

# *‘I want my parents to be proud of me’*

## Refugee brothers to graduate from RCSD 1 year after arriving in the US



**Brothers Desire, left, and Armand Chiruzo pose outside Wilson Magnet High School in Rochester. The pair, refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo by way of Uganda, are graduating from Wilson later this month.** SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

**Justin Murphy** Rochester Democrat and Chronicle | USA TODAY NETWORK

Guidance counselor Jamie Miner wasn't expecting any student visitors when she went to her office at Wilson Magnet High School one day in August 2019 to get ready for the coming school year.

If she did have visitors, she wouldn't expect them to be asking about college applications, which wouldn't be due for several months. And she certainly wouldn't anticipate that they would be refugees who had only arrived in the United States six months earlier.

She had never met Armand and Desire Chiruzo.

"They were going through the college application process before our kids who have been here for four years," she said.

Armand Chiruzo, 19, and his brother Desire Chiruzo, 18, will graduate later this month from the Rochester City School District.

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# Brothers

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They are planning to attend Nazareth College and Rochester Institute of Technology, respectively.

Their graduation comes after tragedy at a young age and years of poverty and hardship.

They have relied upon themselves, their other brothers and their cousin for support as they moved from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Uganda to Rochester in pursuit of an education and greater opportunity.

“Since childhood, our life has always been really tough,” Armand said. “We wanted to be someone as soon as possible.”

## Safety and school in Uganda

Armand and Desire (pronounced DE-zi-ray) were born in Goma, a city of 2 million people in the Democratic Republic of Congo in the province of North Kivu, directly on the Rwandan border. At the time they were born, North Kivu was perhaps the least safe place on Earth.

Disease, famine, wars driven by competition for mineral rights and unresolved ethnic discord from the Rwandan genocide of 1994 killed more than 5 million people from 1998 to 2008, according to the International Rescue Committee.

Half of the dead were younger than 5 years old. Among children in North Kivu

who survived, thousands were abducted to serve as child soldiers. Only half obtained a fifth-grade education.

The Chirusas' mother sold shoes and their father was a driver, enough to cobble together food and shelter for themselves and their four sons. About 2009, the boys' lives were turned over when both their parents died. They said their father died in a car accident, but were hesitant to say what happened to their mother.

They and their brothers went to live with a cousin, Safari Augustin. Together they left Goma in 2011 for a refugee camp in Uganda, then moved out of the camp to Uganda's capital, Kampala.

Before leaving Goma, Armand and Desire had spent only one year in school. By contrast, Kampala was safe, with a functioning education system. But that did not mean their lives were easy.

As Desire put it in a college admission essay: “Being a student in Kampala, one was like an academic prisoner who receives freedom only on Sundays and holidays.”

Classes ran 10 hours a day in more than a dozen subjects. Their school was about an hour away on foot, with no transportation on offer. The brothers woke up at 3 a.m. to finish their work before the day began.

The motivation, they said, came from within. From their time in Goma and the refugee camp, they knew what awaited them if they didn't succeed in getting an education.

If they needed any further incentive, there was the fact that Augustin, their

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## Armand Chirusa

Refugee who, with his brother, will graduate from Wilson Magnet High School later this month

cousin, spent his days working odd jobs — selling shoes, fixing computers — to pay their tuition.

“We had no choice,” Armand said. “He got the money, so we had to go.”

## Easier in America

In February 2019, after eight years in Uganda, Armand and Desire, along with their cousin and two older brothers, landed in Rochester after being granted refugee status.

Back in Africa, America had been a dream.

“Education, food, nothing to worry about,” Armand said.

They spent their first week holed up in their apartment off Lyell Avenue, gazing out the window at the falling snow and getting accustomed to the idea of their new home.

They soon began school at Rochester International Academy, the traditional intake school for arriving refugees.

Many students enter RIA speaking no English, with no formal schooling whatsoever. It quickly became apparent that Armand and Desire, who had used

English as their primary language in Uganda, needed much less help.

“Honestly, it's easier here,” Armand said with a grin.

In June 2019, just four months after arriving in the United States, they sat for the Regents exams required for graduation — and passed them. They received credit for their schoolwork in Uganda and were cleared to graduate in 2020.

Armand has been accepted at Nazareth and hopes to prepare for a career in entrepreneurship and the arts. Desire will attend RIT and hopes to become an actuary.

When they saw Miner, their counselor, outside the school building one day earlier this month, she offered to help guide them through the financial aid process to improve their packages.

They thanked her for the offer, but told her they'd already been back and forth with their respective schools three times.

“They're just two humble, kind, confident, motivated kids,” Miner said. “I say ‘kids,’ but they carry themselves like 30-year-old men.”

As Armand wrote in an application essay: “I want to be a role model to every teenager with no parents, who have no hope in furthering their education. I want to raise my family up so that everybody ... (sees) it's possible to overcome even the biggest hardships.”

“I want my parents to be proud of me.”

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