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# Louise Lalu: My Life

Louise Lalu, a cooperator from Congo, recounts how she overcame great adversity to become a doctor. She also helps promotes Harambee programs in Africa.

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**My parents**

I come from Lodja, a small town in the south-central region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Following the local custom, my parents married when still quite

young and formed a large, close-knit family. God gave them twelve children, ten of whom are still living. My parents, as faithful Protestants, made a point of giving us a good Christian education. My father laughingly called me "the little bell of the house." We used to get up very early to pray, at 6 a.m., and since I was always the first one to wake up, I quickly hopped out of bed to call my brothers and sisters: "Get up! Get up! Let's go! Let's go! It's 6 o'clock and time to pray!"

My mother, Marie-Josée, is a strong woman, a true homemaker, who raised her numerous offspring with immense affection. Sometimes this took the form of kisses and hugs; other times, we received angry reprimands for playing at the wrong time or making a racket in the wrong place. And there were even times—oh, my!—when it took the form of sharp slaps that we tried to ward off

without much success. That is, she raised us just like any good mother would.

My father, André Dimandja, now 57, is a good and honest man. In recalling the years of my childhood, one image is branded on my memory. In Africa, the houses are usually close together; often we would hear children crying in neighboring homes because their mothers had to work to support their families. My father couldn't bear to hear their cries. "Don't you hear how that child is crying? Let's go amuse him a little until he calms down." And if he discovered that a neighbor was in need of something: "Don't you see that the poor fellow is alone? Why don't you go help him?"

That is the strongest recollection from my childhood: my father's constant eagerness to aid and console others. He taught sixth grade

in our local school—in a setting quite unlike the well-equipped schools in developed countries. Our school was very rudimentary; like so many others in Africa, and lacked even the basic necessities. Many children were unable to attend school because their families couldn't afford it, even though the tuition was very low. In cases like this, my father would speak to the principal: "If that child's family can't pay, don't worry. Let the child attend class anyway, and I'll pay. You can deduct it from my salary."

**Schooldays**

Since our father was a teacher, we were able to attend school free of charge. That mattered a lot in our household finances—so modest that we could buy clothes only with whatever was left at the end of the year.

My parents did all they could to meet our family's needs. My mother knew how to make a traditional corn drink that earned a bit of money for essential needs. These did not include shoes, so my brothers and sisters and I used to go to school barefoot, like the other students. It hurt my parents to see us like that, but the family income didn't reach that far.

But every cloud has a silver lining. Thanks to not having shoes, we learned how to jump long distances from one patch of shade to another! The intense African sun quickly turns the ground into a gridiron. On my trips to and from school, I learned how to run fast, jumping from one shady spot to the next, and pausing a bit from time to time to cool the soles of my feet. Eventually I reached the schoolhouse, feeling as if I had crossed a bed of coals.

Neither could we afford milk or bread, which we saw as luxuries only for rich families. Sometimes my mother would serve us bananas for breakfast when she had the money to buy them. As I think back, if we had remained in "holy ignorance" our fasting wouldn't have been so hard to bear. But when we got to school hungry, the teacher sometimes talked about bread and milk, which we viewed as wonderful but distant and unattainable products.

**Comings and goings**

Another wonderful but distant reality was high school. Our village didn't have one; the closest secondary school was almost five miles away. After completing elementary school, I started making the trip through the forest each day. In movies, our jungle is seen as a kind of paradise filled with brightly-colored birds and friendly monkeys,

but the reality for me was quite different. That's where the graveyards are—far from town—not to mention every kind of snake and insect, and even an occasional lion—not one penned up in a zoo, but roaming in the wild and hungry for prey.

Each trip was an adventure. My father would accompany me to the edge of the wild, where a number of other children going to the same school joined me. But on some days when they failed to turn up, my father would have to accompany me the whole way. Those were hard years. I would get up and start off on an empty stomach for the five-mile walk, trembling with fear the whole trip. And in the afternoon, another long trip home. After a frugal supper, I studied. When bedtime came, I was worn out, and hadn't been able to learn much. Many of my friends—the few who were able to go on to high

school—dropped out. It was too much for them.

**The discovery**

During those trips back and forth I met another girl, Colette Mpaka, and we became good friends. She went to a Catholic school, and one day took me to see it. There I saw a nun for the first time—Sister Jeanne Aliamutu. When my friend introduced me, Sister Jeanne found it hard to believe that I had finished elementary school because I looked younger than I was. As a test, she brought a copy of the New Testament in French and asked me to start reading. I opened it at random to a passage on the beatitudes. To her astonishment, I was able to read it: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who weep, for they shall be comforted."

