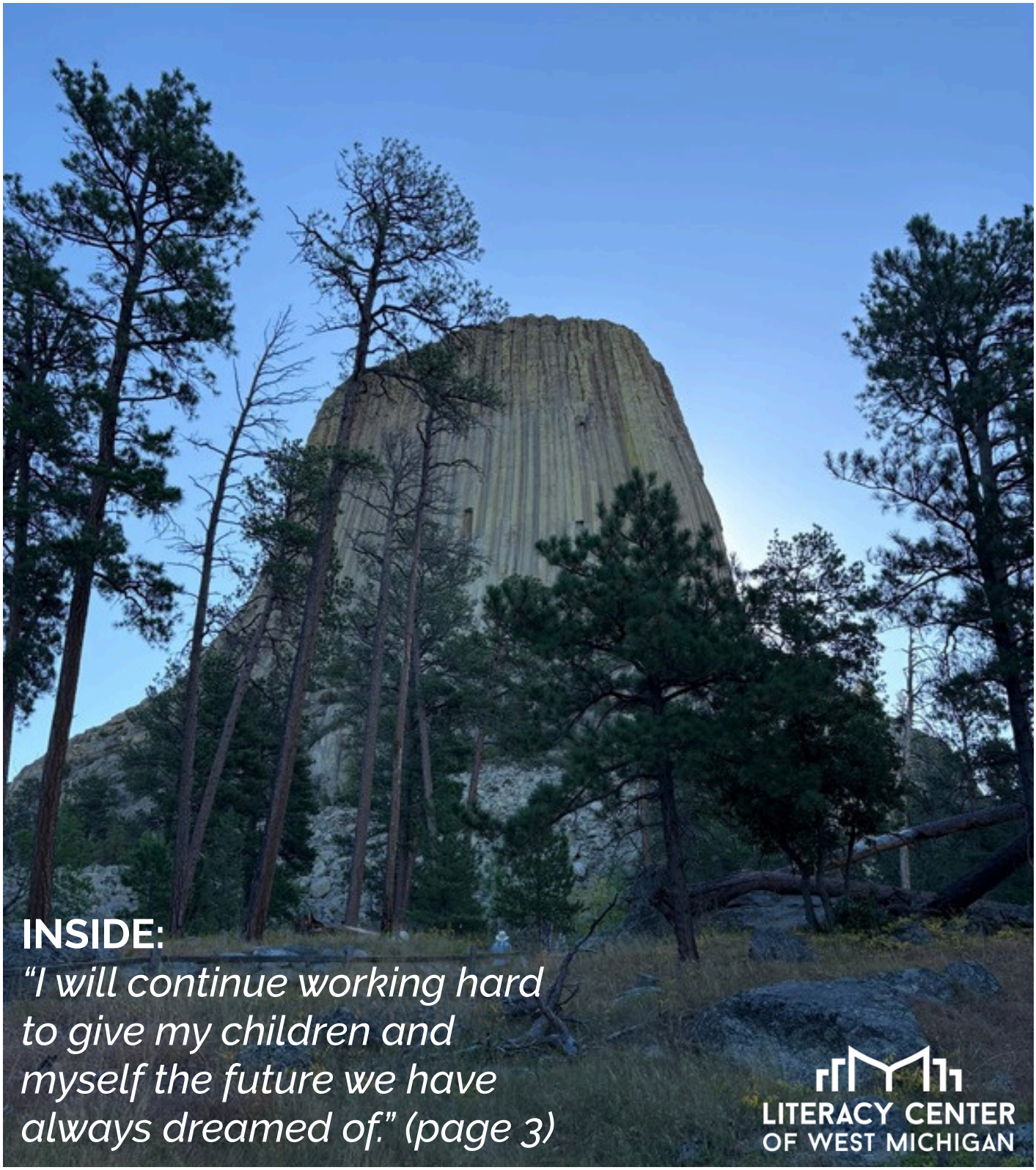
Learner Spark

A MAGAZINE ***BY*** LEARNERS, ***FOR*** LEARNERS



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MY JOURNEY TO A BETTER FUTURE

BY YOLANDA ORTIZ

My name is Yolanda Ortiz, and I am from Venezuela. I am a teacher, and I worked as a teacher in my country for thirteen years. I have a bachelor's degree in Education and a master's degree in Educational Planning. Now I live in the United States. I am studying English and working on my Child Development Associate (CDA) because my dream is to become a teacher again in this country.

