

RUN AWAY

Diane Nukuri-Johnson escaped a life of discrimination and ever-present danger to become a world- class runner.

By Amanda McCracken

Dusk had fallen in Burundi when 15-year-old Diane Nukuri boarded a van to take her home after a weekend of racing in the capital city of Bujumbura. With a bloody civil war raging, conditions in the African country just south of Rwanda were extremely unstable. Halfway through the trip, the driver picked up a young hitchhiker. There was barely enough room in the vehicle, so he squeezed next to Nukuri, his head and neck leaning out the open window. A single shot rang out from a sniper's gun, and in a split-second the man crumpled dead and bleeding from the head. "That was a wake-up call," Nukuri said. It was time to find a way out of Burundi.

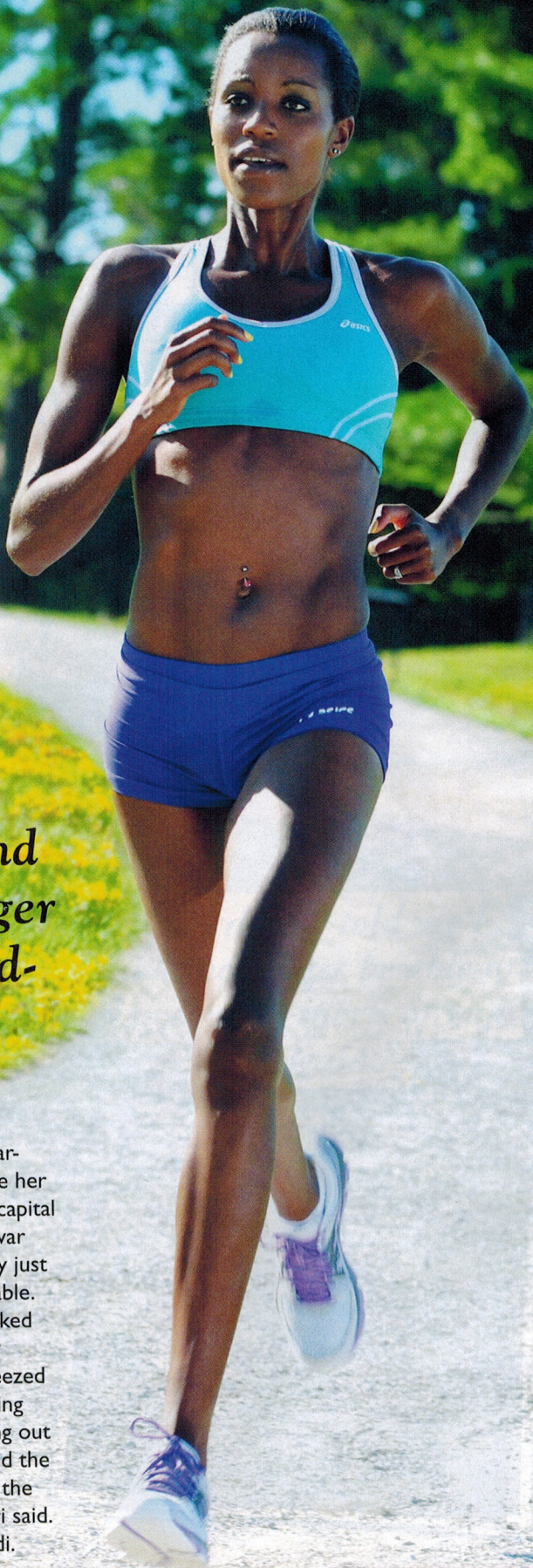


PHOTO BY PETER BAKER STUDIOS

Life in Danger

Since escaping Burundi and settling in the United States, Nukuri (now Nukuri-Johnson) has become a two-time Olympian, world-class runner and three-time All-American athlete. This August she raced the Olympic marathon in London, finishing in an impressive 2 hours, 30 minutes on a wet and winding course. But before she ever ran competitively, Nukuri was forced to run for her life.

Growing up in the midst of a civil war that claimed an estimated 300,000 lives (many of them civilians), the future was always uncertain. Nukuri recalls keeping a plastic bag of belongings at the ready in case she, along with her brothers, sisters and mother, were forced to flee at a moment's notice. Nukuri's father was killed by a death squad when she was 10, and the family lived in fear that troops would pay a visit to their home.

