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Concord's **Becky Field** turned her passion for photography into a mission to help the city's refugee population. **Deborah Elonga** and her family escaped amid gunfire from a war-torn life, eager for new beginnings in America. They've never met, yet their stories and their paths have come together.

Forever connected



Deborah Elonga is a freshman at the University of New Hampshire whose mother's courage guided the family through severe hardships in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda. RAY DUCKLER photos / Monitor staff

By **RAY DUCKLER**
Monitor columnist

Maybe someday soon, the photographer and the refugee, both of whom live in Concord, will meet.

It makes sense since their connection was built while the two were thousands of miles apart. The photographer, Becky Field of Concord, is a quirky humanitarian and animal lover who speaks in lightning-fast sentences and once studied, as she said, the "Yip, yip, yip," of wolf pups.

Field wanted to help refugees earn an education, once news spread a few years ago that racist graffiti had been spray-painted on the homes of local

African refugees. She reinvented herself as a professional photographer, published a book showing bold, colorful photos of the area's diverse population and started a scholarship fund to help refugees attend college.

The refugee, Deborah Elonga, is a tiny 18-year-old freshman at the University of New Hampshire whose mother's courage guided the family through severe hardships in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda.

Elonga wanted an education here, once she learned that violence was common in her homeland and opportunities to reach her potential were limited.



Becky Field is a Concord photographer who has turned her lens on the state's refugee population. That effort recently turned into a scholarship, which launched this year and was awarded to Elonga.

SEE CONNECTED A5

CONNECTED FROM A1

So here they are, connected strangers. Elonga is the first recipient of Field's \$3,500 scholarship.

So Deborah, meet Becky.

Sort of.

"They told me she was from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a Concord High graduate and she was going to UNH," Field said over a cup of coffee downtown. "They told me she was in a refugee camp, but there were not a lot of details about that. I have not met her. I have not photographed her."

I met Elonga a day later, at her dorm room on the University of New Hampshire campus in Durham.

"I don't know her," she told me when asked about Field. "There was one who told me you should apply here, you will get a scholarship. That's how I knew, but I did not receive any information to know too much about the scholarship."

The scholarship comes by way of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation, which was born 56 years ago and now manages nearly 2,000 philanthropic funds. The staff there chooses who gets how much money.

Elonga was selected because "she has a passion for helping her community," said Judy Barrows, the director of student aid for the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation. "We get references from teachers, and she is excellent with community activity."

The references noted that Elonga is a fast learner, highly motivated, ambitious and not afraid to ask questions.

In fact, she's not afraid of much at all. Or at least she doesn't show it. Thank her mother, Rebecca Bidana, for instilling a giant courageous streak into her daughter.

Bidana works at Walmart and is learning English. With her husband suffering from severe back pain after a beating by rebels, she was the one who cradled 9-month-old Deborah in her arms and led the family on a desperate journey out of the Congo, with gunfire and a sense of hopelessness in the air.

"Oh my God, Jesus, receive my heart," was the line repeated over and over, Elonga says her mother told her.

She was the one who sold women's clothing and food to help the family survive, and she's the one who insisted that her three children pursue an education, and she's the one who paid for and filled out the paperwork to lead them from a refugee camp in Uganda to the United States, back in 2014.

She's also the one who brings a giant smile to this little face.

"It was kind of tough for my mom," Elonga told me. "She played two roles, as a mom and a dad."

Asked to expand, Elonga put her thoughts into cruise control, telling me, "Oh my God, she's a very, very strong woman. Caring and forgiving. She does not treat us with favoritism. She treats us the same, at least that's how I feel. Sometimes she may be tough on us a little bit, but we know where she comes from."

Elonga showed up at Concord High as a freshman who had finished the sixth-grade, spoke no English and made sure she never cried, even when she had no idea what the heck the teachers were talking about.

"I put on a strong face," Elonga told me. "Not that I got it, but I just wouldn't cry, but when I got home I would be like, 'Oh my God this is hard, I don't know if I can do it. I really don't understand.'"

She mentioned teachers, remembering the subjects they taught more than the spelling of their names. She remembered the physics teacher who stayed after school with her, repeated things over and over, drew her pictures.

With mom proving the backbone of confidence, Elonga has a sister at Harvard and another at Concord High. And it's led to a young lady sitting on her bed in her dorm room in Durham, with backpacks and desks and computers and wall tapestries and a mini refrigerator and a roommate, a friend from Concord High, who's still in bed at 11 a.m.

Elonga's native language is Swahili, and her English is solid, easily understandable. Sometimes she pauses, searching for words, but her vision and sense of appreciation came through loud and clear.

"Health management and policy," she said when asked about a possible career.

All of which made Field beam over coffee. She made sure I understood the story was about Elonga, but you can't tell the story of Elonga without at least saying something about Field.

By her own admission, Field likes to talk and write, and she's good at both. She grew up in Connecticut with lambs, pigs, chickens and dogs, and her parents opened their home to Russian and Lebanese immigrants in the 1950s, a novel idea at the time and the building block for who Field is today.

Wildlife ecology was her thing, which is why she studied those wolves and their pups back when she was pursuing her doctorate at Johns Hopkins University. She also studied the courtship between mallards at the University of Minnesota.

"I was following the people that I admired in the field," Field said. "I saw the work they were doing, communications work and social interaction. I've always been interested in that."

That's why she's no longer working for the federal government or taking photos for the Red Cross. She heard about those awful things spray-painted on homes of refugees years ago and said she had to act. Single with no kids, Field changed jobs at an age when most people were taking their grandkids to the movies.

"I was very angry about that," Field said, referring to the graffiti episode. "It just seemed that these people had come from difficult situations, and sometimes violent situations because they were refugees, and here was somebody having the nerve to write hateful stuff on the sides of their house."

Her life came into focus, as did the subjects of her photos. She said she was walking down Pleasant Street when her new direction in life hit her like a camera lens to the head.

"I knew that's what I wanted to do," Field said.

The woman who keeps her house cold and worries about her carbon footprint, who marveled over faraway cultures, would dedicate her life to taking pictures of immigrants and refugees – people who had to start over and had the courage to try.

Her book, *Different Roots, Common Dreams*, documents the many faces and emotions and clothing styles of these people.

People like Elonga. A portion of the proceeds from Field's book helped Elonga reach her goal. She's 18 and will be home this week for Thanksgiving break. Seems like a good holiday to celebrate at this time.

"I'm so excited, I'm so excited," Elonga said.

Field and Elonga live in the same town now. They've given each other pleasure, without ever having spoken.

"I am getting enriched and learning about their lives," Field said.

Asked about Elonga and her family, Field had a simple and quick answer.

"I would like to meet them," she said.