Her dream for Liberia
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HOPE HAS BEEN REBORN IN THE AFTERMATH OF CIVIL WAR, ANARCHY, AND A BRUTAL REGIME

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Cecelia Harmon-Rogers ’85 sat alone in the dark on a cold street bench, numb inside and sad to her core. It was November 1985, and the new college graduate and aspiring banking/finance professional had just finished a routine work day in downtown Boston while at that very moment, in a cruel twist of fate, her father was being buried thousands of miles away in Monrovia, Liberia.

Over the next two decades, Liberia would continue to be a source of unimaginable heartache for Harmon-Rogers. The West African country, created with promise by freed American slaves and characterized by lush tropical rainforests and a colorful indigenous culture, would be nearly destroyed by two horrific civil wars and rampant government corruption. Fourteen years of strife would leave Liberia’s economy in ruins, healthcare and education at a standstill, the capital city without water or electricity, and 250,000 people dead. But the women of Liberia never gave up hope during those tumultuous years. Under the leadership of Liberia’s first female president, Nobel Peace Prize winner Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, elected in 2005, Liberian women fought peacefully for their beloved homeland. They are credited with Liberia’s fragile rebirth and tenuous stability. Harmon-Rogers is one of these women.

Her journey began quietly enough, in typical teenage fashion. “Buff,” as Harmon-Rogers is known to family and friends, was living in Liberia and deciding on a college. Her police director father, a Michigan State University alumnus, wanted something small and safe for the third of his eight children.

“My aunt graduated from Regis in the 1950s and the wife of Liberia’s former secretary of state was a graduate,” said Harmon-Rogers about the Liberia-Regis connection. Two cousins, Sharon Cooper and Lafayette Harmon, graduated from Regis as well. (Lafayette is deceased and Sharon is currently the UNHCR special representative to Ghana.) “I wasn’t thrilled about the all-girl thing,” she laughed. “But I had never ventured outside of Africa and was ready for an adventure. I was excited to go to America, a place I had heard about my entire life. We grew up reading about the U.S. and watching American TV shows. I visited Regis in March and still remember my tour guide vividly and how beautiful the campus was. I was so excited when I received my acceptance letter.”

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Harmon-Rogers’ family was part of Liberia’s Americo-Liberian group, an estimated 5 percent of the population who descended from freed slaves. Her ancestors trace back to a plantation in Delaware and Gibson Island and South Baltimore in Maryland. In 1819, the United States Congress appropriated $100,000 for the establishment of Liberia by the American Colonization Society, led by prominent Americans such as Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, and President James Monroe for whom the capital city is named.

The first group of settlers arrived in 1820 and in 1847 founded the Republic of Liberia, establishing a government modeled on that of the United States, one that advocated freedom and equality. Liberia continued to modernize throughout the 20th century with American assistance and displayed high rates of economic growth throughout the 1950s, thanks to foreign investment. Actively involved in international affairs, Liberia was a founding member of the United Nations and a vocal critic of South African apartheid.

The political and economic climate in Liberia remained relatively calm throughout Harmon-Rogers’ youth. She recalls a middle-class upbringing filled with laughter and delicious African cuisine courtesy of her mother, Sylvia, a professional chef. Later, as Harmon-Rogers settled into college life in tranquil Weston, Mass., turmoil began brewing in Liberia. In a military coup, Samuel Doe of the Krahn tribal group overthrew the Americo-Liberian leadership in 1980, murdering President William Tolbert and executing his cabinet.

Far from the upheaval of her homeland, Harmon-Rogers felt the personal pressure of familial expectation. “My parents made a major financial sacrifice so that I could study abroad and I didn’t want to let them down,” she said. “The last words my father said to me in person were: ‘We are depending on you.’” This sentiment resonated with Harmon-Rogers and gave her strength during the four years she lived apart from her family.