When danger seemed near, Nukuri crawled under the natural canopy of tea plant branches with her three younger siblings to hide. "It was hard to keep my little sisters quiet and to keep them from crying," she remembers. While her village was lucky enough to avoid attack, "we could hear people screaming and gunshots [in the distance]."

By the time Nukuri was a teenager, violence in her area had abated, but Nukuri's mother was left widowed with eight children. As the middle child (fifth in line), wearing mostly her older sister's outgrown clothes, Nukuri learned that if she wanted something, she had to be selfish. "I'd come home for dinner and hear, 'Oh, you didn't eat, we thought you'd ate'... just because there were so many of us."

Hidden Talents

Nukuri's life began to change at age 13 when a coach named Jean Pierre took notice of the young girl who outran her peers in gym class. He recruited her to run on his club team where she was coached three times a week and entered her in local competitions.

The coach also tried to persuade Nukuri's mother that her daughter

should pursue running—with limited success. The Burundi culture frowned upon anyone running for sport, especially females. The proper place for unmarried girls was at home doing chores. Nukuri says, "Neighbors tried to convince [my mom] that since I was the middle child, I should drop out of school to stay at home and help her." The village culture dictated that extra energy should be spent working on the farm, not exercising for fun.

Nukuri's older sister also raced for a time, but after being shut out of the house one evening by their mother because she came home late from a race, her sister gave up the battle. But Nukuri persisted, even when it meant lying to her mother and taking heat when she was caught. She recalls her mother "liked the prizes I'd bring home [from winning races], like a radio, but due to pressure from neighbors, she reprimanded and sometimes punished me for running. Sometimes my brother would cover for me."

Chance for Escape

The young runner's first taste of life outside Burundi came during competition. Nukuri's coach entered her in international events in Uganda, South Africa, Australia and Portugal. She even made it to the Sydney Olympic at 15 where she competed in the 5,000 meters. That same year, the young man sitting next to her in the van was shot, and Nukuri began to plan her escape.

For a full 12 months, Nukuri secretly plotted to leave her country behind with the help of her coach and mother, who despite discouraging athletics ultimately wanted the best for her daughter. When Nukuri saw her chance, she seized it without hesitation.

Nukuri was offered a spot to race at the Francophone Games in Canada, so she contacted an older cousin she'd never met who lived in the Toronto suburbs. Knowing she'd buy herself more time to disappear if she ran on both the first and last day of the games, she informed the Burundi Sports Min-

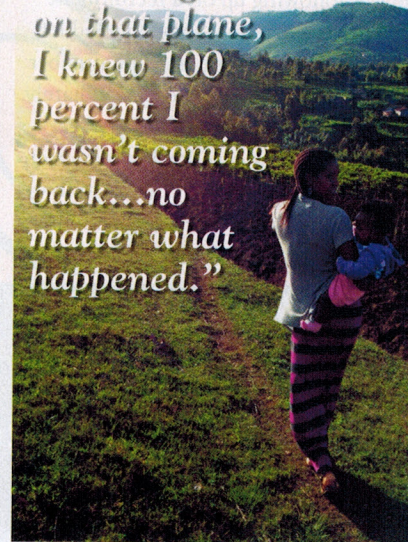
istry she would run the 10,000 meters and the 5,000 meters. By the time the gun went off for the latter event, Nukuri hoped to be well on her way to Toronto. Her brother and uncle drew up a waiver that her mother signed to seek asylum in the foreign country, and Nukuri was on her way.

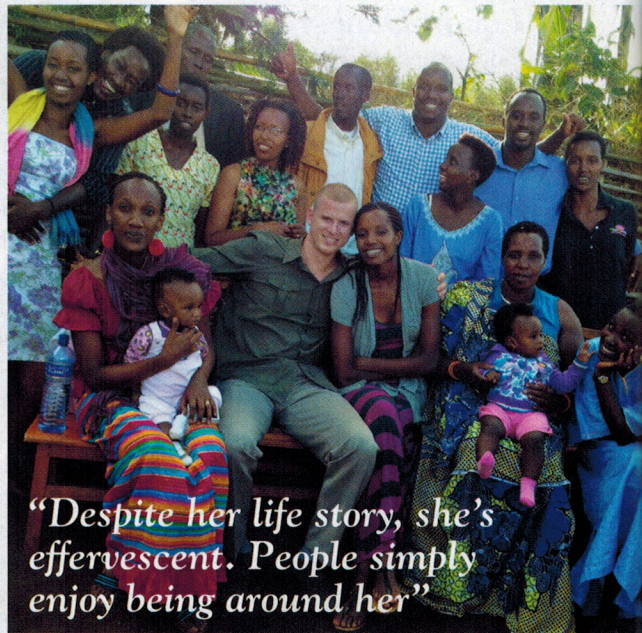
"Once I got on that plane, I knew 100 percent I wasn't coming back...no matter what happened. I honestly think that was my last chance to leave." In Canada, everything worked according to the 16-year-old's plan. Her cousin picked up Nukuri at the back of her hotel. In a foreign country, accompanied by a near stranger, Nukuri road six hours to her new home. She recalls nervously watching out the back window as they drove away, fearful the Burundi sports ministry would capture her and send her back.

