



Adult Public Charter School

## 2016-2017 Graduate Profiles

*“The Academy of Hope will be a school in which the main subject for everyone, teachers and students alike, is not reading, writing or math, but hope.”*

*The following stories of five graduates embody Academy of Hope’s fundamental commitment to planting and nourishing a sense of hope. The lives of each of these individuals reflect resilience, hard work, courage and commitment to overcoming adversity – and are all driven, first and foremost, by hope for a better future. We thank these graduates for sharing their personal stories, both orally and in writing. Their personal achievements are what Academy of Hope is all about.*



# “Just Keep Pushing No Matter How Hard it Might Be”



## Amy Challe

**D**espite a lifetime characterized by abandonment, poverty, exploitation, rape, torture and serious illness, Amy Challe has never lost her spirit or lost sight of her educational goals. She embodies persistence, resilience, and strength in the face of unimaginable obstacles. Having now obtained her HS diploma, she is studying at UDC Community College in educational management and is looking ahead to a Ph.D.

### **Early life in Sierra Leone, West Africa**

Born in 1976, Amy was abandoned by her mother, rejected by her father’s wife, and eventually raised by her grandmother (who was the matron at a girls’ boarding school) and grandfather (a reverend in the United Methodist Church). Amy fondly recalls being protected and taken everywhere by her grandmother, and she has loving memories of her father’s monthly visits. She also adored “plucking fruits from the trees and rising early to fish and swim in the sea.”

She followed the older kids to school when she was just three, and began formal schooling at five. “I loved it from the start and found everything interesting. The teachers loved me and said I was brilliant.” She says: “At 11, I passed the ‘selective

entrance exams' with flying colors, but was denied entrance to a Freetown school because I was coming from the village". Finally, with the help of her father – a local political leader – she was finally admitted. Amy lived briefly with her father and his new wife, but left due to abuse from her stepmother. Her father then took her to live with her mother, "a drunkard", whom she had not seen since she was an infant.

### **A very tough next chapter**

Shortly thereafter, Amy's father lost his job and could no longer pay for school fees or books. And her mother left Freetown, leaving her with rum dealers she barely knew. One night while fetching water, Amy was raped and, three months later, found she was pregnant. She was 12 years old. Some relatives helped her through the pregnancy, but the day after she gave birth they sent her back to Freetown. Unable to find her mother, she went to the mother of the man who had raped her and asked for help. The woman agreed to care for the baby, so Amy returned to school to see if she could be re-admitted, but she was refused. So she left school and moved in with the woman caring for her baby in exchange for cleaning, cooking and fetching water. She and the baby later reunited briefly with her mother, but eventually they returned to her grandmother. With the Civil War starting, there was no food, so Amy had to gather and sell wood to help the family survive.

### **Never giving up on her dream**

With her desire to return to school still strong, Amy traveled widely in search of help to further her education. After many

refusals and broken promises, a wealthy uncle took her in and paid her fees, and she was promoted to Form 5 (11th grade). But the uncle tried to rape her, so she had to leave. Later a distant cousin took her in but the cousin's husband abused her and threatened to kill her if she told anyone. However, while living with another uncle, Amy finally managed to save about \$15 in change from the marketing money he gave her and, with the help of a good man she had met, she was able to apply to teacher training college at age 15.

Though attending training college was wonderful, Amy's experience was marred first by the theft of all the money she had saved, and then by the fact that she contracted TB and thus missed college for nine months. Yet eventually she completed the course and became a teacher in a Government primary school. There a former teacher took her in "as her own daughter". Amy later returned to training college to get a Higher Teacher's Certificate, but by this time the extremely brutal Civil War was raging. And in the late 1990s, during a student protest against the rebels' closure of the training college, the rebels captured, raped and tortured her. They had also murdered her father for his support of the Government.

### **End of the Civil War and starting a new life in the US**

When the war ended, Amy finished her studies and taught for two years. She later worked with war-affected children, providing emotional support and practical skills instruction, and then for the US Embassy as a cultural affairs assistant. She had also started university studies, but deferred when the

Embassy nominated her for a post in Iraq and sent her to the US for training. Sadly, while in the US, Amy suffered a stroke. She spent nine months in the hospital and rehabilitation before returning to Sierra Leone in 2010. After a year of recuperation, she returned to the US with support from a friend. Although she started off in a shelter, she later obtained transitional housing. And with help from an organization for torture victims, she was granted political asylum. “At that minute, I wanted to go back to school!”

