

**‘A man and his wife are a team’**

A Galway-based Angolan refugee tells SANDY HAZEL about his ongoing wait for reunification with his wife and daughter

DENIS ANDRE met Angel eleven years ago, when they were both 17. They dated and during the courtship Angel became pregnant. Denis then had to woo her family with gifts and money, to prove he was worthy. By accepting these presents, Angel's family showed their approval and the young couple were permitted to be married in a traditional ceremony.

Part of this process involved family members giving the pair advice on married life, generally along the lines of ‘take the bad times with the good’. Denis says that as with any advice “you listen, but it depends on who is giving it whether you take it.” The couple had a daughter, Claudia, now aged nine.

Denis was working as a nurse in Angola at the time. It was discovered by his employers that he had helped some wounded Cabindan independence fighters with medicine and treatment. Cabinda is an enclave in Angola and is a disputed territory. Cabindans are claiming independence since the Portuguese colonialists left and as it is an oil rich region, Angola wants to keep it as its own. Although a treaty was signed in 2002 there has been continued resistance and fighting. Denis was removed from his post and found himself behind bars. While in prison he was advised to leave the country, and friends helped a fearful Denis to flee in 2003. He arrived in Dublin, applied for asylum and was moved to an asylum seeker centre in Galway. Back in Angola, his wife Angel and baby daughter Claudia had to leave the city and return to village life for some anonymity and protection. “It was very difficult for them too,” says Denis. “It is only through friends that we have a small amount of contact.”

Denis received refugee status and in January 2007 he applied to have his family join him in Ireland. Recognised refugees have a legal right and legislative passageway to apply for family reunification. But Denis, like so many others, encountered problems. “I was advised that a more official marriage must take place between myself and my wife in order for it to be recognised,” said Denis. “I could travel then, but not to Angola. So I was able to arrange to meet with my wife in Congo where we had an official certificate issued to us. Then I had all the paperwork and passports available to present for the family reunification. I was told that it would take a few months but had not heard anything at all after six months. I was told that my application was being sent to the Minister of Justice.”

A year and a half later, he is still waiting. “I do not know where I am in any queue or if there even is a queue. The worst part is just not knowing.” Denis has not seen his daughter in five years. He feels that while he is a patient man, the frustrations of the process are making life harder. “I do understand that paperwork must be processed and that each case needs to be assessed, but after three years in the asylum process, another two year without my family is incredibly tough. I do not know why it takes so long.”

As soon as Denis obtained his refugee status, he applied to the Galway-Mayo Institute

of Technology (GMIT), where he did a one-year access course in nursing. He has recently moved to Dublin, where he believes he will have more opportunities.

“Although I was a nurse for five years in Angola, I have to start again from the beginning here,” he explains. He says that the rigmarole of completing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) course, undergoing interviews for the nursing programme, living in a bed-sit and starting from scratch would all be made more bearable if his wife and daughter were with him.

“A man and his wife are a team, and you do all this for your children. I don’t just want them by my side, I need them here. She is my wife and my life is her life.”

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