New Beginnings

"I didn't realize how hard it was going to be," Nukuri says of adjusting to a strange continent, country and family. Canada granted her asylum and her cousin accepted the teenager into her home. She enrolled Nukuri in a French-speaking high school, as this had been her second language in Burundi. Still, the transition wasn't easy, and Nukuri often felt isolated.

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Although Nukuri now lives in the United States, she remains a Burundian by law and in many ways at heart. Nukuri held Burundi's flag at the 2012 Olympic Opening Ceremony (above), before racing the marathon nine days later (above, right). Nukuri is now close with her family in Burundi (far right), and travels there with her husband whom she met at a University of Iowa track meet (bottom, left).

"Despite her life story, she's effervescent. People simply enjoy being around her"

Instead of drawing inward, the runner channeled these overwhelming feelings into success on the track. By her senior year, she had posted impressive times on her high school team and was recruited by a number of American universities.

Transitions

Eager to get a college education, but unsure where she would fit in, one meeting with a coach sealed her fate. When newly hired University of Iowa coach, Layne Anderson, paid Nukuri a visit, he was following up on a recruitment lead: a piece of paper someone had left on his desk with her name and number scribbled. The two clicked immediately. Anderson helped set Nukuri up for academic success by allowing her a transitional period—before coming to Iowa in 2006, she went to Butler Community College in Kansas. Anderson explains, "It was a good bridge to help Diane gain confidence in herself and improve her academic English."

Nukuri continued to mature as a runner and enjoyed great success in Iowa, where she set school records in multiple events and won two Big Ten Championships. Anderson describes Nukuri as a "worker." While the city

slept, Nukuri would wake up at 4:30 in the morning to get in her long runs before the heat of the day. Her serious work ethic is balanced by a bubbly personality. "Despite her life story, she's effervescent. People simply enjoy being around her," says Anderson.

It was her effervescence—and stunning looks—that initially caught the eye of Alex Johnson, a reporter for the college newspaper. While covering a men's track meet, he spotted Nukuri for the first time. "I said to myself, 'I want to meet her!'" he recalls, and soon connected with the runner on Facebook. When Nukuri was at a party, she recognized Johnson in the crowd and asked him to dance. They were married two years later.

Giving Back

Nukuri now has permanent United States resident status, but is not yet a citizen. And despite the horrors she faced in her home country, in many ways she still feels like a Burundian at heart. After graduating, Nukuri returned home for the first time in eight years to see her family, who is enjoying peace in the war's aftermath. She has since returned twice more.

In 2012, Nukuri was given the opportunity to represent Burundi in the Olympic marathon and happily accepted. "She often gets frustrated with the male-dominated culture of Burundi," her husband explains. "She wants to do great things for the women of Burundi in sport." And Nukuri knows that setting a positive example is one of the best ways to encourage young girls.

Nukuri says that her country is moving in a more progressive direction, evidenced by the fact that more women than men ran for Burundi in the 2012 Games. However, she believes people at home need to support women running on the roads, not just those competing in the Olympics. Recently, on a visit to Burundi she was out running when a bystander heckled, "You must be a man!" Nukuri quickly shot back, "Oh, so you must be a female if you're sitting down."

Last September, Nukuri organized a small race in the town of Ijenda, a few miles away from her childhood home. Funded entirely through donations, the race charged no entry fee in order to encourage young girls and boys to start running. Nukuri ran away to pursue her dreams—now she is following her heart back home to ensure more stories like hers rise out of Burundi. ■