### **Academy of Hope, UDC and beyond!**

With her solid educational foundation, Amy entered AoH in 2015 and completed her NEDP in six months. She says: “I asked questions and looked for all the help I needed. AoH is a great school, it has all the resources.” An AoH career counselor helped her to apply to UDC Community College, where she is now in the second semester of a program in Early Childhood Education. Her goals are to work in education management and then go on to pursue studies at the doctoral level.

Outside of school, Amy is a loving mother. She is proud of her eldest daughter, who is now a practicing accountant in Sierra Leone, and she is currently raising her lively five-year old daughter Victoria. She is also working to adopt a 14-year old girl from Sierra Leone to protect this girl from the difficulties that she experienced earlier in her own life. With her remarkable strength, intelligence, and persistence, we know she will achieve this and all her other goals.

# A Devoted Mother and Strong Student, Striding toward a Brighter Future



## April Russell

**A**fter years of physical and emotional upheaval, April Russell has overcome many life challenges with resilience and hard work. With her family now settled and her GED in hand, April has completed an accelerated Certified Nursing Assistant program and will soon begin a two-year Associate's program in respiratory therapy at UDC. She is a role model to her children and to all who know her story.

### **Early achievement overshadowed by family challenges**

April was born in 1989 in Camp Springs, MD, where her father worked at Andrews Air Force base. The family moved to Tampa, FL in 1991, but returned to Maryland in 1998 when her father retired from the Air Force and joined the police force. April has happy memories of riding her bike, climbing trees, and doing well in school. But these good times were interwoven with sadness due to her mother's struggle with mental illness and April's worry that her mother might kill herself. Over time, April's efforts to protect her mother and to take care of her younger sister began to affect her grades and her sleep. During this time her father worked two or three jobs

to make sure they were cared for. April recalls: “It was very difficult”. In 2001 her parents separated, and her father got full custody of his children after his wife put a gun in her mouth in front of the girls.

April did not see or speak to her mother for five years. During this time she says: “I worked through a lot, saw a counselor, started writing poems, and put my anger into a journal.

Things got better, my grades started going up, I took AP English, and felt validated.” At the end of her junior year in 2007, April and her sister decided to reconnect with their mother, who had returned to Florida and was doing better. Though she had gone for just a short vacation, April got involved there with an old friend and ended up living with him at her mother’s home. Although she began her senior year there, she did not graduate as her mother kicked her out of the house. She and her boyfriend returned to his grandmother in Southeast where, in 2008, their daughter was born.

### **An unsettled time as a young working mother**

Six months later April and her boyfriend both started working and moved into an apartment with a roommate to help cover the rent. Neither had completed high school. Looking back, April thinks: “this decision was not the smartest thing”. She worked nights at RiteAid while her boyfriend worked days at Banana Republic, together caring for their daughter and then, after 2010, for their baby son. Unfortunately, the roommate stopped paying his share of the rent, and April and her boyfriend were evicted. They returned to his grandmother’s house, and later moved into two more apartments. But when

her boyfriend lost his job, April says that their relationship suffered. They broke up and, again, April was evicted. She and the kids returned to her mother in Florida for a time, but that didn't work out. They then stayed with her grandmother, and later moved to stay with an aunt in Ohio. She and her children survived on government assistance.

Eventually her boyfriend came to get them and they moved back in with his grandmother in Southeast. April got a job at Target and her boyfriend worked for DCPS with autistic children. They signed a new lease, but this period ended when April learned that her boyfriend was seeing another woman and had had another child. When he left, April ended up in DC General Homeless Shelter with her two babies, and found herself pregnant with her third.

### **Meeting the demands of parenting while pursuing her GED**

At this point, April decided it was impossible to take care of her kids with minimum wage jobs and government assistance. Through a case manager at the shelter, she learned about AoH and enrolled in 2014, the same year that her third child was born. But "life in the shelter was a struggle". April had to leave at 5:30am to get her older kids to her cousin's house across town, take the baby to day care, and then get to AoH by 9am. At 12:15 she would retrace her steps, bathe and feed her family at her cousin's house, and return with the kids to the shelter by the 9:00pm curfew. Exhausted by this routine, April started to miss class. And her efforts to stick to her attendance contract faltered when her mother became ill and

needed April's help.

