

After escaping civil war in Sierra Leone, Hermitage's Sulaiman Kamara is excelling on the football field at Wake Forest

Sulaiman Kamara remembers bits and pieces of his journey from Sierra Leone to the United States. Just 3 years old at the time, the former Hermitage High School football star recalls the ferry ride to the airport, the flight across the Atlantic Ocean and meeting his father at a bus station in Maryland.

The memory that remains most vivid from his emigration from the civil war-torn country on Africa's southwest coast is his first morning in his new home.

"I remember waking up the next morning and realizing I was in a different place," said Kamara, now a senior defensive tackle at Wake Forest. "Coming downstairs and seeing all my siblings and my dad and grandma and everybody. That's what I remember."

It was a Christmas morning-like setting where the biggest present under the tree for a little boy who had spent over two years separated from his parents and siblings was having his family back together.

Sierra Leone's civil war lasted 11 years, from 1991-2002 officially, and claimed over 50,000 lives. It sent countless families fleeing the nation, seeking safe, fresh starts. Kamara's father was the first in the family to be able to obtain a visa and move to the U.S.

Soon after, in 1999, his mother and older siblings did the same, by way of Guinea and then Senegal. Older children were being forced to join the Revolutionary United Front army and getting them out of the country was the priority.

Kamara and his cousins came a few years later. The Kamara family lived in Richmond and Kamara's older brothers, Abu and Sorie, played high school football. Sulaiman, seven years younger than Abu, eventually followed that path.

While Abu played defensive line and fullback and Sorie was a defensive back, Sulaiman — who the family calls "Sue" — was the biggest of the boys, a college prospect as a defensive tackle at Hermitage. He struck up a close bond with former Virginia coach Mike London, and might have become a Cavalier had London not been fired after the 2015 season.

Virginia Tech, under former coach Frank Beamer, also recruited him. But when Beamer retired, the Hokies' new staff didn't offer Kamara a scholarship.

Now, his Wake team hosts those two schools from the Commonwealth on back-to-back weekends. Virginia plays at Wake Forest this Saturday, and the Hokies come to town the following week.

“These two here are gonna be a lot more fun,” said Kamara. “Virginia, it’s where I’m from. I’m always excited to play teams from back home. I remember playing at Virginia Tech last year, that really got me going.”

Kamara turned 24 on Thursday, making him the old man of the Demon Deacons’ program, a fact his teammates make sure to rib him about often. But during his time in Winston-Salem, N.C., Kamara said he’s grown into a more complete football player, becoming a starter last season.

This year, the 6-foot-2, 300-pounder has recorded nine tackles through the first three games.

“I came here as a young kid, was probably a little too cocky, thinking things were gonna be easy, and I got humbled real quick,” he said. “My game has elevated way, way more than it was when I first came in.”

Kamara still has family back in Sierra Leone. When he’s home in Richmond, his mother will call him to the phone to say hello and stay connected.

Kamara understands the toll the civil war, and the subsequent Ebola outbreak and mudslides, took on his homeland. He knows Sierra Leone isn’t the same country his family left decades ago.

Still, his siblings have told him about the other side of life there, before the war. He hasn’t returned home, but it’s a trip he longs to take.

“Just hearing the stories they would tell me, the childhood they had when they were there, running around, picking mangos from the mango fruit trees, going to the beach, the kids in the neighborhood playing soccer,” said Sulaiman. “When a lot of people think of Africa, they think of Africa as this really poor place. My family, we didn’t have it too bad. We lived a decent life before the civil war. Even though they didn’t have much, they were happy.”

Abu Kamara was 10 when he left Sierra Leone with most of the Kamara family. He visited again in 2018.

“It was difficult, just seeing the country’s condition,” he said. “Before the war, it was very beautiful. People from all over the world came to visit the country because of our natural beaches.”

For Sulaiman Kamara, there is still much beauty in his native country and the people who still live there. So much so that he sees a return to living there in his future.

“When it’s all said and done, football, work life, I’d love to actually just retire to where I’m from,” he said. “Just have a house by the beach and enjoy the culture of where I’m from and my people.”

Lazore sisters embody Native American women's fight for lacrosse opportunity

Growing up, Jacelyn and Mirabella Lazore knew the place lacrosse held in their Native American community — celebrated, supported, sacred.

They also knew, as girls, many believed they had no place in that game.

“I always knew it was a men’s game,” said Jacelyn, who is heading into her sophomore year at Virginia Tech. “To this day, I don’t touch a wooden lacrosse stick, because traditionally it brings bad luck to the game.”

Back home on the Akwesasne reservation, on the U.S.-Canadian border between upstate New York and Ontario and Quebec, lacrosse is much more than a game. The sport is deeply rooted in the Mohawk nation’s history and culture, and its participants have always been held up as pillars of the community.

The men, at least.

For the Lazore sisters, their passion for the sport was largely viewed, at best, as meaningless and, at worst, as sacrilegious.

“Women are overlooked and deprived of opportunities that our boys are given,” said Mirabella, a rising sophomore at Dartmouth. “That’s what makes lacrosse mean even more to me now.”