“Holidays were hard,” she admitted, recalling classmates such as Mary Crimmins Adgate ’84, Linda Moroni ’83, Sarah Harpley Brukilacchio ’85, and Peggy Keegan ’84 who opened their homes on Thanksgiving and Christmas. During the summer months, Harmon-Rogers scrambled to find a place to live, writing letters to extended family members in New York and Virginia in search of a place to stay. “This was very unsettling. I couldn’t wait to get back to Regis where life was stable,” she said.

She flourished there, majoring in economics and establishing close friendships with classmates and faculty. Sister Zita Fleming, then dean of students, provided much-needed guidance. “She made my experience bearable and became a mother-presence to me,” Harmon-Rogers said. Sister Zita remembers a young woman, “full of light and love and fun.” Classmate Keegan was struck by Harmon-Rogers’ inquisitive and pensive nature and Harpley Brukilacchio recalls a chance meeting freshman year that developed into a lifelong kinship. “Harpley/Harmon: We shared a mailbox,” she said.

Ever self-reliant, Harmon-Rogers secured a part-time job as a bookkeeper with a Boston real estate firm and learned to navigate the MBTA with ease. Sometimes exploration was necessary. “There weren’t any Weston hairdressers who could cut black hair so I had to find one,” she said of her trips to an ethnic hair salon in Copley Square. On other occasions, she served as the unofficial tour guide for her American and Puerto Rican friends. “There I was the foreigner and the Boston expert,” she chuckled.

Graduation was bittersweet. Harmon-Rogers reunited briefly with her visiting mother and then moved on to the next phase of her life in the States. She accepted a permanent job with the real estate company and moved into a six-bedroom house in Newton with Harpley Brukilacchio and several Regis classmates.

And then the news arrived that Harmon-Rogers’ father, Edwin, had died. “My mother told me not to come home for the funeral. It was unsafe to travel in Liberia after another attempted military coup. I hadn’t seen my father in four years and now he was gone,” she said. Harmon-Rogers detected loneliness in her mother’s voice when they spoke by phone every Sunday. She quit her job and booked her airline ticket.
Though waves of discontent echoed throughout Liberia in the late ’80s, Harmon-Rogers was happy there and acclimated quickly. She got a job with Citibank in customer service and was promoted to the treasury department. She married William Rogers. But life was about to change forever. Rebels from the National Patriotic Front of Liberia led by Charles Taylor launched an insurrection against Doe’s government in 1989, leading to the first Liberian civil war. The economy came to a grinding halt, Citibank closed down, and the capital city of Monrovia, where she and her family lived, fell under siege.

“Overnight our community became a war zone,” she said. “Armed rebels pulled us from our homes by force. They were fully armed—hand grenades strapped across their chests, waving machetes in the air, high on drugs, and dressed crazily in women’s dresses and army boots. They dragged thousands of people into the street. Along the road, people lay dead and dying. Bodies bloated and unrecognizable. We couldn’t react, couldn’t grieve, or the rebels would kill us. They didn’t want witnesses. I kept my expression passive as I memorized the faces of the dead so I could tell their families.”

Harmon-Rogers trudged along with her mother and husband, their only solace that the two youngest Harmons were not with them. “I sent them out of the country before the invasion,” Harmon-Rogers explained. “I’d heard that rebels were abducting and raping young girls and my sister was a teenager. My brother was 6’ 4” and often mistaken for an American. He would be killed on sight.”

As the ragtag army led the terrorized Liberian families, one of the rebels took a closer look at William and pulled him out of line to be shot. “He accused my husband of being from a particular tribe, said his features resembled that group. Another rebel pointed out scars on William’s ankle, insisting they marked him as a government soldier,” she recalled. “He’s no soldier,” she told them with a laugh. “Just a clumsy soccer player who was kicked in the ankles.” Seven times she boldly intervened, Bible in hand, and with humor convinced them otherwise.