In spite of her initial doubts about my abilities, I liked that nun and her school very much. So much so that in a short time I was thinking about becoming a Catholic. When I spoke about this with my father, his response was that of a godly man, ever attentive to the motions of the Holy Spirit: "If God is calling you to that path, I won't oppose it."

I took catechism classes and at the age of 14 was baptized. My father was very happy. He allowed me to accept a scholarship to live in that school. It was the beginning of a very happy stage in my life. I had better study conditions, and on Sundays I could sing in the parish choir with four friends. Their fathers, like mine, were teachers—Catholic teachers, in their case.

By the third year of high school, my studies had been moving along in a somewhat disorderly fashion

because the curriculum kept shifting, at the whim of the dictator who ruled our country (Mobutu Sese Seko). Finally the school was shut down, along with 125 other schools in our part of the country.

Thanks be to God, however, the pastor of the parish encouraged us five girls to continue our studies, and obtained for us scholarships in a Catholic boarding school located in another part of the country, so distant that it took three days by train to reach it.

In those days, it was not easy to get permission from parents to send their daughters to a boarding school. Nor is it easy today, but many prejudices have been overcome. Many parents made it difficult for their daughters to study because they thought it was enough for women to learn to sew and keep house. But my father told me: "If that school is going

to help you improve your education, I'm all for it."

The pastor, as I said, paid our way from his own pocket: the trip, the school uniform (3 skirts, 3 blouses, and kerchiefs). There I discovered another world, not only because many of my companions were from other social classes (even rich and affluent families), but also because everything was so new to me—the dry, cool climate; the customs; the meals. So different, in fact, that two of my four friends were unable to adapt to it and returned home.

**Medicine**

When we finished high school and were asked what we wanted to study next, I answered firmly: "Medicine." This was nothing new. I had dreamed of it ever since my childhood. Even when I was little, I used to catch frogs and dissect them, to examine what was inside, while my friends

were playing games. The other girls were horrified: "Louise, what are you doing?" I would answer in all seriousness: "Practicing surgery. I'm going to be a doctor!"

Once again, the problem was money: "Medicine!" the teacher exclaimed. "How in the world will you pay for it?" It's the same question my father asked when I told him my plans. "Medicine? Don't you realize, my daughter, how much that would cost? Just the plane ride to get there is expensive." Nevertheless, he left me free and, as always, encouraged me to work it out.

I've always found that, most of the time, when you really want something you find a way to do it. What matters is the determination to be ready to make any sacrifice to attain your goal. I spoke with a number of people, among them the bishop of the diocese, Most Rev.

Mambe Mukanga. He also looked at me in astonishment as he exclaimed, "Medicine! You want to study nothing less than medicine?" Then he went to his writing desk and began to write a letter to a friend of his, the registrar at the University of Kinshasa. He sealed the envelope and handed it to me saying: "This is a letter for the registrar. I asked him to help you however he can. But please don't forget to hand it to him in person! And the plane fare, do you have it?" "Not really." "Ah, no money for a ticket. Well, don't worry about it; I'll pay for it. And where will you stay in Kinshasa? Do you have family there?"

**The university**

Fortunately, I was particularly rich in family. My parents had many brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, cousins—all kinds of relatives, most of them distant, who

lived in different parts of the country. Two aunts, older sisters of my mother, lived in Kinshasa. When I reached the city, my aunts and cousins were astonished to see me. To study in a university was unheard of, especially for a woman. I was the first person in the whole family to even think of it.

The first problem was that they didn't speak French, and they didn't even know where the university was. But finally we managed to find out. The university was far from the house. One of my aunts took me there. We asked where the administrative offices were. I was praying to our Lady, asking her to help me succeed in handing the letter to the registrar. Everyone had told me that this would be difficult to do. But fortunately the registrar was from my part of the country, and when we asked for him, his personal

secretary took me to be his sister and admitted me to his office.

"Wonderful! Very good!" This was the registrar's response when he had read the letter. "You can begin your studies whenever you want. I will work out the matter of registration."

**Other matters**

But registration was not the only matter to be worked out. I had flown to Kinshasa, reached the house of my aunts, and entered the university. But some "small details" remained to be taken care of, such as meals and books and transportation. The house was seven miles from the university.

The easiest to resolve was the books; I borrowed them from classmates. They loaned them to me for short periods of time, so I literally devoured them while my friends were reviewing their notes. At first this arrangement was hard for them,

but when I let them review my notes, they came to like it a lot. I worked out the matter of meals as best I could; sometimes, I didn't eat. As for transportation, I simply walked the seven miles each way. After all, it was only two miles further than high school.

