



BLAISE

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Sawt: An Oral History of Resettlement Campuses was funded by an Emerson Collective Fellowship.



ARRIVAL

The first few days in the US in general, I call it lost. I was lost. I was lost. I didn't know where was the North, South, West, East. I see everything black. They look alike. It was easier for me to get lost.

There was a time I wanted to go to the Walmart. I was new in this country, and I went down the road, and I was waiting for that guy on the light. He was red. I was waiting for him to be white for me to cross the road. And I stood there for 45 minutes, waiting for that guy to be white. . . . I know how to cross roads back home. We don't wait for this guy. We just run and cross the road. And I waited a minute and look[ed] from my left and my right . . . All the cars are a little bit distant, so I ran across the road. But there was an old lady. This old lady. . . she saw all this and she [said] “Oh, are you new in this country?” And I [said] “Yeah, I'm new. I'm from Africa”. . . excited about talking about where you're coming from. She [said] “OK, I'm going to show you something. So. . . there's a button here. You need to push the button in the middle.” Oh, my god, I stood there for 45 minutes. And the button was like just some inches away. . . So accepting learning is one of the first steps to do when you come [to] this country.



Hosted by:

**GUILFORD
COLLEGE**



Interviewed in English by:

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With the informed consent of participants, interview transcripts have been adapted here in narrative form for clarity and efficiency with a commitment to retaining the intended meaning.

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Back home, you speak the same language with everybody. You know everything. You do everything like everybody. So you're not scared of facing a new thing. But I remember here every time I hear. . . "Oh, tomorrow we're going to get . . . social security." I [thought] "What is that? Am I going to succeed in this one?" Because I don't know. I don't know how to express myself. So you get lost with everything.

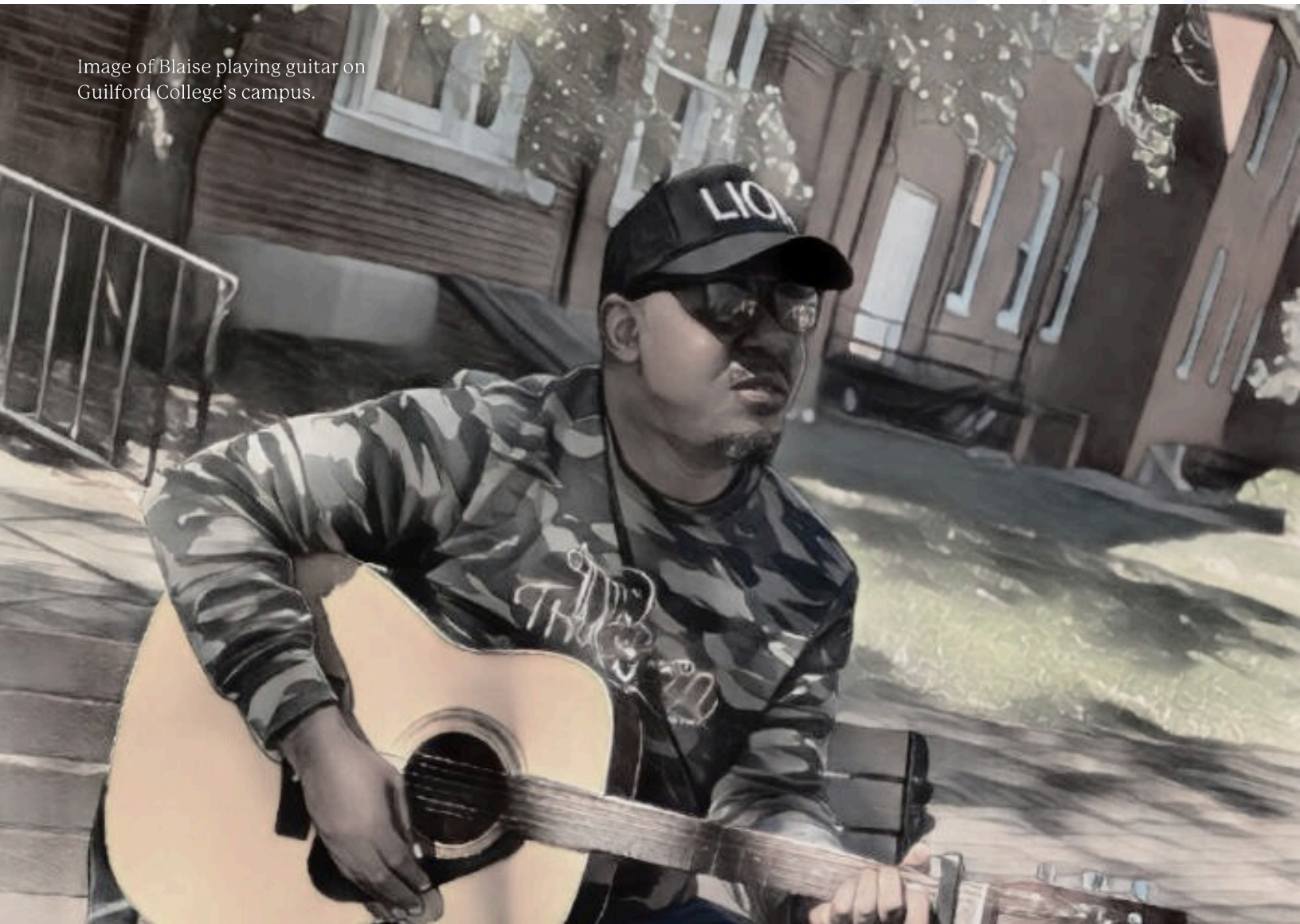
My guitar, which I call my girlfriend. . . because my guitar is always on my bed. That's my wake up to touch, you know, the cuddle, the hugs. We have this type of bond. . . I can call special. . . and the reason why I bring my guitar is because music will have been a big part of my life since I was a kid. My mother was a singer. Yeah, in a choir, she was a singer. Actually [at] home, everybody's a singer.

