

Adebayo's Story¹



Photo: Rick Bremness, CBC

Adebayo Katiiti is a transgender swimmer from Uganda. He came to Edmonton to compete in the International Gay and Lesbian Aquatics Championships in 2016. He is also a strong advocate for LGBTQ+ rights and is working to make changes for LGBTQ+ refugees in Edmonton.

Just days before coming to Canada, Adebayo was arrested and put in prison after police raided a gay pride event in Kampala. Police took off his clothes to check if he was a man or a woman, beat him, and pulled his hair out. They forcefully took photos of him and shared them on the local news, which his family was watching.

While Adebayo was in Edmonton for the swimming competition, he started to receive hate messages from his family. He decided that he couldn't go back home because he was afraid for his safety. Same-sex relationships are illegal in Uganda and can lead to long prison sentences, or even death. Adebayo claimed asylum in Canada, hoping to make Edmonton his permanent home. He was granted refugee status and is now considered a protected person in Canada.

¹ Information for this story was taken from the following sources:

Clancy, C. (2016, December 11). Ugandan transgender man secures refugee status in Edmonton. *Edmonton Journal*. Retrieved from <https://edmontonjournal.com/news/local-news/ugandan-transgender-man-secures-refugee-status-in-edmonton>

Osman, L. (2016, November 18). Persecuted Ugandan swimmers compete in international LGBT championship in Edmonton. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/persecuted-ugandan-swimmers-compete-in-international-lgbt-championship-in-edmonton-1.3714270>

CBC. (2018, May 25). Struggles of Edmonton LGBTQ refugees explored in new documentary. *CBC News*. Retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/edmonton/edmonton-refugees-alberta-lgbtq-documentary-1.4677680>

Adebayo has found work in Edmonton, a place to live, and friends. He has received help from the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers and St. Paul's United Church. In 2017, he began making a documentary film called *A Long Road to Peace* with a filmmaker named Katie Cutting. The film tells the stories of nine LGBTQ+ refugees who are all living in Edmonton. Adebayo and the filmmaker hope that sharing the refugees' stories will help make life better for all LGBTQ+ refugees.

Adebayo's life has changed a lot since moving to Edmonton, and he is looking forward to his future in Canada. He feels lucky to be safe in Canada while other sexual and gender minorities in Uganda are living in fear. He is dating a Canadian woman, swimming, and playing floor hockey. In the future, he hopes to have a career in sports as a physical trainer or a lifeguard. He was a national soccer player in Uganda, and it is his dream to play on Canada's national team one day.

Annet's Story²



Photo: Nadine Yousif, StarMetro Edmonton

Annet Atuhurire never expected to leave her home in Uganda; she didn't plan on boarding a plane to Vancouver or travelling across Canada to start a new life in a city called Edmonton. But that is exactly what she did.

Annet had a government job in Kampala, the capital city of Uganda, and planned to stay in her city. Following tradition in Uganda, Annet was expected to marry a man. Her family forced her into many relationships, but each time she ran away. One time, her family forced her to marry a man, but she ran away from that relationship on her wedding day. She couldn't tell her family that she was a lesbian and didn't want to marry any of the men that they found for her.

There is nowhere in Uganda that LGBTQ+ people are safe. It is very dangerous, and the penalty for being gay is life in prison, or even death. Most LGBTQ people who are put in jail are killed or never get out. Annet was put in jail for being a lesbian, but she was lucky and was released on bail.

Finally, after two years of persecution, in August 2017, Annet fled her country and found safety at St. Joseph's Basilica in Edmonton. Her suitcases in hand, Annet was ready to start a new life in a new city, thousands of

² The information in this story came from the following article:

Yousif, N. (2019, January 1). 'We are the only family for each other': How LGBTQ refugees are finding support and solidarity in Edmonton. *StarMetro Edmonton*. Retrieved from <https://www.thestar.com/edmonton/2018/12/21/how-support-workers-are-helping-lgbtq-refugees-find-support-and-solidarity-in-edmonton.html?fbclid=IwAR01he0V1yMmUfNdrNjsdgwZQAr9aZkk44KRAqNKGaQ2gRtGKf8wQU7LVdA>

kilometres away from where she once called home. Annet has now received permanent resident status in Canada.

