

Bridging Understanding | Munzihirwa's story

In the *Bridging Understanding* series, McMaster students who have experienced global crisis, war or conflict share their experiences in their own words. For more on the series, please visit the [McMaster news website](#).

Warning: The topics covered by the interview subjects include grief, loss, trauma, sexual assault, aggression and sexual and gender-based violence. The content of the interviews may be triggering for some. All interview subjects reviewed and approved the material prior to publishing. Views expressed are strictly those of individual participants and are not endorsed by McMaster University. For support, please see the university's [resources page](#).

Interviewer: Tell us a bit about your connection to Congo.

Munzihirwa: So, both of my parents are Congolese, born and raised, but they've lived outside since 1995, so for quite a while now, almost 30 years. But we've kept a very strong connection, so growing up we'd go back every two years, and more recently it's been every year, or maybe even twice a year.

So even though I've never lived there full time, I'm there quite often and my whole family outside of just us lives back in Congo as well, so it's a very strong and very close connection. I just don't personally live there anymore.

Have you been back recently?

Yeah, I was. I just came back from there. I spent the summer there.

Do you have memories that you think of when you go back, things you look forward to doing?

We go to visit my family. My grandma passed away a few years ago, but we go to her house. I have a very big family. My grandma had 13 children and then they all had children. So we'll rent out a couple buses and make it like a little road trip up to my grandma's house, which is always very, very exciting.

I'm always meeting new cousins or just like new family members when I go. I also have a lot of — comes with the territory of being a big family — a lot of celebrations, always.

In August, my cousin got married and a few cousins were graduating as well, so it was like a lot of celebrations in one, every time I'm there.

What led you to McMaster — was there any particular reason you thought, "That's the place for me"?

It was more about kind of the freedom I got from my program. Being able to do a combined major was probably my deciding factor, but also just the environment of Hamilton. I think I didn't want a super big city or like super downtown because I don't think I'd be able to handle the hustle culture. I do like it that it's a bit of both. It gives you the best of both worlds. You get like the quiet areas; you get nature and everything. But you also have a bit of downtown as well.

So, I picked Hamilton more than I picked McMaster.

I'm an international student — I moved here just for school. I grew up and went to high school abroad.

Is there something you wish your fellow students knew about you or your experiences?

I think the thing I have the biggest, like, issue with — not so much an issue, but I think I've encountered a lot, is just that people don't expect me to be an international student. I think it might just be because of I have a more English accent and so they expected like a different accent.

So the first barrier I always face is explaining to people that I am actually international.

My other thing is just getting people to accept that I have a connection to many places when I'm explaining my background, because my family did move around quite a bit.

A lot of people will say that I'm not really Congolese just because I've not grown up there. ... I've been raised as Congolese and been raised to have a very strong identity in that and I still relate to the countries I grew up in, obviously, but I've never *not* introduced myself as Congolese to people.

Just something like how I present myself to you is how I want to be seen. And so, if I am saying I'm Congolese, I'm doing it for a reason. Like I know for sure that I've grown up in other places. I could easily say I'm from one of the other places I've lived, but I don't. And that's because I know what it means to be Congolese. And so it's just kind of accepting that, like, there's a reason to the way I present myself and why I do it that way.

When you say, "I know what it means to be Congolese," what does it mean to you?

I think that's a pretty tricky question. I think for a lot of people and just in general, nationality can be confusing, but I think it's just I feel a very strong connection to Congolese culture, which is a vague way to say it because different parts of Congo are so different, but I think because that's where my family is from and where my roots are.

To me, there's no way to separate myself from being Congolese and so it's like the love for music and food and just the community and the values — so the way we respect each other and elders and things like that, that's all part of who I am and how I was raised.

And so, when I say like I can't *not* be Congolese, it's because of those things.

What motivates you in terms of continuing your studies and what you're pursuing right now?

I think what motivates me is my family does not play about education. My mom's father was a secondary school principal. And so even when we were growing up, he would make sure we were doing our homework. He'd really like, be on top of our education and our studies, but it's also just seeing the commitment that my parents and their parents had to get them through school and things like that.

My dad went all the way to his PhD, so he has a PhD, and his father was very strong about education and pursuing it and going as far as you can.

And so I think my parents would be okay with me stopping after a bachelor's degree, but they do encourage going further and just this genuine curiosity about the world.

But something my whole family emphasizes all the time is just to relate it back to Congo. So no matter what you are studying or what you're doing, even if you do stop after high school or whenever you do, relate what you've learned back to Congo.

I think in many developing countries, the idea of you can go out and get your education wherever, but it's important to remember your roots and bring it back home.

So it means something at home as well that I've come all the way out here and got this fancy degree. It means that I can do something with it when I do go back.

What's something that inspires you — in your studies or another aspect of your life?