This is one of the first things I owned when I came [to] the US, one of the first thing[s] I owned. This is something that helped me to go through difficult moments, especially when I was alone in the US. In a time, I wanted to sing my sadness. This is what I was using, playing, calling songs. . . making some cries in singing. . . and the guitar was there.

Every time I sing or I use my guitar, the mood is not the same. . . when you play, you start to enjoy and start to discover something else. You start to. . . put your mind in playing rather than focusing on what made you sad. So it's like a cure – my heart's cure.

I like how, how it [guitar] treats me.

Image of Blaise playing guitar on Guilford College's campus.



SUPPORT ON CAMPUS

You find yourself lost. But the campus, it's another story. I think it was learning. It was learning because I'm happy I started here. Because I got some knowledge of life in the US by meeting people on the campus. And they were open. I could ask questions with my limited English. They tried to understand what I was asking. So it was like a process of learning. They tell you, "Oh, this is how they do things." Lost in the US in general, but learning at the campus.

Being in this campus or being in their house was like winning the lottery. It was like hitting the jackpot. That was a life's dream, [a] beautiful house, everything you need. . . their house was really, really clean. . . you see these facilities. . . being [in] a place where most of my people dream to be. [T]he place was good, beautiful people, people who understood the reason why we are here. And whoever knew that we are here as refugees or he was interested in helping, asking questions, "Oh, do you need anything or do you want to learn anything?"

And the campus . . . I think we don't have this type of school back home . . . When I grew up back home, everybody who went to school in the US, they say is smart. . . so it was like you put yourself down and you see these kids come into this school and say, "oh, this kid must be smart" . . . [but] people will open, open to receive you. They didn't show that feelings of superiority. *I started to feel like also I can be one of them. I didn't see myself different from the students or the teachers.*

[I lived on campus] rent free and you could eat for free [at] the cafeteria too. . . I remember there's someone who brought me a jacket from the campus, [a] student. Really good jacket. I think I still have it. . . because when I came, I only came with the sweater. Back home, we don't have this type of winter clothes. We don't know what is the winter. Home, we always in the 70s, 80s degree. But when I came, it was in February and it was really cold. For me, it was really cold. It's real cold.

