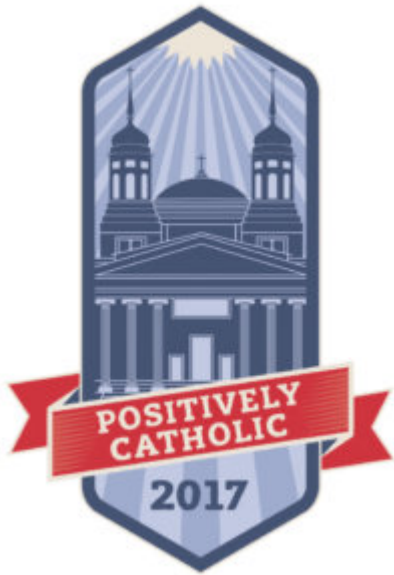


# Absent priest was man for others



When Anthony Zehyoue walks the halls of Loyola Blakefield or roams its football sidelines, he does so as an example of the universal church, mindful of the debt he owes to those who helped him get there.

While parents, former football coaches and professors are among his influences, one person in particular played a crucial role in protecting him and his family in the midst of war.

A native of Liberia, Zehyoue was 4 when the First Liberian Civil War began in 1989. Over seven years it claimed hundreds of thousands of lives and created approximately 1.5 million refugees, including Zehyoue's family, which fled the capital city of Monrovia.

"It was a tough time," he recalled. "You had to travel during the night to avoid being seen and heard. It was a time of desperation. It's scary because you literally had to take things day-by-day. ... You didn't know if you were promised another day."

Making it more difficult was the fact that his father had left a year before the war began to pursue a Ph.D. in chemistry at Louisiana State University as a Fulbright Scholar.

Help stepped forward, however, when Zehyoue, his mother and four siblings, in a village outside Monrovia, met Father John Williams. The priest became instrumental in their escape to the U.S.

“He took us to where food was more readily available and to where my mother could use the phone,” Zehyoue said.

The threat of danger was ever present, as Father Williams created a cover story for his new traveling companions.

“Rebel soldiers at checkpoints would stop him,” Zehyoue said. “He did things under the offices of ‘Hey, they’re helping me out with the Mass.’ Every time he was stopped, he gave them the same old song and dance, but it’s only so many checkpoints that you can go through before they get suspicious.”

With the priest’s help, Zehyoue and his family were able to make it to the neighboring Ivory Coast before immigrating to Louisiana, where his father anxiously awaited their arrival.

While he has warm memories of Baton Rouge, Zehyoue experienced another catastrophe, albeit from a safe distance. He was a sophomore at LSU in 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans, to the southeast.

“People work their whole lives to provide for their families, and it was sad to see everything they have get taken away like that,” he said. “I have a big heart for people going through natural disasters. First with Hurricane Harvey and now with Hurricane Irma.

“It puts things in perspective, that everything you have in your life can be taken away instantly.”

New to the Baltimore area, Zehyoue has taught only at Catholic schools. He credits his upbringing with bringing him to Loyola Blakefield, where he teaches history and is in his first season as the varsity football coach.

He knows that he would probably not have made it to Towson without the bravery of Father Williams, his family’s benefactor in Liberia.

Zehyoue said that the missionary priest died a few years ago, but that he will never be forgotten.

“No words can explain how grateful I am for what he did for my family,” Zehyoue said. “Him risking his life and well-being is the reason that me and my family are here. It’s terrific to be able to say that. He is the reason why I am here.”

*Kyle Taylor played varsity football for Loyola Blakefield, where he was in the class of 2001.*