



Dr. Stephen R. Briggs

An unexpected opportunity, a robust test

photography by ALAN STOREY

"I CANNOT CHANGE THE FACT that I lost my father at the age of six. I cannot change the fact that I do not know if my mother survived the war in Burundi. I cannot change the fact that the woman who raised me, my grandmother, is no longer with me. And I cannot change the fact that I am a refugee. Through it all, I have never used my life as an excuse. I have never once complained about the life I have lived. I have only used my past to make myself stronger. I can and I will achieve everything I want, including a college education."

Mireille Kibibi, on her Berry admissions essay



Mireille Kibibi was born in the turbulent nation of Burundi in Eastern Africa. She was 4 when her family fled home to the neighboring nation of Rwanda, where unspeakable genocide had just ended, to escape the violence now in Burundi. Her parents became separated on the journey, and she never saw her mother again. Her father died a few years later.

Raised mostly by her grandmother, Mireille lived for six years in Rwanda and then moved to Uganda before immigrating to the United States. Although she can speak, read and write to some extent in several languages, including Kinyarwanda, Swahili, French and English, her education was sporadic, including only three years of schooling in Rwanda and two years in Uganda

before being placed in a U.S. high school, where she earned a diploma in four years.

Mireille completed 36 credit hours during her first year at Berry, nearly all with a grade of A or B. She graduated in May with a degree in accounting and plans to earn either a master's degree in accounting or an M.B.A.

THE UNEXPECTED OPPORTUNITY

Mireille arrived at Berry as part of a program that emerged unexpectedly. In July 2009, we embarked on what I have come to view as a robust test of Berry's core vision. We did not set out to conduct such a test, but one opportunity led to another, and we found ourselves having accepted the challenge of this test nonetheless. We would expose our cherished ideas and assumptions

to the "grave danger of refutation," as suggested by celebrated philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper. We would test the boundaries of our assumptions and their breaking points.

Berry seeks to graduate responsible adults who will improve the communities in which they live and work. Central to Berry's vision is a belief in the power of an academic residential community that combines rigorous academic preparation with firsthand experience through work, research, service, leadership and campus engagement. This vision forms the basis for our aspirations and our strategic planning efforts. This cherished idea is consistent with our enduring commitment to provide an integrated education of the head, heart and hands.



In her day, Martha Berry tested this integrated approach by making calculated investments in boys and girls who seemed trapped in a web of poverty but to whom she was attracted because of the “sparkle in their eyes.” Some were transformed by their experience at the Berry Schools; some did not make it through. The approach worked, but it was demanding and required that students develop *resolve* and *resiliency*.

Our test started with Naing Oo, a student in Atlanta whose family had fled Burma, a nation that now calls itself Myanmar. Naing learned about Berry at a college fair, and when Dr. Wayne Anderson, president of the Associated Colleges of the South (a consortium of 18 distinguished Southern colleges) was a guest at his family’s home for dinner, Naing “grilled” him about Berry, asking whether it would be a good fit.

Anderson wrote to me about Naing in September 2008, saying, “He’s a delightful and impressive young man, and I think Berry would be great for him and he would be great for Berry. ... He’s very thoughtful and articulate and has an interesting background to share. And he’s highly motivated – he wants to be the ambassador to Burma one day so he can provide help to that troubled nation.”

Anderson subsequently introduced me to Barbara Thompson, who at that time was involved with the Saturday School in Decatur, a school that provided English language support for students resettled in the Atlanta area who were refugees from war-torn nations. Thompson was a champion for

Naing, but also for several other students. She had a dream: She wanted to see students who had survived extraordinarily challenging life experiences have an opportunity to thrive and succeed in a residential academic community such as Berry.

At the same time, we were formulating, with Audrey Morgan, the Gate of Opportunity Scholarship Program as a means by which students could “work their way through college” with the prospect of graduating debt free. All of the pieces of the puzzle were on the table, ready to be assembled.

THE ROBUST TEST

Besides Naing, Thompson introduced us to five students from the Saturday School. A seventh refugee student emerged in our applicant pool. Five of the students visited campus in February 2009. I still remember how stunned they looked and how reserved they seemed as we walked to lunch. They were exceptionally polite and attentive but restrained. In retrospect, it is entirely understandable. They were overwhelmed by the campus and the rapid pace of discussion in English, which was for all of them a second, third or fourth language and one many didn’t begin to learn until middle school. They were uncomfortable because they lacked confidence.

Imagine growing up in a nation torn by conflict in which schools were not always available, even at the elementary level. Imagine fleeing the war zone and resettling in a nearby country – as an outsider and unwanted refugee – and having to learn a

new language. Imagine finally arriving in America in early middle school, perhaps separated from parents or siblings, and being placed in an urban housing project with its own set of challenging living circumstances. School is now available, but you are placed, knowing little to no English, into sixth grade or higher because of your age.

By and large, this is the story of our seven students. The amazing part of the story is that they all found a way to graduate from high school. How many of us could have graduated from high school in a foreign country in a foreign language in five years? And imagine the challenge if our schooling up to that point in our native language had been disrupted and inconsistent.

The great strength of these seven students is their resolve and resiliency. We never doubted their work ethic. We knew they were talented intellectually – how else could they have made it through high school under such trying circumstances? But this talent was not reflected in the traditional predictors of success in college. None of the students had the SAT verbal scores normally expected for admission to Berry. All of them had endured wrenching transitions, and most had suffered the ravages of war. All of them yearned for an opportunity to attend Berry College. None had the financial resources to make that possible.

Naing applied for and was accepted as one of the members of the first class of Gate of Opportunity Scholars. Fittingly, his Gate sponsors and mentors are Marti Berry Walstad and Randy Berry, members of the