

Rose Kingston, a Refugee From Liberia, Explains Why Life is Called Gold-Dust in War

Meeting Rose

I was nervous the first time I made the trip over, by ferry, from Manhattan to Staten Island, to meet Rose Kingston. Clutching my cassette recorder as well as a box of chocolate chip cookies I had baked for Rose, I breathed in the sea air and gazed at length at the Statue of Liberty.

Rose is stunningly beautiful. She is also tiny, and looks much younger than her age. But wearing a camouflage military cap and baggy sweats and boots and braided hair, she exuded an almost intimidating toughness. She was not inclined to smile or meet my eyes directly. Her voice was so quiet that I worried it might be difficult to pick up on tape. The interior of her car was a jumble. There was ample evidence of her two year-old-son amid the detritus in the back seat. Her car clearly served as part-office, part-storage, in addition to providing transportation.

We drove several blocks through rundown streets to a narrow old storefront brick office building. Rose pulled a big bunch of keys from her coat pocket, unlocked the heavy metal grating covering the front door of the building and led us up the creaky stairs to the second floor. Here was where her dance studio and several small classrooms were located, and here every room was pristine and orderly. The dance studio was small and not fully equipped for its function—old linoleum tile flooring, and no dance bars—but it was clean empty space, with a narrow wall of windows overlooking the street that let in a good amount of light. Rose was clearly proud of her studio.

Had it not been so cold, Rose would have preferred to conduct our first interview right there on the dance floor, because she said it was her favorite and most comfortable place to be. But the dance studio was frigid that morning, so we settled instead into one of the windowless small classrooms that were spared winter drafts. Facing each other in child-sized chairs across a child-sized work table, I presented Rose with the chocolate chip cookies, which she thanked me for but declined to eat, and then I turned on the tape recorder, and asked Rose to tell me what it was like to have been a nine-year-old living in Liberia when war broke out there. She spoke for several hours that day. At the end of the session, Rose said she was surprised by how good it felt to tell her stories. She had been dreading this first interview.

Over the course of the year that followed, Rose and I met many more times, at her dance studio and in my home, as she continued recounting her life as a refugee. It took courage for Rose to return to some of her memories. But she dared to revisit her past for one overriding reason: to help the world better understand both the plight and promise of girls like herself, throughout the world, who are forced to deal with violent conflict and radical displacement in their efforts to survive.

What follows is just a small handful of Rose's stories, which recount the outbreak of war in Liberia and her family's harrowing escape to Ghana.

War Breaks Out in Liberia

Rose was nine years old when armed rebels came and overtook Monrovia, Liberia, the city where she was born and had been raised. The first Liberian civil war, which raged from 1989 to 1996, was one of Africa's bloodiest, claiming the lives of more than 200,000 Liberians, with hundreds of thousands more raped and tortured. More than a million others were forced to flee to neighboring countries.

Amid this chaos, Rose was separated from her mother for nine years, and lost contact with her older half-sister for more than a decade. Together with her father, a sister and two brothers, Rose spent seven years of her childhood and early adolescence fleeing the violence of this civil war and struggling to survive in neighboring Ghana as refugees, before being permitted to resettle in New York City when she was 16 years old. Thirteen years later, Rose now finds herself living in Staten Island as the founder and director of a dance and after-school program serving children and teenagers from other Liberian refugee families as well as other disadvantaged youths living in the neighborhood.

Before war broke out, Rose's family enjoyed a comfortable life in Monrovia. Rose's mother worked as a secretary in offices at the nearby port; her father worked as a policeman and detective. Rose and her sister and two brothers lived in a comfortable spacious house with a backyard, and all of them attended school. But even before either of the opposing rebel forces loyal to Charles Taylor and Prince Johnson entered the city in an attempt to take control from Liberian President Samuel Doe, their life was disrupted by the impending threat of violence and civil war:

Schools started shutting down a little before when the talk of war was coming. It wasn't like normal times anymore, where you could go to school. Even before the war started the government was on very high alert. It was almost like they were searching everybody, they were harassing people, they were trying to find who was the spy, who was the terrorist. They didn't know which direction the war was

coming from, so everybody was on their tippy-toes. It became unsafe, people started running away, leaving the country, so a lot of disruptions started happening. You couldn't find gas anywhere, you couldn't find food anywhere, you couldn't find ... there was a lot of things missing. So people were stocking in, things were just disappearing out the city. Food was very, very difficult to find.