However, by September 2015, she had found an apartment in Southeast, got her children settled in neighborhood schools, and returned to AoH. She says: "I really started studying, started letting go of the bitterness, anger, and depression that had kept me from getting where I wanted to be. I learned time management, setting goals, and talking to my inner critic."

This gave her the courage to take two parts of the GED.

"Passing was a really big deal!" She later passed the social studies test, but failed math. So she started following the study guidelines she had learned and staying after class to get tutoring on equations. On her third try, on June 1, 2016, she passed her math exam. "That was a very big deal, and I passed in time to get fitted for my cap and gown and graduate on June 4, 2016."

### **Next steps toward a bright future**

After graduation, April immediately signed up for an accelerated CNA course through the UDC Workforce Development program. "That was a big awakening, I didn't know how much work it would be!" Her children's father returned to the family and made it possible for her to be at school on time and to get her certification. She has now enrolled in a two-year Associates program in respiratory therapy at UDC, and has signed up for 'work/study' (something she already knows a lot about!). Once April has her degree, she will decide whether to go on for a BA or to go straight to work. For now, she says: "It's been a long road – I'm still not there, but I'll make it. Most important is to be a good role model to my babies. They

deserve a lot because they've been through a lot. They love the fact that I'm going to school, they've been my biggest motivation, and they've had my back!"

## Reading is the Foundation



### Elvis Zaldivar

**E**lvis Zaldivar's life has been filled with challenges, most notably his long battle with illiteracy. But after enduring years of pain associated with trying to keep his secret, Elvis

*built the foundation that allowed him to enter AoH and go on to graduate in just two semesters. With his new skills and HS diploma, along with his ready smile and personal warmth, Elvis has entered a four-year program at the Mid-Atlantic Carpentry Training Center, where he is currently working and studying to become a Journeyman Power-Driver.*

### From El Salvador to life in DC

Born in El Salvador in 1979, Elvis grew up without much family. When he was three his mother traveled to the US, leaving him with her own mother. Two years later, his mother returned to El Salvador to bring him back to the US. His childhood memories are not happy.

Arriving in DC at the age of five, Elvis found life “very rough” as he did not speak English and his school was filled with racial tension. He started getting into fights and landed in the hospital twice by the age of 12. One day, in an effort to protect himself, Elvis brought a knife into the school building. He was in fifth grade. He also found it hard to learn. By the time he

entered middle school, he recalls: “I was a pretty bad character, hung out with the wrong crowd, got into trouble in school.” He finally moved to Manassas when he was 13 to live with his godparents, but they treated him like “a little slave” and so he left after eight months.

At 14 he moved in with his mother’s sister in Hyattsville, but that situation was no better as he had to sleep on a mattress retrieved from the trash, was tormented by an older cousin, and got no support from his aunt. Despite efforts made by some of his teachers, Elvis felt frustrated and believed he was unable to learn. When he graduated from middle school he still could not read or write. “My self-esteem was way down.”

Elvis stayed in school for two more years, spending weekdays in Hyattsville and weekends at his mother’s in DC, where he worked at Popeye’s for 37 hours between Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Missed class time combined with the effects of drinking and drugs led Elvis to be “kicked out” of Northwestern High School when he was 16. He then moved to Frederick, MD, where he lived with some of his co-workers. Two weeks after his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was picked up in DC and charged with carrying a pistol without a license; he was sentenced to three months in a halfway house. While at the halfway house Elvis spent days at Cardozo High School, but at the end of the period he quit school and went to work full time.

### **Living with a Secret**

Elvis and his girlfriend moved in with his mother, and Elvis continued to work at Popeye’s for minimum wage to help pay

the rent. For five years his annual salary increase was just ten cents. At 21 he went to work for a contractor, and at 23 took a job with a countertop business. At 25 he got into more trouble with the law and was nearly deported, before being given a pardon and returning to work. Then, at 33, he was laid off “for making too much money,” despite the many skills he had learned on the job and the fact that he was earning just \$15.50 after ten years on the job. He was depressed, having to constantly find “tricks” to get around the problems caused by his illiteracy and to guard against those who teased him or coworkers who preyed upon him. In spite of it all, he was a hard worker. Being laid off, Elvis says, “was the best thing that ever happened to me!”

