Committee, helping malnourished children and rape victims.

He quite literally did whatever it took to scrape together enough money to buy his sister a new life, that didn't involve sleeping in a tent, on a hard, desert ground.

His first step?

Upgrade the tent to a real, permanent structure. With the small funds he'd brought in, he secretly began to buy materials to make bricks. Bricks he formed by hand, and built into a 3 meter by 4 meter shelter.

To them, it was a home. A place of belonging in a sea of uncertainty. A place to cover themselves.

“I had to try different things to survive that horrible life we were living,” Julius said. “There were so many malnourished people in that camp, women, children, the elderly, my sister. It's horrible to live in a state of constant desperation, hunger and survival. But it's all we knew.”

And if the malnourishment and harsh living conditions weren't enough, the terror made itself into the camp in 2008 when the refugees turned on themselves and began killing each other.

“I had to send my sister to boarding school, even though I couldn't really afford it, it's the only thing I could think of to keep her safe,” Julius lamented.

With his sister away, and Julius still hustling to find a way out, in 2009, life took a different turn for him.



Julius and Guillaine Buroko

Even in the most insurmountable darkness, love found a way to shine a light.

Julius met his wife.

“We met while I was living in the refugee camp, but we met in Nairobi, when I would leave the camp to go sell some goods and clothes,” Julius smiled. “Once we were married, she moved to the camp, and we started our life together.”

In that little brick house, with barely enough room to cover them at night.

And it didn't take long before Julius' wife, Guillaine, was pregnant with their first child, a boy. Their son, Gaël was born in 2010 to two proud parents.

The couple was ecstatic, even though their circumstances left much to be desired.

But shortly after that, Julius' life took another drastic turn.

“I'll never forget it. It was in July of 2011. July 13th to be exact. It was that day that I got acceptance from the United Nations to leave the camp and go to the United States,” Julius stated. “Guillaine was almost nine months pregnant with our second child, it was heartbreaking to consider leaving, but when I got on the United Nations list, I wasn't married at that time.”

With his wife just days away from delivering their second baby, the couple made a heart-wrenching decision.

Stay together with the life they know? Or be torn apart for a life they hoped would be better for them all?

Julius boarded the plane to Sacramento, California. Guillaine knew life would be much worse if he stayed.

A world of promise awaited. A world of hurt was behind him. The world he loved most was stuck in the middle. When he landed in America, Julius began doing what Julius always did. Being resourceful, being resilient, being scrappy.

Another African immigrant took to him after he told his story, and she helped him find a job.

At \$8.00 an hour, Julius was thrilled to work at Thrift Town in Sacramento. And just six weeks after his arrival, Guillaine gave birth to their second child, their first daughter.

“With this job, I was able to have my wife and two kids find an apartment in Nairobi, away from all the bad things in the refugee camp,” Julius beamed. “That was a scary place for my wife, and my son was weak there because he was malnourished.”

9,500 miles away, he was finally able to provide a safer life for his family.

After taxes, Julius was bringing home about \$450 every two weeks. Barely enough to keep his family safe, while also being barely enough to keep him going so he could focus on his main mission: how to get his family to California.

With the help of some international refugee aid corporations, a lawyer helped Julius file the necessary paperwork to bring his growing family to America.

And it was then, his life took another turn, this time for the better.

In late 2012, after nearly 16 months apart, his wife and two kids were on their way to him!

And he also found out that his mom and dad, and at least some of his siblings had survived the devastating times in the Congo Civil War.

He hustled and got another job working at Sears so he could save as much money as quickly as possible to get his own place for his family.

His hard work was met with some good fortune in a strong church community who rallied around him and his on-the-way family.

They collected money for a down payment for a car for Julius, because to this point, his only form of transportation was a bicycle. They bought him a 2007 Kia Sorrento.

“I still drive that car to this day,” Julius smiled. “Those men of the church helped me, and I'll never forget it.” By the time his family got there, he'd rented an apartment for \$1,400 a month. The cost of living in California was a stark difference to what his family had just left.

He picked up a third job by this point, just to try and make the numbers work.

“The government was assisting me with around \$320 per month, plus food stamps and medical assistance for my family. But even working three jobs, I was bringing home \$1,800 a month and our rent alone was \$1,400,” Julius said. “It was a good life because we were together and we were safe. But it was not easy.”