As government troops loyal to President Doe were kept on high alert and ordered to keep Monrovia in lock-down mode, Rose witnessed terrible incidents in the streets right outside her home, as government soldiers tightened their grip on the city:

I remember one curfew, this is before the actual war got into the city, there was one curfew that this man didn't make it home. He had to pass in front of our house. He was wearing a white shirt and black pants. And he was running, he was really running, trying to get home because 6:00 p.m. curfew had started. He got caught trying to get home and the soldiers asked him where he was going and he said he was going home and he was so sorry. And they took his tie off his neck and started beating him bad. It was raining, I remember that, cause his white shirt got very muddy, because he got beat up, he was on the ground, he was crawling, he was trying to escape for his life, and he was really, really struggling to just leave. There were so many soldiers on top of him, just beating him up with the back of the gun, like he was a puppet or something like that, just being thrown from one person to another. And his shirt was dirty and it was a white shirt because when he was running I always used to stand and just look and I seen him and I said oh my God. My eyes popped open, like he is going to get in trouble, what is he doing at 6:00, everybody should be home. And right in front of that checkpoint I knew it, they came out and got him.

I don't know if they killed him or they didn't kill him. I never wanted to remember after that. I just knew how bad they tortured him, but I know for a fact he didn't survive, he did not make it home at all. There are so many gunshots that the particular one that killed him sounded like the rest of them to me.

The Family Flees with Nothing But the Clothes on Their Backs

Members of Rose's own family were not spared the violent paranoia of government troops. Rose has never been able to forget the afternoon that her older brother decided to try to borrow some cooking oil from a neighbor across the street, and as a result of an innocent misunderstanding, was suddenly confronted by government soldiers and barely escaped with his life. Rose and her sister watched as their brother was beaten and tortured in their front yard that afternoon; they heard the soldiers debating whether to shoot and kill him now or later. Fortunately, Rose's father returned home as the soldiers were

deliberating his son's fate, and he was able to persuade the soldiers that there had been a misunderstanding and that his son should be spared. But that same evening, Rose's father also concluded that the entire family had to flee their home immediately.

I remember my father said we got to get out of here, I think it was 6:00, almost 6:00, and we had to get out of here and we got to get out before curfew starts. We asked him why, cause they let my brother go. My father said they will come back, like all it takes is that they get drunk and somebody is still saying the same thing or this order is not there anymore, it is just one of those things that they will come back. And my father said they will be back. So we have to—we left everything just what we was wearing it was all we had. I remember crying because I wanted my doll baby to come with me. He said we couldn't, we were going to walk very far we didn't need any luggage, we left all our passports, we just left, we just left.

We had to just walk out, like my father said we were going to the store, going somewhere, so we had to just, not, I mean not even a purse. He just locked the door and we left the house completely with everything as how it was, and we left and we walked and walked miles and miles to get to the other side.

As it turned out, Rose's father intuited correctly. The soldiers did come back:

They came back. My father had asked my uncle to go check up on the house at one point during the time and the house was shoot out, they literally shot the house out, everything in the house, because my father wanted him to go in to get our personal stuff out, there was nothing there, everything was like trash, like somebody came in looking for somebody and raided the house out, so it was a smart move for us to leave when we left.