With the cushion of unemployment insurance, Elvis was finally ready to tackle his illiteracy. He started by enrolling at the Washington Literacy Center, but was disappointed with his progress. “Whatever they taught me, I was not getting it.” Yet he managed to “look stronger” than he really was, due to the multiple-choice exams, and to be accepted at AoH. Not surprisingly, he was not able to keep up in his classes. So he dropped out and entered Carlos Rosario School, where he was taught to read and write in Spanish. There he also took citizenship classes, which led him to become a US citizen. In 2013 Elvis was encouraged to return to the WLC where he finally learned how to read and write in English.

### **Back to Academy of Hope and Beyond**

Elvis returned to AoH in 2014 for night classes, while working as a traffic controller during construction work. He

enrolled in NEDP and, after just a few months, received a certificate as “most improved student.” Again laid off from his job, Elvis stuck with his studies. He switched to daytime classes and completed his NEPD in Spring 2016. He thanks staff at AoH for helping him to help himself and for teaching him how to study. Overall, he underlines that his high school diploma and the math and study skills that he acquired at AoH have been essential in making it possible for him to move forward in his life.

Since graduation, and with encouragement from the Power-Drivers Union, Elvis passed an entry exam and was accepted into a four-year work and study program at the Mid-Atlantic Carpentry Training Center. His goal is to receive a diploma as a Power-Driver Journeyman in 2021, and possibly later to go on to become a construction consultant.

# “Don’t be Afraid to go Back to School, Just Do It!”

## Melvin Larker

**T**he life of Melvin Larker has been filled with losses and hardships that made learning very difficult. But his life has also been marked by hard work and personal accomplishment, including obtaining his GED in June 2016. Continuously struggling to overcome adversity, Melvin is now learning new practical skills and looking forward to helping others by becoming an alcohol and substance abuse counselor.



### **A very tough start and a bit of hope**

Melvin was born in 1965 in Washington, DC, the second of five children. In 1969 his father accidentally shot and killed his mother, leaving Melvin and his siblings in the care of their abusive maternal grandmother. He recalls her hitting him with shoes and bottles, and whipping him with an extension cord at school in front of his friends. He also recalls being beaten by teachers: “Schools didn’t protect kids in those days”. Kids teased him and he got into a lot of fights. After being held back in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, Melvin finally made it to junior high. But his grandmother sent him to a school far from home, on the other side of a notoriously dangerous neighborhood, and Melvin had to fight just to get home each

day. By age 14 he had developed a serious drinking problem, and in his second year in junior high he was expelled and labeled “emotionally disturbed” by DCPS.

But life brightened after Melvin was sent to the Leary School in Alexandria, Virginia. He remembers studying math, science, history, and having plenty of time for sports, “to get the energy out”. He learned many useful skills, earned a monthly stipend for good behavior, and won a \$50 savings bond and a pair of tennis shoes as “student of the year”. He also met Tim, who has become a life-long friend. The next year, though, DCPS placed Melvin back in junior high, in a neighborhood that was “the headquarters for crack cocaine”, a drug that took its toll on Melvin and much of his family. Fortunately he managed to transfer to Burdick Career Center, where he studied culinary arts and baking. Of Burdick, Melvin says: “It was a great learning experience, I felt like a pro”. Building on his love of cooking, he won an award for “most improved student of the year.”

### **More serious challenges**

However, living back at his grandmother’s house was unbearable due to frequent cut-offs of water and power, no food, and continued beatings (including to his eyes). “I couldn’t shower, couldn’t wash my clothes. Trying to go to school with all the family issues was very tough.” So he got a job at Popeye’s, dropped out of school, and moved to Landover, MD with his girlfriend, who he later married. Then, in 1981, when he was 16 years old and applying for his

learner's driving permit, Melvin learned that he had glaucoma and that he would be blind by the time he turned 40. In spite of his failing eyesight, Melvin worked for over 20 years, mainly in maintenance. And through courage and persistence, he managed to keep working for six months after he had totally lost his sight in 2003. He was 38 years old.