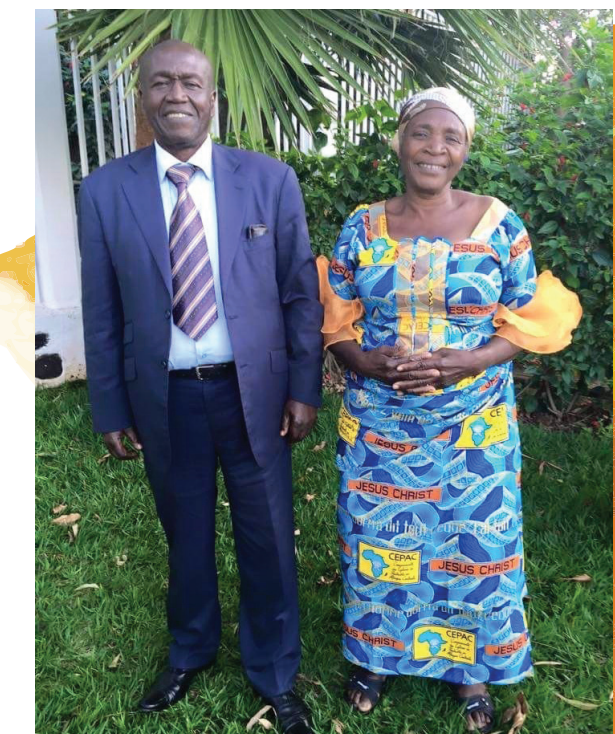
The math wasn't sustainable, and through their network, they were told to look for work and a home in a smaller state, away from the coasts, where the costs would be lower and the quality of life, higher.

So, from the Congo to Nairboi to a Kenyan Refugee Camp to Sacramento, they moved to Iowa.

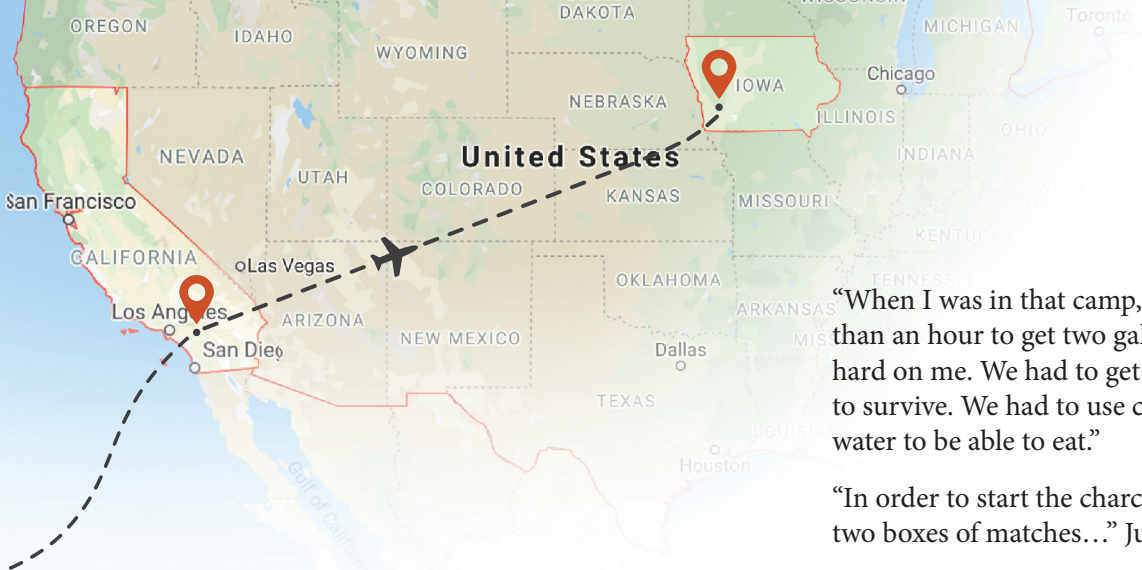
“We got to Iowa on a Saturday. And on Sunday night, I went to the Tyson plant in Waterloo. I was one of 16 people hired that day, thankfully,” Julius remembered. “I quickly qualified and was making \$15 per hour. This was about \$2,000 per month, and our rent was only \$590. For the first time, I felt like we could get ahead, not just survive.”