Harmon-Rogers and her family, along with 30 other people, were sequestered in a 10-by-15 foot office at the overtaken University of Liberia’s Fendel Campus. They remained there for four months with no electricity or running water. Day and night they heard piercing screams and constant gunfire. There was no privacy and rebel interrogations were frequent. “We pooled our money and gave it to my mother. She scrounged for food and tried her best to make our one meal appetizing. But there was never enough,” said Harmon-Rogers, who was pregnant with twins. “I had no medical care and terrible morning sickness,” she said.

Harmon-Rogers’ one possession, her Bible, became the kidnapped groups’ lifeline. Using her trademark sense of humor and enthusiasm, Harmon-Rogers taught an informal Bible studies class. “I became the encourager. People depended on me to keep them going,” she said. “Knowing that I was needed lifted a weight off my shoulders. I had a job to do.”

Charles Taylor’s rebels soon split into opposing factions and in-fighting broke out. The Economic Community of West African States, led by Nigeria, intervened. They organized a military peacekeeping force and released the campus captives. Harmon-Rogers and her family returned to their desolate Monrovia neighborhood and found their home empty. “There was nothing left. The rebels had stripped it bare. They’d taken everything: our cars, furniture, clothes,” she said, noting with
surprise that her wedding dress remained, hanging alone in a closet. With no functioning medical facilities and a blossoming pregnancy, Harmon-Rogers knew she must leave the country. Her aunt struck a deal. “She gave a group of soldiers her house in return for transportation to a port where we boarded a ship to Ghana,” said Harmon-Rogers. When they got to Ghana, the twins, Leopold and Maggie, were born and the Rogers family eked out a meager existence with financial support from family living abroad.

But they always wanted to return home. So when word reached the Rogers’ that Monrovian banks had reopened, they returned to Liberia. It was a brief landing. Every time a new chaos erupted, they went back to their rented house in Ghana. “After our third child, Edwina, was born we realized we couldn’t continue this up-and-down life, as much as we loved our country,” she said.

The family moved to the Ivory Coast after another eruption and then immigrated to the United States in 2000 where many Harmon siblings lived. William began working at the Ryder Transportation System as a diesel truck technician, Harmon-Rogers at the University of Maryland and later at the Liberian Embassy in Washington, D.C. She is still there today, serving as the finance and administrative officer and overseeing human resources. Responsible for issuing visas and renewing passports, she is a staunch advocate for Liberia and is filled with hope for the country’s future and her place in it, due in large part to the 2011 re-election of Sirleaf, who also happens to be her godmother.

Harmon-Rogers attributes her country’s resurgence to the peaceful negotiations of Harvard-trained economist Sirleaf. “After accumulating three billion dollars in debt, Liberia is now a credit-worthy, debt-free nation,” said Harmon-Rogers. “Development and reconstruction is happening. Liberians who were forced to leave are returning, reconnecting with their communities and bringing back the professional training they’ve received in other countries. The infrastructure of roads, electricity, hospitals, and schools are being rebuilt. Progress is slow and sometimes frustrating, but it is steady.”

From her Maryland home, Harmon-Rogers reflected on her war-torn years in Liberia. Now a senior pastor with Harvest Ministries International, Harmon-Rogers is philosophical and grateful, and said her first-hand experience with civil war changed her life. “Tension always existed between indigenous tribal groups and settlers like me, but war brought us together. In that tiny university office, we suffered as one, we became allies.” She is confident that Liberia is, as she writes, “on the verge of redefining herself as a nation of people emerging from a critical historical correction that should realign her destiny in a very positive way.”

President Sirleaf echoed this belief in her commencement address at Harvard University’s 2011 graduation: “Today, we are proud that young Liberian children are back in school, preparing themselves to play a productive part in the new Liberian society. Our seven-year-olds do not hear guns and do not have to run. They can smile again,” she said. “We can thus say with confidence that we have moved our war-torn nation from turmoil to peace, from disaster to development, from dismay to hope.”