### **Finding his way back to education and to AoH**

Throughout these years, Melvin and his wife raised their son, who was born in 1991. The boy always did well in school and Melvin says: "I was there when he graduated at every level." Proud of his son's academic success, Melvin wanted to get his own high school credential before his son graduated from junior high. He started a GED program in SE but found it was far too basic, so he quit. When his son graduated from high school, and then from college, Melvin again thought about a GED program for himself. As he had lost his sight by that time, he contacted the Rehabilitation Services Administration of the Department of Disability Services for a referral. They sent him to UDC for a GED pre-test and then to Columbia Lighthouse for the Blind, but neither program offered critical technical support for the visually impaired. Finally, after years of effort on Melvin's part, the RSA/DDS put him in contact with Academy of Hope, and Melvin enrolled in the Autumn of 2014.

Melvin was so discouraged during the first semester that he almost quit, as it was difficult to get into the building and to find his classes on his own. It was also difficult academically, until his second semester when AoH gave him a computer with a voice synthesizer and screen reader. By the third

semester his CASAS scores were going up and he started taking GED tests. Though he didn't know anything about algebra at the beginning, he got the support he needed from his teachers and he started excelling! "They have some of the best educators that I have ever experienced. I call my three favorite teachers 'Melvin's Angels'! I enjoyed going to classes, the teachers kept us interested in everything, and we supported each other. I still have friends from the class." Melvin made a great effort not to miss a single day, going to class even in the worst weather and when he was not feeling well. And he used his sense of humor to get others to enjoy coming to school, too, and to keep the peace. "Not only do you learn about the GED, you learn about people". Not surprisingly, Melvin was selected to speak at the AoH graduation in June 2016.

### **Latest achievements and plans for the future**

Having overcome his own addictions to alcohol and drugs, Melvin is eager to enroll in a program to become an addiction counselor. With support from AoH, he is now waiting to begin work at Catholic Charities in Spring 2017. In the meantime, Melvin is studying at the National Federation for the Blind, learning how to navigate the Internet, use a Smartphone, and master Braille. He has maintained his friendship with his old friend Tim, and remains close to his son. As for his son – who has overcome many obstacles along his own educational path – he is now in medical school at Duke University. Filled with fatherly pride, Melvin says: "He is the part of this story that means even more than my diploma."

# “I don’t want to stop, I want to keep learning”



## Mui Derr

**T**he life story of 59 year-old Mui Derr includes the loss of her home, separation from her family, and years of hunger, sickness, and fear. Throughout, Mui has shown courage, resourcefulness, and

resilience. She has also demonstrated perseverance, generosity, and hard work. Having completed her NEDP in September 2016, today Mui is happy and proud of what she has accomplished, and continues to move forward with a ready smile and hope for the future.

## Early Years in Viet Nam

Mui was born in 1957 outside a small town in South Viet Nam, the first of eight children. Her Chinese father and Vietnamese mother owned a home and two clothing businesses. Although her family was Buddhist, she was educated in a Catholic girls school. She says: “I loved learning and was especially interested in geography”. She also loved the nuns who taught her, and wanted to become a nun herself. But as the family’s first daughter, she had to care for the younger children. So with great sadness, she left school in 1972 at the age of 15.

In 1975 the North defeated the South, and Mui’s life changed

dramatically. The family lost their home and their businesses, and was sent to work in the mountains. As her father was Chinese, they received one-half the normal allocation, which left them constantly hungry. And as their IDs had been confiscated, they could not get medical care or travel. Things were so bad at one point that Mui's father obtained enough rat poison to kill the entire family, but his wife persuaded him that they must try to survive. For five more years they endured hunger and sickness. Mui contracted pneumonia, which stayed with her for years.

In 1980 they were allowed to return to their hometown. But without IDs, a home, or even a license to sell goods, they continued to struggle. At first they slept in the market, later they squatted in their old house. During this period they survived only with help from neighbors and their father's former business associates.