Playing soccer as a former soccer player, that was the best experience, especially playing with the young people. And the young people got me and said, "Oh, you're so good, man. You're so good." You know, that was like, okay, I'm proving to you that I'm so good. I used to be a professional, you know?

Dave. . . a music professor. . . [h]e used to come and we play guitars. He has his guitar and I have mine. And we used to play the guitar together. It was a good, good experience. . . two or three times, he took me to his house and he brought his friends and we started playing music and everybody was like, "Oh man, you got a beautiful voice!" . . . so I started to feel myself, "Oh yeah, I'm accepted."

Robin was from the US, teaching me things from the US. You know, there was another girl, she's from Asia, really, teaching me things about Asia, because I like to ask questions. [Another volunteer] she was Hispanic. So, I started to ask questions about Hispanics, you know, at that point, I didn't meet a lot of them. And then my favorite person was Naomi. Naomi, she's American, but she's Jewish. So, she told me so many things about the Jewish [people], about their belief, and how they don't celebrate this type of celebration, like Christmases.



Image of Archdale Hall on
Guilford College's campus.

You get to get these different cultures, different mindset, and you make one thing which is going to be special, because you don't call it knowledge. It's like having an idea on different types of cultures. It makes you to know how to locate yourself.

One of the biggest challenges with the people who came and doesn't live on the campus, they only get their case manager when they come to visit them. When the case manager came to visit them, that's when they listened to English. And the case manager is there just for 30 minutes. So you get like 30 minutes to listen to this fast English. . . [but on campus] volunteers take you to the cafeteria. So you have to talk with them, you have to listen to them. So the six months was really, really beneficial for me. It was good for me because everybody was going fast, but I get to listen to them on a daily basis, like every day. So it was good like training my ears to get the fast speaking of English daily. That helped me a lot.

Hali [is]. . . how I see ECAR in general. She's like this type of lady who helps them, a woman, to give birth. You know, the lady who received the baby. These people are very important in our life because if they do wrong about their jobs, we are dying. But these are the type of people we don't mention in our entire life. They have been there the first day. Very, very important about the first day to make you live. But we don't mention them. So Hali was like them to me. The first day, she was there and she guided me. The first guidance I get was from her. So that's why she's very important.

It was good people ready to teach you or to show you, to guide you.

NOT WITHOUT ITS CHALLENGES

One of my dreams was a big bed. The reason why when I grow up, I lost my parents very young and the family I went to live in, they didn't allow me to sleep with their kids. So they started to put me under the bed. That's where I was passing my night. So putting something under the bed and go under the bed, sleeping under the bed. If I go like this, if I go like facing up, that's how I'm gonna sleep the entire night because I cannot move under that bed. If I put my belly down, that's how I'm gonna be if I lay down like that. So under that bed, I was a little, I was like 10 years . . . something like that. Under that bed, I was like, oh, what if I get the money? I'm gonna get myself a big bed. I don't have a big bed, big, big bed [yet].