Rose, her father and her siblings found temporary shelter elsewhere in Monrovia. But in the months that followed, and especially after the rebel forces arrived and fighting broke out, they were forced to move again and again from hiding place to hiding place. The first morning that rebels arrived, Rose knew it by their footwear:

I remember talk about it, people were just saying the war is coming, the war is coming, that there was going to be war soon. I didn't understand what it meant, so, but it was just a lot of talk about it. What I remember was, we woke up one morning, and we look out the window and we have soldiers everywhere with camouflage on and their shoes were sneakers and that's how we knew they was rebels. Because the government wear camouflage but they have boots like army people, they dress army, so you wouldn't

see somebody with a camouflage outfit on that have sneakers on, different color sneakers. So we knew that the rebels had taken over, and that same night there was a lot of shooting, there was a lot of screaming.

Sleeping among Corpses

After the violent arrival of rebel forces, Rose's family situation grew still more dire. One night, Rose and her family found shelter in an abandoned house. The small house was pitch-black inside, and because they were exhausted from the trauma of escaping gunfire in the streets while seeking shelter, they all immediately fell asleep on the floor of the first room that they entered. Rose woke up early the next day, and in the early morning light streaming in through a window, she saw that her father, also awake, was silently but frantically motioning to her to close her eyes. Incurably curious, Rose could not resist glancing around to see what her father did not want her to see. And what she saw—what her father did not want her to see—were dead bodies strewn around the room. A family of dead bodies lay in pools of blood on the floor right next to them; her brother's sleeping arm was inadvertently draped over one of the corpses. Even then, Rose did not cry out. She understood the need for complete silence, as rebel forces in all probability were roaming the streets just outside the window. After doing his best to conceal the bodies with whatever could be found in the house, Rose's dad roused the rest of the family and hurried them out the door, to find shelter elsewhere.

For the months that they remained trapped and in hiding in Monrovia after fighting broke out, life was very difficult for Rose and her family:

Life was called gold-dust because it was that hard to find. Just like now nobody can just easily find gold or diamonds, so that's what life was being called, gold-dust, and your money cannot buy you life, because money was worthless. I mean it might work out a little bit if you give it to the soldiers but they'll kill you for your own money and that's it. So money became worthless and we needed to find food.

There was no light, there was no drinking water, there was no food. So it was almost like you were living in this town, where you're living, but then you have no way of surviving, as far as food and water, shelter, but at the same time, you just mind your business and keep going, keep hustling or keep—stay in your house, or follow the rules and then you'll be alright. It was definite torture going on, with you know, soldiers was hiding, so many people hiding, trying to put down their weapons and hide their guns and just be a normal person because they took over the town. There was a lot of killing. They did a lot of shooting when they came in and took over the city.

You don't want to get caught looking eye-to-eye with any of them. You don't want to be out too long just passing around doing nothing, because then they were raping women, they were. Don't look at them the wrong way. Get your young girls away from them or you know, stay in your house. You can't go play outside because the rebels, they just, it was a lot of be careful.

I don't even know what clothes I had on or if had a change of clothes. It didn't even matter at all what you wore. Just safety and food was the most important things. Because you could be sleeping in this house today and not wake up the next day. Not because you died in your sleep, but because there was crossfire, fighting at night, and your house got bombed. Or your house got shot into.

Rose was gravely ill with malaria during this time, as well as malnutrition. But sickness and hunger could not be countenanced in the face of war:

It's like, if you're sick you're not going to run. If you're sick you're not going to walk. If you're sick they're not going to ...you just can't be sick. I mean some sickness is obvious, you can't control diarrhea, but there's no time to be sick. There's no time to be lazy, or to cry.

These are things my dad would tell us, you know. He did everything he could to protect us, but we just, had to help him help us. That means that we had to walk, you know we just couldn't be sick anymore but, so that's how we made it through the war without water and the food.