### **Struggle to Move On**

Finally in 1988, as part of the official census, the family obtained IDs, and Mui's father helped her and her sister to leave Viet Nam. With a bit of gold that he had sewn into the hem of his shirt, he paid smugglers to get his daughters to the North, and then to China. But the journey was dangerous and the sisters, along with two of their nieces, were separated in China. The nieces were sold into servitude, but Mui escaped by refusing to be mistreated. For two years she stayed with a half-brother in China, but after the 1989 protests in Tiananmen Square, she was arrested for not having Chinese papers. Finally she and her sister made it to Hong Kong, traveling on

separate boats so that at least one of them would survive. There, Mui lived in a refugee camp for five years, working for Caritas and teaching knitting.

In 1994 the Hong Kong government declared that Mui and other refugees had to return to Viet Nam. In response she joined a group called “Freedom or Die” and went on a hunger strike. As she was finally receiving treatment for her pneumonia, her doctor advised her not to participate. But she was so desperate to avoid return to Viet Nam that she stopped eating for seven days, and ended up in the hospital. She eventually returned to the campaign, but ended her hunger strike. Finally in 1995 Mui was able to leave Hong Kong for the US. The International Organization for Migration gave her a plane ticket (which she repaid at \$50 a month for two years). After stops in Japan and Los Angeles, she finally arrived in Washington, DC.

### **A New Life in the US – and Academy of Hope**

Once in the US, Mui took a job as a housekeeper at The Courtyard Marriott Hotel. After just one year she had saved \$7,000, which she sent back to her family in Viet Nam to build a house. The following year she sent \$5,000 to close friends to help them replace their broken-down bus, which allowed them to continue making a living. She also made an effort to learn English, and through her sister, in 1999 she met a man who helped teach her. One year later she married him in Las Vegas, in Viet Nam and in DC!

Unfortunately, after working steadily for 12 years, in 2007 Mui

lost her job. Having seen signs at the unemployment office for GED and NEDP programs, she realized that she might find a better job if she could get a high school credential. Mui started her studies at Academy of Hope in 2008. To her husband, she says: “I always say thank you, for finding the program for me and for encouraging me to go.”

About her time at Academy of Hope, she says: “I loved it! If there was something I didn’t know, everyone can help me.” She especially appreciated the kindness and the support she got from the AoH teachers, and from her tutor, who taught her written English and grammar, and who tailored support to Mui’s practical needs (e.g., teaching her about credit card liability and common health problems).

In 2009 Mui took a job as a cleaner at Georgetown University. Working from 5pm – 10pm seven days a week, she attended class during the day. When in 2013 she switched to the 6:00am – 2:30pm shift five days a week, she continued her NEDP course online and through weekly meetings with her tutor. She also got help on breaks from many Georgetown students, who showed her how to use her new lightweight computer. She learned much from them, including how to create bar graphs and pie charts, and she is proud to have taught these skills to her tutor! Having graduated with her NEDP in September 2016, Mui says that: “I’d love to go back to school – maybe in nursing”. Later she thinks she would also like to volunteer to care for the elderly.

## Survivor



### D'Arrica Day

*In her 27 years, D'Arrica Day has endured a long string of life challenges, from physical beatings and sexual abuse to serious illness. Although she has been hurt by many of the adults in her life, today her energy,*

*resilience and warm smile are hard to miss. Now with her GED, D'Arrica is poised to enter a hands-on job training program and looks forward to building her own house.*

### Living “by herself” from a young age

Born while her mother was on a road trip from South Carolina to DC in 1990, D'Arrica was told that her name means “unique and precious”. Sadly, she has too often not been treated as such. As a child, she loved her father, but he was rarely around. She remembers waiting at the window for him to arrive, but more often than not he failed to show up. And at home, she suffered frequent beatings from her mother, which led to her to be placed in foster care at age 11. D'Arrica was later placed with her father and his new wife and family, but this caused even more trauma. Her father was frequently away from home, her stepmother was often locked in her room with migraines, and her step-grandmother was frequently drunk. It was in this environment that her stepmother’s teenage son, a heroin addict, molested D'Arrica.

“Even though I lived in a house full of adults, I was by myself. Nobody saw it or wanted to see it.” She tried to protect herself by staying at school as late as possible, participating in lots of activities (Step Team, Glee Club, basketball): “anything to keep me away from him”. But it was not enough. And during this time, a good school friend who had also been abused committed suicide.

