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Walking Down a Long Road

She grew up on three different continents and endured family tragedy. But Angela Donkor has always found the strength to continue her journey

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Junior Angela Donkor recently added the Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Award to a lengthy list of achievements. (Photo by Caitlin Cunningham)

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There probably aren't many Boston College undergraduates who aspire to being the United Nations secretary general, or president of Ghana. Angela Donkor '12 would be happy to have either job — or, for that matter, both of them.

And based on what she's done with her life so far, she might just pull it off.

Donkor grew up on three different continents, and didn't live with her parents until she was eight years old. She spent a portion of a summer posing as an immigrant worker in Kuwait as part of a research project funded through BC. She traveled to Uganda and Rwanda, where she and other BC students worked with children suffering from HIV/AIDS.

Her activities at BC have ranged from tutoring at the Connors Family Learning Center to volunteering at the Suffolk House of Correction through the University's PULSE program, to working in the 48 Hours retreat program.

Donkor burnished an already impressive resume — which also includes a Gates Millennium Scholarship and two scholarships from the Magic Johnson Foundation — last month by winning the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship, presented annually to a BC junior who reflects King's philosophy in his or her life and work. Although she wasn't at the Feb. 15 King Scholarship Banquet to formally receive the honor — she's studying at Peking University in Beijing this semester — Donkor was elated nonetheless.

"When I attended the MLK Scholarship banquet as a freshman, I was amazed at the accomplishments of the finalists," says Donkor, a Bronx, NY, resident majoring in political science and international studies. "I promised myself that I would work just as hard and that I hoped to earn a place among these scholars. This honor means that I am on my way to accomplishing what I came to BC for, which was to be the best student I can be while serving those in need."

But while she takes pride in her achievements and endurance, there is a sincere sense of both humility and determination about Donkor, qualities she says stem from being an immigrant.

"I have been able to learn and grow in part because when I've arrived at a new place, people have educated or corrected me to help me adjust," says Donkor. "Yes, being an immigrant means there is a struggle, but this struggle does not define your life — not if you don't let it. There is the moment when God gives you a test, to stand on your own. Can you rise to that challenge?"

"When I think about the similarities between Dr. King's life and mine, I think about using the challenges life throws at us as empowerment. I wanted to be thought of as a conqueror, not a victim. If my story can perhaps empower others to work for diversity, then it is all for the good."

Donkor's story began in the village of Konongo, in southern Ghana, where she and her twin sister Angelina, and her brother Alex, were born. Their parents, trying to make a better life for the family, found work in Italy and left the children with Angela's grandmother. Angela, two months old when they left, met them for the first time when she was six years old. Their next meeting would come two years later, when Angelina died.

"My sister's death was a painful reality," says Donkor. "I had seen Angelina vanish from my life, so I knew nothing was permanent. Since there was no guarantee of tomorrow, you should always strive to do your best."

The loss of her sister, and her grandmother shortly thereafter, brought about a permanent reunion with her parents and Angela and her brother went to Italy to live. It was not an easy adjustment, she says: She grieved for Angelina and her grandmother and struggled to form relationships in her new surroundings. But Donkor found that "life was beautiful" in Italy, and she did well in studies and sports, especially in track.

When she was 16, her family moved to the United States, where they felt there would be better higher education opportunities. Once again, it meant adjusting to a new home and school, this time in the Bronx — and she did, finishing second in her class while helping revive her school's track program and starting a peer tutoring initiative.

On the suggestion of a guidance counselor, she looked at BC and was impressed enough to apply. Although she admits feeling "intimidated" at first because she considered her background so different compared to her BC peers', Donkor took comfort in a wider perspective.

"I realized it didn't matter where any of us came from; we are here together, and that's all that matters. For a child from Konongo to come to BC seemed such an unlikely possibility, yet it happened — it's something to celebrate."

Her college career has been full of personal and spiritual revelations, but for her two experiences stand out. There was the trip to Uganda, with a stay in Rwanda, her first visit to Africa since childhood. Working with orphans, interviewing women who were using microfinance loans to help improve their lot, visiting the memorial to the Rwandan genocide — it all gave Donkor much to contemplate.

"I remember looking at the children and thinking, 'What made me special that God would give me so many blessings in my life?'" says Donkor, who seeks to organize a service trip to a Rwandan orphanage next year. "We didn't choose where we were born, or what families we are part of. Why am I not still here in Africa? These are questions I don't know if I'll ever answer."

Donkor's research on immigrant workers' experiences in Kuwait also broadened her view of herself and the wider world. Concerned about getting her prospective subjects to offer unvarnished and candid views, she convinced a hotel manager to let her work as a waiter so that she could ingratiate herself with the staff. This approach is characteristic of Donkor's belief that solutions to social problems are inextricably linked to empathy and practicality.

"If I can understand what you go through day by day, then it helps me to learn about you. Why is that important? Because if you want to make changes that help people, you should have access to the people you want to make those changes for."

As Donkor was to learn, acts of kindness need not be large-scale. She introduced one immigrant worker she had befriended to the Internet, and set up an e-mail account for him so he could communicate with family and friends. Months later, back at BC, she was astounded to receive a "chat" message from him.

“I thought I would change the whole world in Kuwait,” she says, “but this was more meaningful.”

Donkor, who is continuing her study of immigrants’ experiences in other countries during her semester in China, talks enthusiastically about the UN as a future destination (“There are so many opportunities for it to be successful”), but seems equally avid about someday leading the country where she was born.

“Being an outsider can help, and I have the credibility of an excellent education,” she explains. “I just want to reconnect with Ghana, because the biggest tragedy is to deny where you are from.”

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