A Diet of Rats, Weeds and Sewage Water

To make it more palatable, Rose used to pretend that the discolored sewage water she was sometimes forced to drink was tea. Rose's father trapped rats for his family to live on, and Rose and her siblings also scavenged for food scraps in dumpsters, and ate weeds picked in abandoned fields:

We ate a lot of greens. Different kinds of greens. There was times when people would just go and pick any kind of greens that was never food, just if there's green. You made soup. You just get it, even if it's just to mix it. And eat. So you best believe there wasn't trees anymore and then even the grass became food to some people.

The situation got worse. There was a lot of struggle in finding food every day. Every day was not the same, on how you had to struggle to find food. It wasn't anything typical.

We always would go outside to look for palm kernel we call it. This is from the palm tree. Little palm seeds, palm nuts, that's what we used. We cooked soup with that during normal times, and when you get

the juice and everything out of it, it's left with this little seed. And in this seed is something that you can also eat, but you don't need to swallow. You just chew it until you can't chew it no more and then you spit it out. You find some palm kernels, and you bring it over to a spot and you take a rock and you open it and you chew it up and it has this juice and after that you spit out the difference.

Also looking in the dumpster. And garbage cans. Just looking around.

After a while your stomach just gets used to hunger that it didn't even matter. You just ate whatever you can. We had bush rats in the house and we ate them. Bush rats are bigger than the typical mouse in the house. My dad set traps and you just get them out and roast them or whatever, and that's food.

Running for Their Lives—Again

After another too close encounter with armed rebels while hiding in a friend's house on the outskirts of Monrovia with her father away, Rose remembers:

My older brother was like, "Let's go!" and we just snuck right out the gates. And I remember it was raining. Water was very high, so we had to go in the water. The mud road was flooded. And I remember that was the hardest running I've ever done. Running for your life and running in water and just trying to make it is like the hardest thing ever. We ran all the way through the village to another house and asked the lady there if we could please hide in there because there were some soldiers looking for us. And she said "No, you can't hide here," because its like you're bringing somebody else's trouble. Everybody is trying to stay free of any affiliation that would bring the rebels to their house, because when they come to your house, you have to be, you have to get a miracle to survive and as soon as you do, you're out, because they're coming back. It's just, anytime they'll come back for you. They're not going to leave you and leave you forever. So, she said no. And then we started crying. We said we got to come in, so we're pushing our way in and she's pushing us out. And then I think she heard them coming, so you have a choice, either you argue with us in front of the house or you let us all in and shut up and hide and let them pass. Because it's important to make your home look like a ghost house when they are in the area, so that they don't because sometimes they come in for no reason, like they're just in the neighborhood, looking around. And that's just your luck that day. Either they're going to come in there, they're going to peek under your door—see something they don't want to see, they're going to ask a question, they're just going to—something's going to snap and they're going to end up killing everybody in the house. So it's always important to make your house look like a ghost town or just don't draw attention to yourself

She heard their voices saying “Where are those kids?” And that’s why she took us in. And we all just got quiet and went through the back. And the rebels passed and then we came out and came home and our dad was there in the front and he asked us what happened and we told him. And he said, “We got to go, we got to get out of here, because they’ll be back.”

They always come back. They always will come back. For whatever reason they always will come back. So they come to your house the first time, leave. You need to leave and that just goes even without question. It’s just like you need to leave. So my father was like, “Okay, let’s go.” And that’s how we left that area and went somewhere else.

After months of fleeing from house to house, hiding and struggling to survive, Rose’s father finally found a way for his family to escape Monrovia. The need to do so became even more acute when it became clear that he and his young sons risked abduction into one of the fighting forces in the city.

They was recruiting. That’s why you have the child soldiers. They were recruiting a lot of kids. Rebels and government both. They called my dad a couple of times. They was trying to get him to go fight too. A lot of men was going to fight on their own because that’s the only way of surviving too, so you just pick a side and you go fight. My brother was fifteen. So he was definitely somebody that was going to have to go fight, and the war now was starting to heat up.