### **Having a tough time at school**

Returned to her mother’s house at age 12, D’Arrica says: “I was doing good, making grades, was into sports and the Boys and Girls Club. I wasn’t a bad kid, but I was rebellious and disobedient. I was the cause of getting into trouble, always the mastermind. It was easy for me to influence others.” After her arrest for being a passenger in a stolen car (she says the theft was her idea), she spent two months in juvenile detention and was then put on probation. Then, in 2004, when she was 15 and a student at Ballou High School, she got into a fight. As the only lesbian on the girls’ basketball team, D’Arrica did not get along with her team members, and so quit the team. This led the coach to punish the other girls for discrimination. This action, she says, “came back on me”. D’Arrica was threatened, first by a group of seven girls, and later by a crowd of about 30. She refused to run, took a swing at one of the girls, and fought many of the others. While security people broke up the fight and took her back into the building, gunshots were heard nearby. D’Arrica was expelled from DCPS, “I was not even allowed to attend the alternative school for bad kids. What was I supposed to do?” So at age

15 she dropped out.

### **Trying to move forward while dealing with health problems**

D'Arrica came close to getting her GED through a church program, but when funding ran out she was unable to take the test. She spent the next few years moving between her mother and her father, but her relationships with both were still very difficult. She eventually moved to a friend's house in Virginia, and got her first real job working on a bread truck for Thomas' Muffins.

Between age 14 and 24 years, D'Arrica suffered severe abdominal pain and was hospitalized monthly. Only after ten years was she finally diagnosed with endometriosis and underwent emergency surgery. Unfortunately, there were serious complications, including blood loss, kidney failure, and a massive infection. "My body was never the same." Since then she has lived with fibromyalgia, causing intense pain in her back and her bones. To cope she has seen "tons of specialists" and tried to get well with the help of physical therapy, acupuncture, and psychiatry. Nonetheless, she is not allowed to work without restrictions. "Every other day I feel at my breaking point."

### **Entering Academy of Hope and taking next steps**

Despite these challenges, D'Arrica enrolled in Academy of Hope in order to complete the high school education that had

been cut short earlier in her life. Up to that time she says: “I had never found a program that fit me until I found Academy of Hope, with individual help and learning at my own pace. They focus on your weaknesses to make them into your strengths.” D’Arrica goes on to say: “I caught on quickly, was able to show others, didn’t have to wait. It was excellent! The teachers break stuff down for you and then make you explain how you got the answer. It’s really hands-on learning.” D’Arrica’s strengths are reading and writing. She is also interested in poetry and music, and as a child she played violin, trumpet, and piano. “I love music, it’s my therapy, it helps me express how I feel without being judged.” Having obtained her GED in March 2017, D’Arrica is committed to pursuing her education further. She is currently looking into a few hands-on job training programs through which she could acquire skills in carpentry and plumbing.

Her goals are to find employment and, one day, to build her own home “from the ground up!” In April 2017 she placed second in an AoH essay contest on how transportation systems can make education more accessible to adult learners. Her essay will be published in the next AoH newsletter, and D’Arrica will join several other AoH learners and graduates who will testify at the DC Council on April 24, 2017.

# “Academy of Hope Guided Me to Dream and Opened My Mind”

Mary Amos Zrara



**M**ary Zrara’s life has been buffeted by war, poverty, and displacement. But her strong spirit and enormous heart have helped her to survive the brutal conflict in her native South Sudan and to

*create a new life in the US. Today she is driven by love for her husband and daughter and an urge to help those in need. Now with her NEDP in hand, she is pursuing further education and runs a non-profit organization to feed children and the elderly in her home country. Her fortitude and her dreams are boundless.*

## **Living “Growing up in the midst of conflict**

Born in 1972, at the end of the 22-year long First Sudanese Civil War, Mary and her eight siblings lost their father when Mary was just a year old. Without his salary (he was head of nursing in the local hospital), the family left their home in Juba and moved to the “bush” to farm. Although the closest school was a two-hour walk away, back in Juba, Mary’s older sister Eve registered the two of them for class. “We didn’t have clothes, and could only buy a school uniform after selling our mother’s corn, okra, and peanuts in the market.” She caught mice to eat and at times went days without food. When Eve

became pregnant and dropped out of school after 6 th grade, she and Mary moved back to the family home in Juba and survived by selling boiled corn, tea and homemade beer. Looking back, she says: “Life was hard, but I thank God that I didn’t get pregnant or drop out. I liked my school friends and I just loved school.” While most kids her age had quit by middle school, Mary “just kept going”, until she was 19 years old.