A little more than a decade ago, Akwesasne — like most Iroquois reservations — had no teams for girls or women. Now, both Lazore sisters are lacrosse players at Division I programs. Their paths there were fraught with obstructions, challenges they hope they’ve helped clear for future generations of girls on the reservation.

“We went through so many obstacles,” Jacelyn said. “It was like, we were looked at as a joke all the time.”

Since the Iroquois people viewed lacrosse as being for the boys and men only, schools did not offer or fund teams for the girls. When they were able to form teams, they received hand-me-down uniforms from the boys’ programs — pinnies that were too long and stretched down to their knees and baggy shorts that reached their ankles.

As middle schoolers, the Lazores were part of a group that fought for and won funding for a girls team at Salmon River High School, located about 10 miles from the reservation, helping set them on their path toward becoming Division I lacrosse players, something few Native American women have achieved.

“This is not something that’s been traditionally supported,” UVA men’s lacrosse coach Lars Tiffany said. “The vast majority of tribes have not allowed girls and women to play the game of lacrosse.”

Tiffany grew up in Lafayette, N.Y. and attended a school with a large number of students from Onondaga, another Iroquois tribe, developing a deep appreciation for their culture. In 2018, he served as an assistant coach for the Iroquois national team.

Tiffany said the game traditionally was part of the development of boys to men, a rite of passage dating back to the days when the men were the hunters and warriors. Boys were given their first lacrosse stick at the age of 3.

“With the Iroquois people I grew up with, women and girls were not even allowed to touch the stick, much less play the game of lacrosse,” Tiffany said.

Tiffany said he’s seen friends, Iroquois men with daughters, wrestle with the decision whether or not to let their girls play the sport, struggling to blend modern ideals of equal opportunity with longstanding tribal traditions.

For the Lazores, their family always has been supportive of their desire to pursue lacrosse. How to view those who wanted to block them from the sport is a complicated question. Jacelyn and Mirabella have a deep respect and appreciation for their culture and for the place the game holds in it and they understand that clan mothers and tribe elders don’t see their objections to women playing as oppressive but rather as traditional.

“It’s the medicine game. Hundreds of years ago, it was meant for the men to play for the creator’s entertainment,” Jacelyn said. “In return, the creator would heal all the sick people in the community. The women were forbidden to play. It’s such a sacred game, and it was meant for men only.”

The Lazore sisters are quick to note, being discouraged from playing lacrosse is just one symptom of a culture that can devalue women, despite Native American tribes being a matriarchal society, where lineage is through the mother.

They point to statistics of the widespread physical and sexual abuse endured by indigenous women for centuries.

A study released in 2016 by the National Institute of Justice found that 84.3% of Native American women had experienced violence at some point in their lifetime and 56.1% had been the victim of sexual violence. Two in five, or 40%, had experienced some form of violence in the past year.

It’s an issue that moved front and center for the family when, in January, Mirabella said she was assaulted by a male lacrosse player from the reservation while in Montreal. She has pressed charges and has a court date on July 7, according to documents she provided to The Times-Dispatch.

On the reservation, she said community members have reached out to offer their support to her. Still, she knows old ways of thinking prevail.

“I look now, and those same people are the same people now hanging out with my abuser and making him feel like everything’s normal,” Mirabella said. “Lacrosse is a huge part of the culture, a huge part of the community. So all of these boys are put on a pedestal.”

It’s a pedestal Native American women are beginning to ascend, with athletes like the Lazores leading the way. That’s put an added pressure on the women, they both readily admit.

“In their culture, lacrosse is a men’s game, not a women’s game,” Virginia Tech coach John Sung said. “And so for [Jacelyn], she’s pioneering the sport on her end. She has a lot of kids that look up to her.”

Both girls left the reservation to pursue their lacrosse dreams. First, at IMG Academy, a boarding school in Florida, and now at their respective colleges. It’s exposed them to a whole new world and exposed a whole new world of people to them and their culture.

“I never knew anything besides home, besides Akwesasne,” Jacelyn said. “I never looked over the horizon. When I started playing lacrosse, the ability to see that and open up to that was something new. And it was scary at the same time.”

10 years ago, Yeardeley Love was murdered. Thanks to her mother, the story ends with hope.

CHARLOTTESVILLE

Be it routine or ritual at this point, Sharon Love starts out May 3 the same way year after year — mass at her church and then brunch with her daughter, Alexis.

It's been 10 years since her younger daughter Yeardeley's murder. Yeardeley Love was a senior lacrosse player at the University of Virginia at the time, and in the decade since her death, her family has worked tirelessly to spread education about domestic abuse and unhealthy relationships.

For the Loves, May 3 this year would have included a community run in Baltimore and the dedication of a memorial statue to Yeardeley at the headquarters of U.S. Lacrosse.

The spread of COVID-19 stopped those plans, but nothing has stopped or even slowed the work of Yeardeley's family since her death.

This Sunday, Sharon Love won't have church or brunch or the events designed to celebrate the life of her younger daughter.