My plan was the following: Get up at 4:30 and start walking—without breakfast, naturally—to the university, which was located on a small mountain. I had to get to class early in order to find a seat in one of the first rows of a large lecture hall that could hold a thousand students. Classes lasted from 8 a.m. until 6 p.m., which is when I started back to my aunt's house—sometimes on the bus, if a friend paid for the ticket. Sometimes friends got me a monthly pass.

Three times I fainted in class due to hunger or tiredness. Fortunately,

when the registrar visited, he asked that a seat be reserved for me in the first row, so I could sleep in a little longer each morning.

When the second year came, I was able to move to a university residence, thanks to a generous friend. While living there, I had to "borrow" everything from friends—something to eat, something to wear, and such simple things as soap. That's how I got by during those years while I worked at all kinds of jobs in order to support myself—selling bread, cooking for my companions, running errands. It wasn't easy fitting those jobs into a demanding study schedule, but "when you really want something you find a way to do it," and fortunately I managed to get good grades.

It was in those years that I met Opus Dei. I was invited to attend some

talks on Christian life in the university. A new panorama opened before me, one that included the sanctification of work and ordinary life. That spirit of holiness in the middle of the world deeply interested me, and I asked to become a cooperator.

**The big hospitals**

When I graduated in 2001, the new doctors in my country did their residency in large public hospitals, which involved a difficult set of examinations that were administered in an unusual way. Each candidate chose (by lot) the number of a hospital room and called on that patient. After examining the patient carefully and drawing up the clinical history, you had to present yourself before a tribunal, open to the public, that began peppering you with questions: "And why do you think your patient

is suffering from this illness and not that?" "Why have you prescribed that treatment and not some other one?" "How has this particular condition damaged the patient's bodily functions?"

When it came my turn to choose a room number, I paused for a moment to ask for our Lady's help with a simple prayer I had made up years ago: *Holy Virgin Mary, help me as you helped your Son from his birth to his death on the Cross and Resurrection* ." I prayed it with my whole heart and soul, putting myself completely in our Lady's hands, calming saying each word—perhaps too calmly. For the professor became impatient with me: "But doctor, what are you waiting for?" I always felt our Lady's motherly protection. Thanks to her help, I always chose patients with illnesses that I knew well and that I had previously

diagnosed. She helped me and continues to help me always.

The head of that hospital also had a private hospital, and he asked if I wanted to work with him. That's where I began to realize the influence the spirit of Opus Dei was having in my life. Thanks to the formation I had received in a center of the Work I took care to do my work well, with order, with a sense of responsibility, seeing in each patient not a "case" or a number, but a person I had to treat with great dignity.

**The present situation**

A new period in my life has opened up. My work has enabled me to help my family deal with several trials during these years. My parents and brothers and sisters had to leave our town because of the war, but one of my brothers stayed behind with his wife, and was killed. When I began

working I could help my family by paying for the education of my six younger brothers and sisters. We've made a deal. I help them financially and they promise to study hard and do everything possible to attend the university. For as I said, almost always "when you really want something you find a way to do it." I've also welcomed into our home two cousins, children of my aunts in Kinshasa who have died. I promised to take care of them.

In 2004 I went to Madrid to take part in a seminar organized by the Charles the Third National Institute of Health. I was unaware that St. Josemaría, to whom I owe so much, had been in that hospital caring for patients with tuberculosis during those difficult years back in the 1930s when it was incurable.

Now I am once again in Madrid, thanks to a grant from the Spanish

Agency for International Cooperation, to obtain a master's degree in public health and to complete the course work for a doctorate in epidemiology, specializing in the most common diseases in my country.

Here I am also trying to do all I can for non-governmental projects such as Harambee , which began at the canonization of St. Josemaría and is helping many Africans to build a new Africa.

I still have to face financial difficulties in helping to support my large family, following the example of my mother and my father, who is now an evangelical Protestant minister.

I thank God for having given me the strength and tenacity I needed in those hard moments of my life. I am convinced that, through our Lady's intercession, he placed at my side

those people who were so crucial in my life: my high school friend and the nuns at that school, thanks to whom I became a Catholic; the pastor of that parish and the bishop; and the women of Opus Dei who helped me sanctify my work as a doctor. Nor can I forget the secretary who providentially confused me with the registrar's sister! I thank God for all these people. Thanks to them, I can now help others.