My cousins have children, so I have little nieces and nephews — the youngest just turned one. I think it's just seeing how excited they are about everything and how curious they are. It can get a bit annoying when kids are asking "why" or "what" or "how," but I love it and I just, I think it does keep me going. Especially in my program, because it is a lot of asking why, what or how something is happening.

I spend my summers with them, and, after a long year of school, I feel like it's pouring back into me, and I get a little bit of their energy just before I come back to school.

Also, just because they are younger, it also shows them that they can also get as far as they want to. So, this gives them a reference point that's not a faraway person. Your own cousin did this, and so can you — especially for my younger girl cousins.

It can be very easy to get caught up in the culture of “You should be thinking of marriage” or “You should be this type of person as soon as you're done with school.” But the idea that you can go out and do more, or do whatever, and just knowing that I can give them that is what kind of keeps me going and motivates me while I'm here.

Is there a moment from your time here at McMaster, or a place on campus, that you really treasure?

It's the Black Student Success Centre (BSSC). My first year I knew about it, but I didn't go in too much because it's just a bit intimidating the way the room itself is set up. Like, you open the door, and everyone turns around to look at you and it's a bit like scary as a first year.

But since second year, I spend a lot more time in there and it's just ... McMaster is not a super big school, but it is quite big, so it does kind of feel like you get lost in the crowd at some times, but the BSSC feels small enough that you get to know people and it's kind of a reminder that you're a real person and not just a student. That you are more than whatever your student number is.

So, when you're in there, it's like you're making connections with not just students, but everybody who comes in — the staff or professors that come in and out. So yeah, the BSSC has meant a lot to me in these past few years.

Is there something you would like people to know from your perspective of what you've been talking about, and some of the other things that are going on in Congo?

In general, I feel like the perception of Congo, I don't think people know much about what's happening and it doesn't dominate space in the news very often, so I'd really appreciate it if people could understand that it's a very complex and long-lasting conflict.

It comes back up maybe every couple of years or every few years, but officially it has been going on since 1996. That is almost 30 years of continuous conflict, and it's a lot more complicated than the way it's been put out.

I think that when it's in the news, they like to extract just one thing at a time, which I can understand is easier to start learning about something, but I think it's also important, especially in the case of Congo, to understand that it's all happening at the same time.

For example, we talk a lot about mining and child labour and things like that. The focus goes to all of these tech companies, which is a very important part of it, but that cannot happen without the war between like rebel groups and neighbouring countries.

And so, you don't see much about the war itself, but for me the most important thing is to understand that the issues that we have with mining and child labour are able to happen because of the conflict. The conflict keeps it happening and on the other side, that conflict is able to keep happening because of the child labour and the mining and the exploitation of Congolese resources and things like that.

So, it's because these two main things are so intertwined, and they reinforce each other. I really don't appreciate it when I see it on the news when it's just one or the other without mention of anything else.

Congo is such a big country, and it isn't treated as such in the news a lot. The issue for me is a lot of the violence is in one part, which is the part that I'm from, but we're not recognizing that the capital city has its own issues that isn't directly related to what's happening or the conflict or crisis that we talk about.

When it's presented as just this one issue in the whole of Congo, I think it's kind of dismissive and reductive of what's happening and of the impact on individual people because it makes it seem as if it's spread out across the whole country, but it's in quite a small region.

For me that just makes it a lot worse when you actually think about it, because I guess if you can imagine that the suffering is spread out, it makes it easier on the spirit than like knowing that it is just this, like a much smaller group of people going through intense suffering.

And I don't think that the news or even research gives it enough attention in that way. So, it's just quite dismissive the way that people talk about Congo in

general.

Are there themes or ideas that you think people in the McMaster community should be aware of when it comes to this conflict?

There is a certain level of ignorance, and I want to say racism because it is Black people and it is Africans, and we do have certain perception of Africans out here. So, in my classes, even when Congo does come up in the conversation, I think I've had a lot of problems with the wording or like the language used to talk about it.

And last year I did have a few discussions with my classmates about it because there's a very big lack of empathy when speaking about Congolese people, and sometimes the language makes it seem as if it's understood that Congo has gotten itself into its own problems, and Congo should fix its own problems because it's a Congolese issue caused by Congo.

I've had quite a few confrontations about the language used to speak about it, because I understand that we're learning about the issues, but there is a certain way that things should be spoken about.

Even if you are saying, "I acknowledge that Congo has a role to play in its own crisis," there is a way to do that and be empathetic to the actual suffering.

I want to be understanding of the fact that Africa has been taught in a certain way in schools here, or if it even is taught about, but there is a certain level of respect that I think sometimes people are missing.

When you're looking at things from an outside perspective, there is like a tendency to put yourself above whatever you're looking at and above the people that you're looking at and I took a big issue with that, especially in the context of active suffering.