My life changed because of the difficult situation in Venezuela. The political crisis, violence, and lack of freedom made life very hard for my family. I spoke against the dictatorship, and because of that I experienced harassment and felt unsafe. The government also would not give passports to my children or to me, so we could not leave the country legally.

I first went to Colombia and later to Chile to work and save money. My goal was to give my children a better future. When I had enough money, my daughter and I started our journey to the United States.

We traveled only by land. We crossed Colombia, the Darién Gap, Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, and Mexico. It was one of the hardest experiences of my life. We walked for many days and faced hunger, thirst, fear, and exhaustion. Sometimes I wanted to give up, but every time I looked at my daughter, I found the strength to continue.

In every country, I worked hard to earn money for the next part of our trip. I cleaned hotels, worked in shelters, sold things on the streets, and accepted any honest job I could find. I never wanted to stop because I knew my daughter depended on me.

After fifty-two days, we arrived at the United States border and asked for protection. Starting a new life was not easy. I worked in laundries and later in a nursing home. It was difficult to work and take care of my daughter at the same time, but I never gave up.

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From the first day I arrived in the United States, I started studying English because I knew it was the key to building a better future. Today, I work at a daycare center. I enjoy my job because I love working with children, and my coworkers have supported me while I continue learning English and studying for my CDA.

One of the happiest moments of my life happened in 2023, when my son arrived in the United States. Like me, he also traveled by land to reach this country. Today he is studying and working, and I am very proud of him. Seeing both of my children have new opportunities makes every sacrifice worth it.

My daughter and I have also needed time to heal from everything we experienced. We have received therapy to help us recover emotionally. Those experiences made us stronger and taught us to appreciate every new opportunity.

Today I continue working, studying, and moving forward. My biggest dream is to become a teacher again in the United States. I want to help children learn and show them that with faith, hard work, and determination, it is always possible to overcome difficult situations.

My journey has been full of challenges, but it has also been full of hope. I am grateful for the opportunity to build a new life in this country. I believe that every sacrifice has been worth it, and I will continue working hard to give my children and myself the future we have always dreamed of.

If you or someone you know would benefit from mental health support and services, please reach out to Network 180 through their website at https://network180.org/

TWO YEARS AWAY

BY AMENAN MARIE-LOUISE KOUTOU

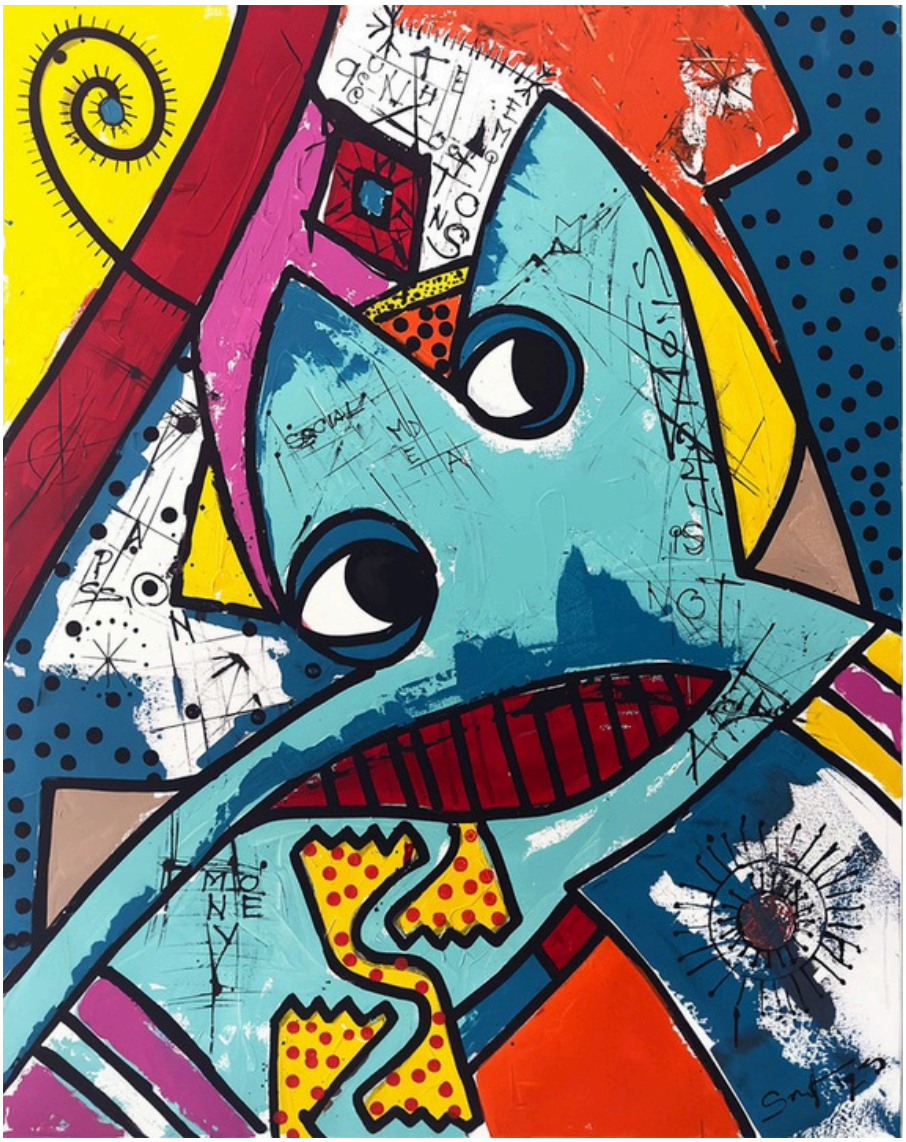
This photo submitted by Amenan Marie-Louise Koutou is of the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace (French: Basilique Notre-Dame de la Paix) in Yamoussoukro, Ivory Coast (Cote d'Ivoire).