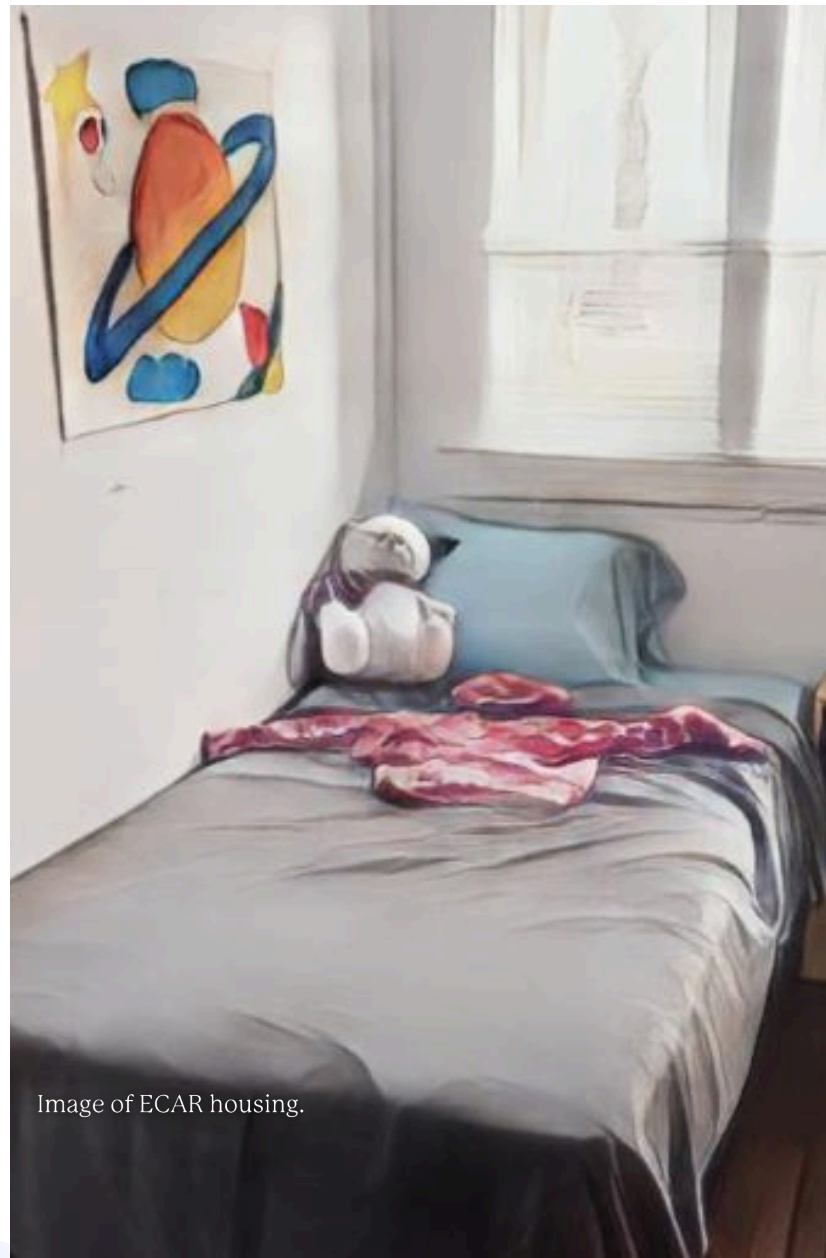


Image of ECAR housing.

CREATING A LASTING COMMUNITY

It was good to meet different people from different countries, cultures, continents. You become a little bit richer when you meet different people because you will learn from different people and you get one thing special from different things. Every time you cross a border, you're into something else. You're into another culture. You're into another mindset. You need to accept others' truth, others' reality too, for you to succeed, especially if you want to stay a long time where you're going.

This community means a lot. It means a lot. This is my new family. These are my new neighbors... I was talking to my sister who's still back home, and she was like, oh, remember, remember I'm your sister. . . and I was like. . . you will not be the first one to be here for me, which was a joke, but that's the true reality. Your neighbor can be quick to help you when your family [is] far.

I'm still ECAR-man. ECAR-man, yeah. That's my new name, ECAR-man.

I think ECAR spoiled us, because we didn't face the same thing that other refugees face. *The ECAR was like a shelter for us, like, you know, this type of shadow that it helps you to not face the really, really heat of the sun.*

Image of Blaise with a community member at the 2022 ECAR Gathering.