“We'll probably sit on the back porch and have quiet time,” Sharon Love said this week. “Each anniversary, it doesn't get any worse and it doesn't get any better. It's kind of the same. What we really miss is weddings and holidays — those kind of things are where you want Yeardeley to be the most.”

Instead, Yeardeley's impact is felt through the One Love Foundation, the group Sharon Love and Alexis Love Hodges founded just a month after Yeardeley's murder by George Hugueley V, a men's lacrosse player at UVA and Love's former boyfriend.

“I don't know how many times Sharon Love would say, ‘We have to shine a light on it,’” said Sharon Robinson, Love's cousin and now the chairperson of the foundation. “‘Take the boogeyman out of the closet, shine a light on it, let people talk about it and understand it better, and then we'll be able to help people.’”

For Sharon Love, an eye-opening moment came during the jury selection for Hugueley's murder trial. (Hugueley, now 32, was convicted of second-degree murder and sentenced to 23 years in prison. This week, his attorneys filed an appeal of that conviction.)

Following her daughter's death, Sharon Love had become familiar with the statistics — one in three women will be involved in an abusive relationship in their lifetime. As attorneys

questioned prospective jurors for the trial, the numbers proved accurate. One in three testified that they had been in an abusive relationship.

That helped drive home for Sharon Love the need to educate, the need to teach people the warning signs of abusive and unhealthy relationships.

It's been her mission ever since. At a time when some people would be overwhelmed by grief, Sharon Love pushed herself to prevent other families from suffering a similar tragedy.

“I remember she said to me once, ‘Well, what am I going to do? Not get out of bed every day?’” said Katie Hood, a family friend and the CEO of the One Love Foundation. “I do think there's people — and I might actually be one of them — that if it was my child, they wouldn't get out of bed the next day. Or the next day. Or the next day.”

Hood vividly remembers the day Yeardley Love was murdered, recalled going to Robinson's house to offer emotional support, thinks about Robinson whispering the brutal details of the crime into her ear, an attempt to “shield” Robinson's young children from the information.

At the time, Hood was heading up the Michael J. Fox Foundation, working for treatments for Parkinson's Disease. From 2010-2014, Hood served as an advisor for the Love family as they began to build up the One Love Foundation.

By 2015, it was time for a major step — the foundation needed a CEO, needed to grow bigger — and the Loves tapped Hood.

Since then, their signature program — Escalation — has reached millions around the country. The foundation first focused on college students, but has since tailored films and workshops for younger and older audiences.

This year, the foundation was working on its College Athletics Challenge, an initiative pushing to get every NCAA team to hold a One Love workshop in 2020. The spread of the virus has made in-person workshops impossible until at least the fall, but at least 500 teams are lined up for programs.

In June, UVA was set to host a One Love summit for about a hundred high school and college student leaders. That summit has been canceled and replaced with an online event.

Lacrosse teams across the nation hold One Love games annually to honor Yeardley and promote the educational work of the foundation. Virginia played in one at Stanford on Feb. 14, and then hosted its own on Feb. 29.

As a college athlete, Yeardley Love discouraged her mother from being one of those parents constantly in their child's coach's ear, but since the murder, Sharon Love and UVA lacrosse coach Julie Myers have grown close. Myers spoke at Yeardley's funeral and works with the foundation.

“I don’t go back to May 3 in my mind very often, the details,” Myers said. “But I go back to who Yeardeley was and just the energy she lived with. It is emotional. Any time that people say, Yeardeley was murdered, it does make me cringe. It hurts my heart. But then very quickly, the foundation, and her family and Yeardeley give you strength. With her loss, we’ve helped so many others. It wasn’t in vain. She’s done more good for more people than is imaginable. It is comforting.”

The anniversary itself would have been marked by a One Love event at the Baltimore Ravens’ M&T Bank Stadium on Saturday night. Sunday morning, there would have been the community run. Then Yeardeley would have been commemorated with the dedication of the statue at the U.S. Lacrosse headquarters.

“It keeps her alive,” said Robinson. “When I think of Yeardeley, I smile. She makes me happy. She made me happy. I think we honor her well by doing this work. May 3 makes me sad. If I think about exactly what happened or if I think about who she would be now, that’s hard.”

Could the work the foundation is doing now have saved Yeardeley Love? It’s a haunting question with an answer steeped in hope.

“I’ve thought about that so many times,” said Sharon Love. “I have to say that, if Yeardeley knew what we’re teaching other students now, it probably could have.”

It’s why for Love, Robinson, Hood and their employees and volunteers, the work continues. The goal remains as simple as it is vital — reach as many people as possible. Help keep them safe. Avoid tragedies like the one that gave rise to the foundation in the first place.

One Love is working more and more with younger age students, and building bridges to their parents.

The foundation is pushing internationally, hoping to open an office in England in the coming year.

The effort won’t stop, not even for a day — not even for May 3.

Sharon Love will spend some time reflecting on the life her daughter might have lived, on everything her family has lost and on all the families facing similar tragedies.

Then she’ll go back to work.

“This is Yeardeley’s story now,” said Sharon Love. “I’m thrilled and I know Yeardeley would be thrilled that she’s helped so many people, but it is bittersweet.”