On a Cargo Ship to Safety

Their final escape was harrowing. Lifted aboard a cargo ship bound for Ghana inside a packed cargo container, Rose vividly recalls her family’s perilous and grim voyage, but also her profound relief and happiness in realizing that the worst was now behind them, as well as her reflections on surviving:

It was very early in October, the first week. It’s 1990, in October, and I’m nine years old. My dad said there was a ship coming in to the port and taking people out of the country and we have to get into the port. So we packed our bags with stuff, whatever we had we had a chance to take, and made our way to the port. My dad got us in somehow, because that’s where my mother worked for years, all her life. So they both knew the port very well, and he got us in there.

So we made our way through the port. A lot of people was rushing into the port and eventually they closed it down. We was at the port for like two days or three days. Waiting.

Then finally the ship came: "Tiny River." Tiny River. That was the name of the boat, the ship. And it was a cargo ship, not really a passenger ship. It was a ship that brings in containers and stuff. It had a staircase going up into the boat and then it also had containers that it was bringing down. They tried to use the staircase before, but that didn't work, so then people started rushing on to it and people were dropping into the water and the staircase was like this rope, just like you climb up onto it, it wasn't something solid that was safe. So they knew it wasn't safe and they rushed, rushed, rushed. People were just rushing. People didn't care. They were just trying to get out.

So they brought the containers down, and people were rushing in on them. And they said "women and children," and my sister and I were in front and we lost contact with our dad in all this rush, and my brother. So it was just me and my sister. We got pushed into the ship, into the container, and then lifted up in the container and they dropped us in there into the ship.

And then people would come out, and they would bring the container back down. So now we don't know where our father is. We knew our father was down, but we didn't know if he would make it up, because the ship can always just leave. And another thing too is ships sometimes have to leave because the rebels or the soldiers get mad because they're taking everybody, they'll have like hostage too— you can't just take all the citizens out. Depends on who they're fighting. Maybe they have to negotiate for us. Sometimes they would just be like, no nobody's going anyway. So they would come and shut down and start shooting at the port and people had to just leave. So whoever's on it is on it and whoever's not is not. It just, if they feel like today they'll just shut everything down.

But my father and brother, they made it on. My father said that he grabbed this woman that had a lot of luggage and said "Can I help you with it?" And my brother, my little brother was okay because he was also children. So when my dad got there the soldiers was like "Where you going?" or something like that, and my father said, "Oh I'm just helping my wife to get into there" and they let him go in slightly. But before all of that the crowd just came in and they pushed all of them in, so now my dad could not come out, he got stuck in the container. Some people just said "kill us or not, we all are going in." People just want to get out of there, so one minute they're in control of the crowd, the next minute people just rushed and everybody just rushed and pushed him in and that's how my dad couldn't get out, and now he wasn't even trying to get out. Once he was in he was in. We found him.

The boat ride was three days and two nights. I remember just a whole bunch of displaced people just sitting everywhere. It a cargo ship. There's no proper place to sit down or lie down. Everybody had to just find a spot outside and sleep there. Outside. It was a very big ship, so they had different levels, so if

you happened to be on the first or second level, you were okay, because you have that level as a cover. But other than that everything was outside. The weather is hot so it wasn't like freezing or anything like that.

I still remember people covering, so maybe at night I guess it was cold but it was all displaced people.

They started to bring food out but they did not have enough food on that ship to feed three thousand people. That's how many were on board. It got packed before they realized, and there's no way, you don't bring anybody down or off. You kill people if they bring them down, and these are innocent people trying to help. So it's like, you can't kill everybody, so you just have to just leave and hope that the ship can make it.

To have so many people on a ship that's not meant for people is hard. Three thousand people on this ship and you got containers on the ship, you have a lot of stuff going on.

It like, how can you deal with all these people on this ship? No food, no water. So they started bringing a little food out and people would fight for it. People would fight just to get food and then they said "Okay, we're going to give the food only to the children," and that was not happening. People were eating—you have animals, and I'm not calling people animals, but you have people that haven't eaten for months, real food, or haven't taken showers or are tired or just, struggle to survive. There were people that was worse than us that you know. You could see their bones and everything showing out that was sick.

