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REAL-TIME NEWS

Muhlenberg College student's program would bring legal assistance to refugees

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Joshua Ajamu's family left Nigeria to find a better life in the United States in 2003, when the now 25-year-old was 10. His personal connection to immigration has been the



inspiration behind his education and the development of a web-based platform that would connect refugees with legal services.

"My family luckily had the chance to come to the United States via a green card," says Ajamu, a CPA candidate at Muhlenberg College in Allentown. "Some people don't have that opportunity. It's a one in a million chance to win the lottery system. And that really hits home. There are other people out there who can contribute to society (if given the chance)."

Ajamu received a bachelor's degree in film from Bates College in Maine in 2014 and then went on to pursue his masters in business and law from Bucerius Law School in Hamburg, Germany. Now, he is focusing on the business of startups, saying he wants to make a difference in the community.

That difference is a web-based platform called Ithaca, which won first place at Muhlenberg College's Innovation Challenge -- a contest in which students pitch an entrepreneurial idea for the chance to win \$1,000.

Ithaca is a long way's off from implementation; Ajamu points out that he needs financial backing and technological support to develop the program. But if it comes to fruition it could help thousands of refugees who, as Ajamu learned firsthand, often have no idea what they need to pursue asylum in another country.

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Law Without Walls

In 2017, Ajamu took part in a University of Miami Law School program called LawWithoutWalls, which is designed to explore innovation in legal education and practice, according to its website. His assignment was to come up with a solution for how law can provide a better life for migrants stuck in detention, something that has dominated recent news headlines.

Ajamu and his teammates spent months researching the worldwide immigration crisis, asking themselves, "How can people get access to social justice?"

At first, Ajamu wanted to address the problems migrants face trying to enter the United States. But with the Trump Administration entering office, Ajamu and his team decided it was too overwhelming to navigate the U.S. legal system.

So they turned to Greece, which has struggled with an influx of refugees from war-torn Syria. They spent time on the Greek islands pinpointing what the biggest barriers were to refugees seeking asylum. Ultimately, they found that there were just not enough lawyers on the ground to help people start the asylum process.

"When they first arrive, most people are disoriented," he says. "Most people are not in the right state of mind. They can't read the language. And there are certain procedures to follow. But if you don't know that, you might get into trouble."

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So the goal was to help at least one person, so he could help another person.

"Eventually by helping so many people (our program) would become obsolete, and the process could go by itself," says Ajamu.

The proposal was well received with LawWithoutWalls, but after the presentation, the students went their separate ways. Ajamu wanted to make this pie-in-the-sky proposal a reality.

Building Ithaca

If Ajamu can secure funding for Ithaca it would look something like this: A database that would connect refugees to lawyers and nonprofit organizations both on the ground and remotely.

"These remote attorneys provide key legal research that attorneys on the ground do not have time to complete due to their large caseloads," says Ajamu. "In this way, Ithaca aims to help provide more efficient and effective representation to refugees in need."

This means Ithaca could help refugees all over the world. It could help families at the Mexican border connect with a lawyer who would tell them exactly what they needed to do to request asylum in the United States.

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"There is a real market for this technology," says Rita Chesterton, director of Muhlenberg's innovation and entrepreneurship program. "Unfortunately, the need for pro-bono attorneys to work on immigration cases both here and abroad is large. As a former attorney, I've seen the ad-hoc efforts to organize attorneys here in the U.S. to work on the recent asylum cases. A product like Ithaca would have been invaluable in their efforts."

Today, Ajamu is looking for people who could help build Ithaca -- someone versed in Drupal or custom web development. He also is working to find connections with nonprofit organizations and individuals in the legal aid field; one of his mentors helps unaccompanied minors in New York City.

Ajamu recognizes the importance of bringing immigrants into this country, pointing out that greatness can come from anyone, if given the opportunity.

"You don't know that the one little child you help could be the one who finds the cure to a disease we've not yet heard of," he says. "It feels like people are forgetting how the United States got started. Maybe I'm the only one who paid attention in middle school social studies. But this country got started by migrants. How can you forget that?"

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Like Odysseus, who inspired the program's name of Ithaca, Ajamu has a long way to go to make his brainchild a reality.

"Our goal is to complete journeys," says Ajamu. "And Ithaca is the place where Odysseus wants to go back to. He's trying to reach it, but he's not allowed to reach it."

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