From 2013-2016, Julius continued working at the Tyson plant. The family even bought a home in Cedar Rapids. A home far from the 3x4 meter brick home he built by hand in the refugee camp.

After earning his U.S. citizenship and having to travel home to the Congo to visit his sick mother, Julius applied for a new job at Iowa Premium in Tama.



Julius's mom and dad



“On June 6th, 2017, I started with Iowa Premium as a tripe washer. Then two months later, Juan Padilla asked me to work with the lead person. In November of the same year, I became a part-time interpreter, and a few months later in February of 2018, I became a full-time interpreter and started training in orientation and then as an HR clerk,” Julian explained. “And now, as of January 2020, I was promoted to a Safety Coordinator.”

Julius’ winding, adversity-filled journey to Iowa Premium is almost too painful, too hard to believe.

But if you’ve seen his smile, encountered his optimism or experienced his resolve, you know it’s just Julius being Julius.

He’s now a far cry from hustling clothes in the streets of Kenya or cutting hair in the refugee camp or even unloading boxes at the thrift store in Sacramento.

“I really like this company. It’s been like home for me, and I know I can be successful at National Beef,” Julius explained. “There are big opportunities here, so many new things, great things to learn. I think I can be successful in the future. In fact, I already am.”

As for Julius’ extended family?

“Mom and dad are still in the Congo, in their hometown. It’s better now, but it’s still not safe. They’re in their late 70’s and have been married for 58 years,” he said.

“My siblings are all scattered from Africa to Europe to Canada to the United States, but they are all OK, amazingly. My youngest sister, the one who was with me in that refugee camp all those years, she is married and just graduated from The University of North Dakota as a Respiratory Therapist,” Julius beamed. “She had to go through so much to get here, I can’t even believe it, but I’m so proud of her.”

And his own, immediate family?

Well, Julius had to fight back the tears as he recounted a story of his own childhood.

“When I was in that camp, I remember having to walk more than an hour to get two gallons of fresh water. It was very hard on me. We had to get this water, and get it home just to survive. We had to use charcoal to start a fire to boil this water to be able to eat.”

“In order to start the charcoal, I needed five cents to buy two boxes of matches...” Julius voice trailed off.

“One day, I didn’t have five cents. I looked everywhere. I couldn’t find any money. All my hard work, all the effort, and I didn’t have enough to buy matches.”

“I remember how thirsty I was. How thirsty I knew my sister was. She was really sick...” his voice broken at this point.

“I couldn’t get water that day.”

And then, as if on cue, Julius did was Julius does.

“When I remember that day and how awfully desperate it was, when I think something is wrong here in America, like maybe I don’t have money in our account or something like that...I know it’s better here. Because I have hope. I know that on Friday I get paid. I know that I’m stronger for going through all of the hard to get to this good.”

He continued, with a grateful realization.

“I tell my kids about the five cents, but they don’t understand it. And that’s OK. They have warm water and food. They have everything they need, and they get it easily.”

“When I am sad or discouraged, I remember the feeling that day when I didn’t have five cents to buy those matches to boil that water. And I say, ‘Thanks, God.’ I’m not looking for 5 cents anymore.”

When asked if he misses his homeland, Julius trailed off, and then responded, “My feeling is that I wish I can take my kids to see home someday, to see where I grew up, but the country is not safe or secure yet. I can’t take our kids when I know full safety isn’t there.”

“But one day I will take them there...”

“And yes, I do miss home sometimes, but I made a new home. I’m good here.”

Julius being Julius. Even though he doesn’t have to stop and pick up the nickel on the street anymore.

Julius, the National Beef family is pretty lucky to have you. You’re home here.



“*I have five kids now, our oldest son is 10, and we have four daughters, ages eight, six, four and the baby is one,” Julius began. “The crazy thing is they don’t have any idea what it was like for me. And that’s a good thing.”*



Top left: Julius and his family on the day he became a United States Citizen in late 2016; Top Right: Julius with his younger sister, who he cared for in the Kenyan Refugee Camp, celebrating her graduation from the University of North Dakota; Above: The Buroko family in 2019