So you can't bring food out and say "Okay, stand on line." They might stand on line but you need to speed it up. You cannot say "The food is finished." That's what started happening. At first people was listening, you stand on line, they give it to people, but then when they get to a certain point, they was not bringing more food, so then the people steal a lot. "The food is finished." So the next time you come outside, the next afternoon, you better believe everybody's going to rush to get their food because they don't want the food to finish on them. So it wasn't at first everybody just being animals but after a while, it just became like that and people just needed to eat. People were sick, they got thrown overboard because they died. You can't keep a body. Oh yeah, it happened.

It was just too many, too much. They didn't have enough manpower, they didn't have enough doctors, they didn't have enough. The ship just got bombarded by this crowd that just needed to get out of the country.

People threw up. I mean it was just, there was no food for three days, three nights, no beds, nothing. We just had to stick to what we had. So ... there was a lot of stuff going on.

But I was not afraid. I was happy. Yes, very happy. Because I could leave this war and not have to worry about the soldiers and the people killing. My little brother was terrified of the soldiers. We all was. When you see that camouflage, everything in your body just stops. It was just that the ship was going somewhere that was safe for us.

You couldn't get food. Even my dad couldn't get food at this time because it was so hard. And the last place you wanted to fight was on the boat because you could easily get thrown off.

It's amazing how a person is in a situation, their survival skills are very, very high, and they're alert, and they fight to survive, but then when you get them out of it, they almost have no strength left to fight. So when you fall in the water you have this instinct to swim, and keep trying to stay alive, but the minute they pull you out of that water and bring you to shore, you're almost, you either pass out or you can't fight no more.

And a lot of people die like that. So my father was really, really praying and hoping to stay with us to be strong. I don't know why I mean it's like that. It's like almost in a sense you're drowning, and you just fight, everything in your body fights to stay alive and you fight to stay alive and you fight to swim and that's great. But then the minute they bring you out, that's when people now have to fight to save you. Then its like where's that strength you had when you were in that water drowning, to save yourself?

So a lot of people started to die on the ship, because some people didn't have energy to go fight for food anymore. So they didn't look for anything. A lot of people were just sitting there, like finally, just relieved or tired or just, just sitting there. They couldn't do anything.

My dad was really just concerned that one of us would die because now, all of this stuff was going on when you were just in the war, but you made it out, you was fine, you were walking around and you was okay, but then now you collapse. Like I never had nightmares when I was in Liberia, but when I was in America, I had them. That's because in Liberia I don't have time to think, I have to survive. Sleep was a privilege, you sleep and you wake up and that's it, so you have to constantly be alert and moving around, you're still struggling, you cannot have nightmares about something you're still experiencing. In Ghana, you're also still struggling and still going through whatever it is that's going on. So they bring you to America and they tell you "Okay, there's no more killing and you have lot's of food." Now

they bring you to America: I have school, I have food, I have clothes, I have TV in the house and water, I have plenty of time to now sit and sleep. That's when those nightmares kick in. That's when you start thinking about what you went through and so you have time now to really have those nightmares.

It's the same thing with people that's now away from the war and into the boat. Now they have time for their body to stop running. Now they start thinking, kind of like your body allows itself to be sick. You know, you start feeling, "I'm hungry," which you never did in the war. So you could think about stuff.

When the ship arrived in Ghana, there were a lot of people in uniforms. Red Cross. UN. A lot of nurses and doctors. Right there at the port, [visible] from the ship. As we was coming off to shore, you could see them all standing there, waiting. They had so many different stations of stuff that you can get help from.

