

# KEEP MOVING FORWARD

*Jordan McElveen/Reporter*

**What goes up must come down, but when you're down you must have hope and faith in a brighter tomorrow.**

Giving up wasn't an option for math teacher Joseph Godoe after he survived the Lutheran Massacre July 30, 1990. Seven months into a bloody civil war that began in December 1989 and eventually swept through his homeland Liberia for seven years, leaving 600,000 bodies in its wake, his family tried hide in a church in the capital city. That was the last day he saw his parents alive.

"People were killing for sport; it was like they enjoyed it," Godoe said.

The country had taken a turn for the worst when Godoe was 14 years old, with tribal conflicts escalating into unbelievable violence. With rebel armies taking over the capital city of Monrovia, Godoe's family joined about 2,000 terrified people who had taken refuge inside St. Peter's Lutheran Church. It was the

government's soldiers, though, who broke down the doors.

As you can imagine, experiencing such trauma would be extremely challenging for anyone, especially a young teenager. The refugees hid inside the church as blood-thirsty soldiers broke in with knives, machetes and guns. Not only were there rebels killing innocent people, but the government forces were in on the killing.

Godoe saw many people brutally murdered. His own mother and father were shot to death right in front of his eyes. Along with his parents, he lost his oldest brother and youngest sister.

Very few people survived the massacre, but Godoe's sister Yassah and twin sister Josephine did. Today, they still live in Liberia.

After seeing such terrifying things, Godoe hid out in the church, hoping for a miracle, when a man he did not know rescued him. The stranger took his hand and they

began running. At some point during their running to safety, he lost hope and stopped.

"Don't stop running! If they're going to kill one of us, they're going to kill us both," the unknown man instructed Godoe.

They ran all the way to the foreign embassy, where they spent the day, but as night fell they were told they couldn't seek shelter there. Godoe and his hero had to go back out into the murderous streets. After going through so much he just became lifeless.

**"It's just like freedom; it gives you many opportunities,"**

"At some point I became numb because I felt like I could die at any moment," Godoe said.

The only thing that helped him push through was prayer. He grew up in a very religious home and fell back on his teachings to help him persevere through such a hard time.

Life was hard for him. After losing everyone, he spent almost over two years seeking shelter and mourning the loss of his family. He was lost and broken and ready to give up when, miraculously, his sisters left a sign on the door of their old home saying where they fled. They left this in hopes that someone from the family might be still alive and would see the sign. His sisters were in a neighboring country, Guinea. As soon as he knew where they were, he was overjoyed and got to them as soon as possible.

Godoe loved singing, and he also enjoyed church--these were the two main things that kept him going. He joined an orphanage Christian choir for young men who had lost family in the massacre called the Lutheran Acapella Choir. He was asked to become the lead singer of the group. This group was to help bring light to children who had been through traumatic experiences. They trav-



*Photo by Tyler Le Bleu*

eled throughout America, singing for three years, which is what eventually led him here.

When he finally came and settled in America, Godoe was 26 years old. He was still singing in the choir when the vice president for student life at Winthrop University discovered him. Although

he was urged to stay in the choir, he knew he needed education. Godoe pushed to be able to become a student there. His options for college were slim to none because he didn't have his green card. Although he received a scholarship from the Lutheran College, he wasn't admitted because

he was not a citizen. Once again, there was a miracle. He was accepted into Winthrop on a TPS (temporary protective status), and he decided not to major in music. He wanted to become a math teacher.

Even throughout his years of teaching at South Pointe since it opened in 2005, he was on TPS up until May 17, 2016. This was a big step in his life and was overly excited.

"It's just like freedom; it gives you many opportunities," Godoe said.

Disappointingly, he experienced discrimination. He felt like he was being judged before anyone even knew his story; even his professor would look at him and grade his work based off of his accent and skin tone. That did not stop him from success. He stood up for himself, which shocked his professor, who began to look at his work instead of him.

Before this bloody civil war Godoe describe Liberia as a very peaceful country. And although it has been nearly two decades ago he doesn't think Liberia will ever be the same.

Godoe describes his childhood before the war as pretty normal. He grew

up in the Lorma tribe, but as a Christian. He went to church and to a private boarding school. At the age of about seven years old, he and a group of other young males were taken and taught many lessons on everyday life and survival skills. At the end his "graduation" included getting a tribal tattoo, a Poro mark, or mark carved into him to show his accomplishment forever.

It was the crucible of war that made him stronger, and he no longer makes excuses for things. Almost 20 years later he still doesn't like to recall the events.

Godoe now has a family of his own, including a wife and two children--a boy, Nate, and a girl, Grace. Church has always been a major part of his life, but as responsibilities grew, he isn't as involved as he'd like to be. Still, his faith is still undying.

Despite what he has been through, Godoe says he is really happy and has a very happy home. He encourages other never to lose hope and to know everything happens for a reason, even if you can't see reason at the moment.