Two years of walking along unfamiliar roads,
Of getting to know skies that didn't speak your language.
Two years of searching for your reflection in foreign shop windows,
Of becoming someone new without ever ceasing to be yourself.

You wore that sense of longing like a discreet piece of jewelry,
A tender weight, a memory that never lets go of your hand.
You learned to smile on streets that weren't expecting you,
To create a home for yourself amid the hubbub of others.

Sometimes, loneliness brushed past you like a cold wind,
Sometimes, joy embraced you without warning.
And in that mix of vertigo and triumph,
You discovered yourself to be stronger than you'd ever imagined.

Two years away,
And yet, here you are, more whole than ever.
For exile did not sever your roots
It made them run deeper.



I Am An Artist, 2023 – 48 x 60 in. – by Merima Smajlovic

I AM AN ARTIST

BY MERIMA SMAJLOVIC

This was one of the first paintings I presented to the public after coming to Grand Rapids. At that time, I was still very new to English. English is my third language, and it was not easy to stand in front of people and talk about myself and my art when I didn't have all the words I wanted to use.

But I was curious. I wanted to learn the language, learn about a new culture, and meet new people. I didn't want to be afraid of making mistakes.

In this painting, I used letters from Bosančica, an old Bosnian script, together with English letters. It was a way to bring a part of where I come from into this new place and this new language.

Art gave me another way to speak. In painting, I didn't need to translate every thought. Color, lines, memory, and emotion could become their own language.

I was learning how to speak in a new language, but through my art, I already had a voice.

THINGS I HAVE NOTICED

BY ANONYMOUS

I am from Burundi which is located in East Africa. I have been here in America for 16 years. I would like to share some social differences between Burundi and America. In my country social distancing is not an important concern. In our home we share most everything: beds, blankets, cups, plates etc.. There is no concept of personal space or belongings. If your sister can fit into it, then she can wear it! It is not yours alone.

This sharing of everything many times continues out in public. Strangers might admire your baby and start tickling or carrying her or him without asking your permission. In the USA, we will always ask for permission.

Our greeting is also different. In America a greeting can be “Hello” or “Hi.” In business, people can shake hands, while family and friends can hug. In Burundi when you meet a person, you have to shake hands or hug. To show respect to someone who is older or in authority, you extend your right hand and place the left hand on your right forearm. If the person is a peer or younger, you extend your right hand only. For family and friends you usually hug and sometimes you add three kisses on the cheeks. It doesn't matter if you are married or the other person's gender.

Eye contact is another difference I have noticed. In Burundi you cannot make eye contact with your superiors. This would be considered rude or disrespectful. In America it is considered rude or disrespectful if you don’t look someone in the eyes.

These are some differences I have adapted to since I live here now. I don’t think about these differences unless I meet someone who is from Burundi or I go back to visit Burundi. It will usually take me a few days to readjust to the culture when I go back to visit.

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