They had a lot of food, a lot of food. That I remember very well. But my father told us not to eat a lot. He said that we should be very scared, there's a lot of food but you guys shouldn't eat too much. Be careful. Eat slowly, he say, because your stomach could hurt or you could die. It's true, you can die. People rush for the food and they eat to a point where they can't eat anymore and just...I remember seeing a guy just vomiting uncontrollably and some people were just sick to their stomach.

There was a lot of rice, a lot of soup and stuff to go with it. There was a lot of food. But I remember we did get something to drink and we did get some food. I remember the clothes that my dad was trying to get us. Some different clothes or whatever and shoes on our foot and stuff.

I remember my father saying, "Kids don't eat a lot, just bring your food here and eat slow." I remember him saying that. I always get asked how I got my survival skills and I never thought about it—my father did a lot of teaching, or guidance, that I'm thinking about now. And I'm like, wow. How did we get so, not smart but aware of our surroundings? Or what we want out of life? My mother, she always wanted more, she always tried to get more. So I guess my survival skills is from my father and my being a go-getter or a dreamer is from my mother.

Life As a Refugee Is Hard

Life for Rose and her family remained difficult and sometimes brutal during their six years as refugees in Ghana. The rations of beans, rice, cooking oil and sugar they were given at the refugee camp were always inadequate and often sporadic. Their tent, and then later the hut they lived in, was cramped and stifling hot, and remained bare of furniture or anything else that could engender any feeling of 'home.'

Fearful for their safety in the sprawling chaotic refugee camp, Rose's father tried several times to place his children in homes with Ghanaian families outside the camp. Too often, however, these efforts backfired. Rose and her siblings were literally enslaved in one household—required to do heavy domestic chores all day with threats of beatings, while being fed virtually nothing and forced to sleep on a cement floor without so much as a blanket or sheet. Rose almost died from malaria and malnutrition before being saved by a concerned neighbor. Her first return to school in Ghana was also traumatic, as she was repeatedly sexually violated by a fourth grade teacher, but never felt safe enough to report or escape this torment.

Rose Makes a New Life for Herself in New York City

When Rose arrived in New York City at the age of sixteen, she met and embraced her mother—now a virtual stranger—for the first time in nine years, and was at last given the opportunity to make a true home for herself. But it wasn't easy. Placed in a large public high school in Brooklyn, Rose experienced major culture shock—and suffered from a felt need to keep her past life a secret in order to fit in. She credits her war experience with her superstardom on the school track team—the adrenaline and childhood memories of running for her life that coursed through her body at the sound of the starting gun at track meets guaranteed that she would run faster than anyone else.

But it is dance that has been Rose's salvation throughout her life. In the refugee camp in Ghana, Rose was a devoted member of a camp dance troupe, and credits this activity with keeping her spirits high and her out of trouble in the camp, when so many other girls her age succumbed to unhealthy relationships, child pregnancies and early motherhood, and illusory escape through drugs. Dance saved Rose in America as well. Through dance, she was able to come to terms with her complex feelings and experience of war, and won a prestigious prize as a high school senior for creative choreography in her depiction of war, as well as a full scholarship to attend a nearby university.

Although Rose was quick to make a living with her dance—appearing on rock videos shot in Hollywood and on stage with major musicians on their cross-country tours—and came to love and master dance in many of its forms, from ballet and tap to hip hop and the traditional African dance of her childhood—it was not enough for her to dance for herself alone. Given the role it played in her own life, Rose was determined to share dance as a therapeutic and cathartic outlet for other troubled youth.

Today, Rose offers dance instruction and an after-school tutoring program, as well as other enrichment classes, to approximately 60 Liberian refugee children and teenagers living in Staten Island, as well as

other needy kids in the neighborhood. She has won humanitarian awards and national recognition for her public service work. But Rose's ambitions don't stop there. Rose knows that her ability to tell the story of the refugee girl through both dance and her own powerful voice is unique. She aspires to tell that story more fully still—in a Broadway musical, in a memoir or in film. You won't want to miss it.

Lynn Savarese

May 2009