Annet was full of dreams for the future when she came to Canada, but now, she doesn't know what the future will hold. She had been hoping to write a book about her life, but she was recently diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer. Even with her sickness, Annet is thankful for her freedom and the support she has received from the LGBTQ+ Newcomers group.

Evan and Samar's Story³



Photo: Michelle Siu, The Globe and Mail

It is impossible to be openly gay in Iraq, so Evan and Samar found another way to be together. They met online in 2013 through a private Facebook group for LGBTQ+ Iraqis looking for relationships and friendships. Since neither woman was single, they remained friends for three years.

Before the two began dating, each was outed as gay to family, and Evan's father threatened to kill her. The women fled separately to Lebanon in 2015.

In Lebanon, they began a relationship. They applied for refugee status from the UNHCR, and the agency tried to determine if they were telling the truth. Each woman was questioned in detail before the agency believed their stories.

Evan and Samar moved in together but pretended to be sisters waiting for visas to join their husbands in Canada. They were rejected by their families because they weren't wearing hijab and they were living alone without their families. They always felt scared that somebody was watching and listening. They had to be very careful not to show their love in public, or they would get beaten on the streets of Lebanon.

³ The information from this article came from the following source:

Bielski, Z. (2017, November 12). Burden of proof. *The Globe and Mail*. Retrieved from <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/relationships/after-lifetime-of-hiding-gay-refugees-to-canada-expected-to-prove-theiridentity/article34858343/>

The worst night was in December 2015 when four men on motorcycles came around them, grabbed them, beat them, tore their clothing, and dragged them by their hair. More than 20 people surrounded them, watching and laughing as they were abused. After the abuse, Evan and Samar sent photos of their injuries to LGBTQ+ advocates in Canada. The advocates helped them get their refugee applications approved much more quickly.

In May 2016, Evan and Samar got approved to take a flight to Ottawa as refugees. Private sponsors from a group called Rainbow Haven met them at the airport with hugs, tears, balloons, and welcome signs. The sponsors also helped them with government documents, enrolled them in English-language and job-training classes, set up bank accounts for them, and arranged free or low-cost medical and dental appointments for them. This kindness made them feel loved, respected, and part of a family.

Today, Evan works as a proposal coordinator, and Samar works in information technology. The women are learning how to do things they were forbidden to do in Iraq, like driving, biking, and swimming. They go out for dinner, drink cocktails, and hold hands at the table. These activities are simple, but to Evan and Samar, they are symbols of freedom.

Kabir's Story⁴

Kabir is a gay man from Bangladesh and the son of a mullah (religious leader). Kabir is also physically disabled and suffers from a mental illness. He has the intellectual age of someone who is only six years old. In his small village, Kabir met and fell in love with a male classmate, Riad, and they began a relationship. Because same-sex relationships are illegal in Bangladesh, the couple faced abuse, violence, and threats. Kabir was disowned by his family and blackmailed by another classmate who knew about his relationship with Riad. Finally, Kabir left his village because of homophobic persecution and claimed asylum in England.

In England, the Home Office, the British government department responsible for immigration, did not believe that Kabir could understand his own sexual orientation or be sexually active because of his disabilities. They wanted to deport him back to Bangladesh, where he could face being the target of an "honour killing" for being gay. In an honour killing, a member of the family is killed because they have brought shame upon the rest of the family.

Lawyers fought for many years to keep Kabir safe in England, and, finally, a judge believed Kabir's story and granted him asylum in England. However, Kabir is still afraid to be openly gay within his Muslim community because he is worried that they will reject him and maybe even kill him.

Kabir has made some friends in England, and he hopes to find safe and permanent housing. He also wants to find work and study.

⁴ Strudwick, P. (2018, September 14). Living with fear: Kabir's story. *BuzzFeed News*. Retrieved from http://www.sogica.org/en/life_stories/living-with-fear-kabirs-story/