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Posted on Mon, May. 09, 2005

Clues, answers -- and a new dream

A mother's sacrifice, a daughter's search

JERI FISCHER KRENTZ -- STAFF WRITER

***THE STORY SO FAR...** Maryline Roux grew up in France, knowing little of her mother in the Ivory Coast. After her mother, Therese Yei Meledje, died last fall, Maryline and a friend went to West Africa to meet Maryline's half-siblings.*

On her first day in the Ivory Coast, Maryline Roux had reached her aunt's house at noon. She planned to stop briefly, then take a bus to her mother's village to meet her African family for the first time.

It was Nov. 6, her 38th birthday. Maryline had dreamed of this pilgrimage for years.

But on her aunt's small TV, she watched the chaos in the city of Abidjan, 40 miles away. News reports showed people in the streets screaming, "Rise up against French imperialism. We are at war."

With their French passports, Maryline and her best friend, Lydia Caillaba, were in danger. Maryline's relatives, fearing the worst, told her she had to stay put. The roads weren't safe. She had come this far, but now she was stuck. There was no way to get to her mother's village, and no way to go back to the airport in Abidjan.

Maryline prayed for her husband to call, for her cousin's cell phone to ring. It didn't.

Instead of going to her mother's village, Maryline paid a taxi to bring her half brothers and sisters to her.

They arrived, eager to see the elder sister their mother had told them of.

She introduced herself and gave each a hug. She passed out T-shirts and soccer jerseys and sweets from America. She gave them a framed photograph of their mother to put on her grave.

Growing up in France, she knew little about her African relatives. She had four half brothers and five half

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sisters. A 10th sibling had died when he was hunting. Of the sisters, the youngest was Delphine.

Everyone seemed awkward, except 11-year-old Delphine. She stayed by Maryline's side, staring at her new big sister as if she were an American movie star. She had two front teeth missing from her huge smile. Her head was shaved to show she was in mourning.

That night, while other family members slept on the floor, Maryline and Lydia were given a bed. Delphine slept between them.

The next day, Maryline helped Aunt Augustine cook fresh fish over an outside fire. Maryline learned to grind manioc root into a thick paste, which quickly fills empty stomachs.

In her aunt's town, few homes have toilets. People fish or hunt or work in the fields picking cotton.

Augustine's house has a concrete floor and an indoor toilet that flushes with a bucket of water. She also has a freezer: To make money, she fills bags with water and freezes them, then sells the ice to neighbors.

When it was time for her siblings to go home, Delphine came running back, crying.

I want to leave with you in your suitcase, she told Maryline.

One question answered

At home in Davidson with their three young sons, Maryline's husband, Patrick, spent a long weekend watching news reports and worrying. On Monday morning, Nov. 8, he dialed her cousin's cell phone once more. It was 6:15 a.m. his time, 11:15 a.m. in the Ivory Coast, and he expected to hear the rapid busy signal he had heard so many times before.

This time, it rang.

Maryline started crying when she heard her husband's voice.

The couple talked hurriedly, tripping over each other's words, afraid they would be cut off.

It's been so hard...

Where are...?

In Ousrou. Are the children...?

Are you...?

The village is calm...

Can you get out? Patrick asked.

We have no idea.

A way out

When Patrick went to work on Tuesday, a plan began to take shape.

At Bank of America, where he is a senior vice president, the corporate travel staff knew of a company that rescues



Top: Maryline Roux is surrounded by her three sons: Cheyn (from left), 10, Tevonn, 5, and Donovan, 2, and husband, Patrick, in their Davidson home. **Top:** Maryline, as a baby. (DAVID T. FOSTER III, Staff) **Bottom:** Maryline Roux's biological mother, Therese Yei Meledje, holding an unidentified baby. Maryline keeps this photograph on her nightstand. (COURTESY OF MARYLINE ROUX)

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business executives from emergencies. Called International SOS, it has a worldwide network that plans evacuations during times of unrest.

Patrick called the company's office manager in London.

Road travel is out, he remembers the manager saying. The best scenario: Find a helicopter to fly Maryline and Lydia from the village to the airport in Abidjan.

As wild as it seemed, the plan gave Patrick hope.

He dialed Maryline's cousin's number. Look for an open space, he told her. A soccer field, maybe. Someplace where a helicopter could land.

At 4:30 a.m. Wednesday, Nov. 10, he called his contact in London. I found a helicopter, the office manager said. But we have only a short time. She'll have to leave today.

The man faxed Patrick a contract. Patrick flinched at the \$3,100 cost, but signed quickly.

He called Maryline. Pack your bags, he remembers telling her. Say your goodbyes. And call me when the helicopter gets you to the airport.

Three hours before she was to leave, Maryline heard a commotion outside her aunt's house. She assumed it was someone coming to buy ice. But her aunt called for her.

This woman has walked here to see you, she said.

The visitor

Maryline says that as soon as the stranger saw her, the woman's eyes filled with tears. For a moment, the woman couldn't speak. She was her mother's best friend.

Maryline sat at her side, eager for the chance to learn more. She turned to her aunt. Ask her if my mother was in love with my father.

The friend spoke slowly, pausing for Maryline's aunt to interpret her African dialect.

Your father sent a man to talk to your mother. That's how they started their friendship. They were always together. Then one day, your mother disappeared. She came back and we said, where were you? And then people told her, you are pregnant. Her tummy was round.... When she gave birth, we found a little baby girl of mixed race.

It was a hidden relationship. You see, your mother's parents were afraid of white people. They were uneducated. They didn't know what to expect.

Your father wanted your mother to go with him. But her family thought they'd never see her again. They didn't know how she would be treated. They wouldn't let her go to France with you and your dad.

She let you go because she thought it would be a better life for you.

On the way home

At 1 p.m., Maryline and Lydia gathered their suitcases and began to walk to the soccer field to wait for the rescue that Patrick had planned.

Afraid of drawing attention to themselves, it was the first time in days they dared to leave Augustine's house.

As they heard the helicopter's noisy approach, they saw townspeople rushing at them. Lydia, afraid, grabbed Maryline's arm and broke into a run.

Nearing the field, they realized the townspeople were only excited to see the helicopter land.

The co-pilot jumped out. Ducking under the spinning rotors, he motioned for Lydia and Maryline to hurry inside. As the pilot took off in a whirl of dust, Maryline looked down. A hundred people stood on the green grass, their colorful clothes blowing in the wind, waving goodbye.

Postscript

Six months later, a place that once felt so distant is now a part of Maryline's life. Back in Davidson, neighbors and

churches are helping her raise money to buy vaccines for the people in her mother's village and send them supplies. They have collected toothbrushes. Toothpaste. Plastic gloves. Mosquito repellent. Vitamins. The kinds of things we take for granted, but are treasured by the people of Vieux-Badjem.

It's the least she can do in her mother's memory.

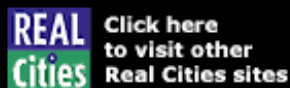
Maryline has also begun another journey.

She relives the moments she shared with a little girl who wouldn't leave her side, a feisty 11-year-old with a big smile and two missing front teeth, who slept in her bed and asked to go home with her in a suitcase. Though there are many barriers, Maryline dreams of bringing Delphine here.

She would like to be the mother her little sister lost.

Want to Help?

To help Maryline Roux send vaccines and supplies to her mother's village, send checks earmarked "Ivory Coast Project" to Davidson United Methodist Church, 233 S. Main St., Davidson, NC 28036. LAST OF TWO PARTS



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