

A MOST UNWELCOME VISITOR

STUDENTS SHAPED BY WAR

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAMI MESA

One walked hundreds of miles to safety, fleeing men with assault rifles and machetes. Another drove in the middle of the night over roads pocked by mortars, traveling to a city where rockets were falling. Both of their paths led them to Pittsburgh, where they dug in this fall to start their careers in medicine and medical research. Shoghag Panjarian-Balian, an interdisciplinary biomedical PhD student from Beirut, Lebanon, and Jean-Claude Rwigema, a first-year med student from Rwanda, have both learned to live along the hard contours of war. They spoke with *Pitt Med* about growing up amid violence.

When the violence escalated between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, millions fled for their lives. Among those fleeing were three boys, the sons of a businessman and Hutu politician. The middle son, Jean-Claude Rwigema, was 13 years old. His brothers, Jean-Pierre and Jean-Paul were 16 and 10, respectively. He'd make a great doctor someday, people always told the 13-year-old Rwigema. But in 1994, all that was on his mind was survival."The killing started in the city," says Rwigema, now 26 and in his first year of medical school at Pitt. "So we started walking. We just walked a really long time. My parents were trapped in Kigali. We thought they were dead for three months."

The Hutu militias turned their weapons, including machetes, on the country's minority Tutsis and many Hutus while the international community stood on the sidelines. Bill Clinton has called the United States' failure to act to prevent the genocide in Rwanda his worst foreign policy mistake as president. More than 800,000 died in three months. The Rwigema boys found shelter wherever they could. "We didn't stay in any one place for [long]," he says. Rwigema initially brought a bag of his belongings. Quickly, he learned to travel light. "After a while, I learned to just leave things behind." The boys often traveled with groups of other refugees, Hutus and Tutsis alike. All around them were signs of danger: deserted towns, reports of gunfire, corpses on the roadside. The boys were perhaps too young to understand the danger they were in, Rwigema now says.

After several weeks of walking as many as 20 miles a day, the boys made it to a safe section of the country. When the fighting ended, Rwigema heard over the radio that his father, Pierre-Celestin Rwigema, had been named the country's minister of education. That was the first proof that his father was alive. The boys were elated.

"Sometimes there are moments that you can't explain. When I think of my life, it's a little like this," the med student says, tracing a sine wave in the air with his finger, representing extreme highs and lows.

His parents later described to him how they were among the 1,000 refugees protected by the manager of the Hôtel des Mille Collines, the real-life "Hotel Rwanda" made famous by the 2004 Hollywood release. The hotel's manager, Paul Rusesabagina, had bribed generals and others with liquor and money to keep those in his shelter safe. In 1995, Pierre-Celestin Rwigema was named the country's prime minister in a Tutsi-led unity government. The next year, Jean-Claude Rwigema went to Pretoria, South Africa, for high school. There he lived in an apartment with his younger brother and learned English. Rwigema eventually landed a scholarship at La Roche College in Pittsburgh's North Hills. He later transferred as an undergraduate to Pitt, studying chemical engineering and becoming a student researcher at the Pitt-UPMC McGowan Institute for Regenerative Medicine.



Rwigema

Meanwhile, Rwanda's poisoned political climate forced his family to flee their home country. Pierre-Celestin Rwigema resigned as prime minister in 2000 after the ascendance of a rival politician, Paul Kagame, the country's current president. Jean-Claude Rwigema says his father was threatened and forced to flee. The family was granted political asylum in the United States and has settled in California.

Rwigema says it would be difficult for anyone in his family to go back to Rwanda because they will likely be targets. "I'm attached to my father's history," he says. Yet he still thinks of returning to Rwanda someday, maybe to start a free clinic.

"Everybody used to say I would be a good doctor. In a way, I kind of hated it because they were choosing a profession for me. Later on, I kind of figured out it was my true calling."

He decided on medicine as a career after working as a home health provider in the Pittsburgh area. "One patient in particular, he had [muscular dystrophy]. We would just talk while he did his exercises. I just enjoyed being there. I liked taking care of him." The two talked movies, sports, PlayStation, anything at all. When Rwigema left the job, the patient's mother wrote to tell him he was the best aide her son ever had. "It's almost priceless when you see somebody is grateful for you helping them," he now says. "That's when I realized I belonged to this profession."

The young man with large, searching eyes and a quick smile says he has a heavy burden to carry.

"I feel a responsibility to serve. I feel like I owe my country.

"How many people make it out of Rwanda and get to go to one of the best medical schools in the country?"



Panjarian-Balian

Shoghag Panjarian-Balian and Alec Balian went to Bangkok, Thailand, for their honeymoon last summer, a few days after getting married in their home city of Beirut. Before heading out to sightsee one morning, Panjarian-Balian checked the television news. She was stunned to see that Beirut was under attack. Israel and Hezbollah were trading mortar fire. The city's airport had been bombed. Much of the country was shut down.

Panjarian-Balian was born in Beirut, a few years into Lebanon's 15-year civil war, which broke out in 1975. Back then, she and her neighbors saw fighting between a dizzying array of factions and militias: Syrians, Palestinians, Israelis, Druze, Shiites, Sunnis, and Christians. Beirut, formerly known as the Paris of the Middle East, had become a war zone. Her apartment building was bombed three times. The last time was in 1990, when Panjarian-Balian was 13.

"The bombs came during the day. We came at night and cleaned up. The next day it was bombarded again," she says.

Panjarian-Balian says she didn't pay much attention to which side was responsible for the damage to her home.

"I don't go into the why, the how, the 'What's next?' It was hit. That's it."

Now, war had returned to Beirut, an uninvited guest.

The couple flew back to the Middle East, through Damascus, which is normally a three-hour drive from Beirut. Somehow they found a driver who agreed to take them across the Syria-Lebanon border along a road that had been bombed just days before. Their circuitous route took seven hours. At dawn, they saw that a Lebanese military barracks along the northern coast near Tripoli had been bombed.

"Everyone was leaving the city, leaving the country, and we were the only ones driving towards it," she says. The city she returned to was worse off than she had feared. "We were born in war; we've seen several phases of the war. This time it was different. There was nobody on the roads. Everyone was depressed. Everybody [said], 'This is it—we can't take it anymore.'"

Panjarian-Balian had been planning to come to Pitt for graduate school. After completing a master's degree in physiology at the American University of Beirut, she'd decided to pursue her PhD so she could research cancer and teach. After looking into several programs in the United States, Panjarian-Balian was accepted into the School of Medicine's Interdisciplinary Biomedical Graduate Program. She was supposed to arrive in Pittsburgh in early August, but the war threatened to keep her away. The U.S. embassy in Beirut was busy evacuating thousands of Americans from Lebanon, so she had to go to Damascus to get her visa. There, she was told she might have to wait as long as three months to secure her papers. If Panjarian-Balian didn't make it out by early September, she would have to wait another year to start her studies.

The newlyweds went to the city of Aleppo, a five-hour drive north of Damascus, to stay with a friend while they awaited word on the visa. On Aug. 20, she went to bed but couldn't sleep until 7:30 a.m. Her husband woke her at 9:30. Church bells were ringing. The embassy had called, he said. Her visa was ready. They touched down in Pittsburgh late on a Thursday night. Her first class was Monday morning. ■