### **Fleeing war and persecution**

By then the Second Sudanese Civil War was in full swing. It went on for another 22 years and has been followed by tribal violence ever since. When the war came to Juba, Mary, Eve and the baby fled to the Khartoum in the north. There Mary eventually managed to return to her education at a government-run “refugee school”; she finished high school in three years. “But life there got worse. We tried our same business, but it was dangerous because the government sent the police.” In addition, strict religious rules were imposed, which were especially hard for Christian southerners like Mary and her family. So, with savings from her small business, in 1996 Mary bought a cheap plane ticket to Syria. There she worked as a housekeeper and lived with a Christian- Syrian family who provided her with food, clothing, and a place to sleep.

### **Some light at the end of the tunnel**

While living in Damascus, Mary registered with the UN and finally received refugee status. There she reconnected with an

old friend from South Sudan, who was also on his own. Her friend, Kosta, was also doing housework and the two of them met on Sundays. "We went to church. It was the best day of the week, everyone came to church!" After a year, she says: "Thank God, we got married!" They rented an apartment in the refugee camp, got new cleaning jobs, made enough to pay the rent, and had a baby daughter. However, they feared being deported back to Sudan. Although they lived quietly to avoid trouble, in 2004 the government arrested Kosta and held him for two days, releasing him only because he had a wife and child. That same year, after eight years of waiting, they were granted asylum in the U.S

### **Life in the United States**

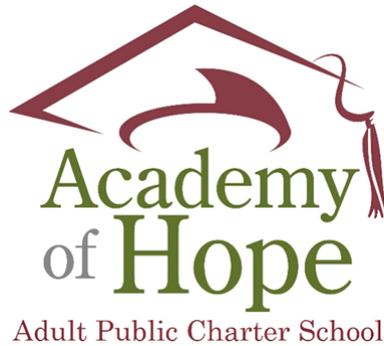
On September 29, 2004, Mary and her family joined her younger sister and her husband in Cleveland, Tennessee. But they were not happy, as they found few opportunities for school and work. Luckily, though, on her way to the US, Mary had met an American woman who had offered to help her out if needed. Mary called the woman and asked to come visit in Washington, DC. She and her family came for six weeks and never left. Mary quickly found a job as a hotel housekeeper, Kosta got work as a contractor washing cars, and their daughter entered Head Start. In 2008 Kosta got a job a part-time hotel bellman and later became a full-time bellman in a different hotel. By 2010 Mary had become a supervisor, began taking computer classes at Career Technology Institute and later, through Jubilee Jobs, got a position cleaning at the Calvary Women's Services shelter. Realizing that she would

need to go to school if she wanted to move up, she registered at Academy of Hope in 2013.

### **Academy of Hope and Far Beyond**

From the first, Mary says that everyone at AoH was welcoming and encouraging, despite the fact that her English was “not so good”. After a year of working part time and attending day classes, her husband took a second job so she could focus on school. She appreciated the fact that her teachers made her write, explained things until she understood them, and got her a tutor to improve her math skills. They also asked about her dreams. With this guidance and her own hard work, Mary obtained her high school diploma on March 1, 2017. And now, with ongoing support and encouragement from her husband Kosta and her daughter Claudia, she will begin her studies at UDCCC on May 15, 2017. There she will study business technology to help her manage a non-profit organization in South Sudan that she has set up “to help people who have no one to help them. I know how they feel.” It is called “Eve’s Road”, in memory of her sister, who passed away. Mary says the organization came about because “AoH guided me to dream and opened my mind”. It is funded by her earnings (she has a permanent part-time job at Calvary) and by her husband’s tips. In Juba the center is run by her sister-in-law and, at a distance, Mary keeps close watch over the operations by phone. Her next goal is to build a center to respond not only to people’s need for food, but also to their need for spiritual support. Beyond that, the sky is the limit for this remarkable

woman.



Academy of Hope's mission is to provide high quality adult education and services that change lives and improve our community.

We would like to extend a special thank you to **Jan Leno** for volunteering her time and skills toward interviewing and writing each graduate's profile.

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