At times, I have just felt very personally disrespected, but in general, the lack of empathy from fellow students when speaking about Congo or African issues was really disturbing to me and so that's what I've experienced, at least at McMaster.

More so people don't know about it, but when they do, I feel like people do have kind of like a dismissive perspective of it. I think it's just again: Congolese

problem for Congolese people doesn't have anything to do with me. But then again, Canada plays a big role in the conflict and so it does have everything to do with us, whether we like it or not, unfortunately.

And I think that's one thing I really wish was more known on McMaster campus specifically just to know that you might not be able to do much about it, but to acknowledge that we are all playing a role in the Congolese conflict, without being there at all.

It's been hard to balance and hard to figure out.

I think the other issue is having to educate people, even when I don't want to. Some days I really don't want to talk about Congo because maybe it's just a tough day for me or it's hard to put something that's been happening for 30 years into one conversation or a two-second encounter or something. So sometimes I don't really want to, but I do feel that because I am here and because I am removed from the conflict, I do have a responsibility to talk about it and to educate people who are willing to listen. But it's just hard finding a balance, especially because I've never been somewhere where people just don't know.

My past schools everywhere else I've been there is at least a base understanding of what's happening in Congo, or at least the regional issues. And so here, I'm starting from zero. And so, it's a lot harder for me to navigate being here as compared to high school.

Is there something that sparks hope for you when you look to the future, whether it's for Congo, or your experience here and your future and relating back to Congo?

This one thing specifically does give me hope. It is a motivating factor, but at the same time it is disheartening. Almost seeing the way that students on campus have rallied for or joined the pro-Palestinian cause of seeing how other students from conflict zones are receiving support from their peers, from each other. Seeing how we're supporting each other has been quite inspiring. Just to see that it is possible.

But at the same time, the university hasn't had the best response to pro-Palestinian activists on campus and so it is disheartening to see that they are being punished for speaking up for themselves in some cases or not receiving adequate supports or having racist events passed off or dismissed or called freedom of expression or things like that.

So that is a bit disheartening. But seeing from a student perspective and from fellow students, there has been so much support for pro-Palestinian activists on campus.

For me, it says that our student body has the capacity to care for each other and for what we're going through. There is quite a lot of diversity on McMaster campus and so you do run into so many different people who have been through so many different things. Seeing that we can all come together and agree on one or two points is quite inspiring.

It does help me look forward to the future. Especially in my first year when I didn't know a lot of people here, and when news of violence would come up, it was much harder to go through it alone and not feel like I could share that, or anyone could relate to that.

Since then, I've met a lot more people who have had similar experiences, and so I don't feel as alone on this campus. So that is like looking into the future and I think in general with so many things happening in the world at once, there is more of like a coming into awareness just generally speaking.

As much as it hasn't happened for Congo just yet, I think seeing it happen for Palestine, for Sudan... seeing it happen slowly but surely for all these places, it does make me feel like at some point we will get to Congo and so it does help. I think I'm a bit of a pessimist when it comes to Congo just because it's happened for 30 years.

Things like this are much smaller. I'm not thinking this will be the end of the conflict, but it does help me see we can get to a place where it isn't as bad as it is today.

You mentioned BSSC, but are there any other supports that you find helpful or connections on campus that you find helpful?

I haven't spent as much time in the International Student Experience Office, but they have been quite helpful. That's one. The Student Wellness Centre, their counselors have been very, very helpful, specifically one of the Black counsellors on staff.

The general supports that the school already had in place is what I've been using. So, the counselors on campus, even the doctors in general, like everybody in the student wellness centre have been so helpful and so accommodating.

I haven't had as much of a good experience with my own professors. A few of them have been, I want to say unforgiving, but maybe just unaware. But if I do come to them and ask for maybe an extension on something because of what's going on at home, I haven't gotten as much support as I would have wanted or needed at the time.

But I think through other sources. So, the BSSC, the Student Wellness Centre, the International Student Office. Those are the things I think that have helped me the most since I've been here.

Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

I have to say that this is the first time my experience or my background has been acknowledged by the university. I'm really excited to be able to do this, and I'm really honoured to be able to do it. At the same time, I'm very aware that I've been Congolese since I came here.

This is the first time I'm being talked to about my experience as someone from the conflict zone, and it's not like the conflict has started this year. And so, while I do appreciate this so much, I really do think that the school should just acknowledge the fact that some of us do come from these conflict zones earlier in our time here.

I really would have appreciated it in first year — even just an e-mail to say, 'We know that you are from somewhere that is going through something right now. And if you need any support, we're here.'

Maybe just a link to the Student Wellness Centre or to the counselors. I really would have appreciated that a lot earlier. I fully did expect to just go through

my university time here, my undergrad experience, without being acknowledged for being someone from a conflict zone and so this means a lot to me now. I just wish it came a little bit earlier.