

Manchester Museum Podcast
Season 2: Episode 3

Do we understand refugee stories?

With Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu in conversation with Jake Gill

00:00:01 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

What museum means is a platform bring people together to learn to know each other. Whatever your country you came from, whatever your culture, whatever your religion, we need to live together, in peace.

00:00:41 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

Our guest on the Manchester Museum podcast today is Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu. Jenny is a Congolese refugee and human rights activist who has dedicated his life to ending violence and injustice in his Homeland. Forced to flee the DRC nearly 15 years ago to save his life after protesting against human rights abuses. Jenny's struggles have continued since arriving in the UK in 2006.

He is joined in conversation by his close friend Jake Gill, a member of Manchester Museum's Visitor Team, who has supported Jenny with his asylum claim and has created a documentary film about his life. In their conversation, Jenny recounts the difficulties that he has faced an asylum seeker in this country and calls for museums to offer space for people to gather and learn about refugee experiences to prevent further discrimination and prejudice.

00:01:55 Jake Gill, Manchester Museum

Hi Jenny, welcome to the Manchester Museum podcast. Could you just tell us a little bit about yourself and your background as a refugee and human rights activist?

00:02:03 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

Thank you, Jake. My name is Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu, I was born in Africa, Republique Democratique of Congo. So, I came in UK on November 2006 as a refugee asylum seeker to Heathrow Airport in London and is where I straight away, I claim for asylum seeker. I run away the pressure in my country, because I risk to be killed. I was a leader,

one of the leader. As a student we fight for the freedom, we like to restore democracy my country since independence. We always been under a dictator. The president Sese Mobutu, who spent 32 year in the power, that is unacceptable, by his stay by force. I was young, I was born in 1975. So, he took power 1965, 10 years before I was born. I realise the country, the poor population, no foods, no water, no electricity, no votes no election, and no freedom. But, in same time, the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRC my country, is the one of the richest country in the planet, but the poorest people in the planet, same time. I could not understand how the poorest country, malnutrition, children don't, they wake up, but they don't expect to have water nor electricity nor foods. That tells me to change things. The things must change. The country is not for belong of someone, or minority of group of people, they can take all the riches; they become more rich, rich than the rich, and the poor people become poorer than poor. So, I try to organise some meeting with friends, to the University.

You know, I am passionate for the law, myself and I'm a true Christian so I like justice, I like justice in the society. I fight injustice. I've fight discrimination. I fight the homophobic. I want everyone to find his space in the society. I want people to be in the freedom. I want everyone to respect the law. I see how England, they do election. You can be in the power only because you've been elected. I see the France on this time. And we start to work. But it was tough to risk our life, every single day, accounts no tell you how many times we been arrested. I see a lot of people lost life, my friends, colleague. That was the revolution to change things. And it was impossible I can say, I'm sorry to say that, to be honest, is only the reality where I came from.

And we start to work. Those ones lost lives. We still love them. We're gonna have memoriam about them, all life, because they work hard but they paid the price of freedom today. The job is not totally done. You can't live under a dictator. We need freedom. They are big work to do and I'm there to do this job because if I don't do the job, I don't do my part, nobody gonna do in my place. That was the situation I face, I risk to lose my life, but thank God, by miracle, I travel to England. That was not my plan, but the reality is that I am here in the United Kingdom.

00:07:38 Jake Gill

While you were able to save your life, your experience in the UK has proven to be difficult as well. Can you speak about the challenges that you faced including homelessness and destitution?

00:07:48 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

I came from DRC like I said, in November, I remember November 2006. Straight away I faced the immigration, without passport. And I came there, I claim asylum seeker. I spent two nights in airport detention. And they plan to send me back, Congo, it was not

easy. The immigration officer who give me the first welcome and interview. He was not happy for me to come in this country without passport and he say about you being colonised by Belgium, your country. You supposed to go to Belgium, and over there you can speak French is a good country, a good place for you. You can go to France. But why you in England? I say I didn't plan to come in England, but life bring me here. I'm asylum seeker, I ran away to risk my life if you send me back home, my life gonna be in danger so you gonna be responsible, if you sign paper, that you are responsible, my life I'm gonna have lost my life straight away if you send me back Congo. Let me tell you true, they're gonna kill me. You are free to send me back like you want, I cannot challenge your decision because I have no power. England is not my country. I not come here for food. I'm not come here for get advantage, or to make profit. You can't compare my life most important. So, it was not easy even to arrive in UK. I face big challenge in airport Heathrow. That is the reason I was under detention. I didn't came in straight away, you pass and you go home, no. I spend two or three nights after negotiation, I spoke today the top manager to the airport, I explained to him the United Kingdom sign the agreements to protect refugee; everyone who runaway for the political reason, to save his life. You sign the agreements to protect us, the true asylum seeker. Top manager say, "Jenny, you are right, we welcome you. You can come in England, stay here. We give you protection and we will now start your case. And let's see what will happen after. But we don't wanna send you back." And he said to me, "sorry for the attitude of my colleague that was a little bit quiet, no good, but, you know, everyone have his stress, so you can go to Walsall."

Walsall is West Midlands near Birmingham. It was the first place I been transferred. After a few months, my case been reject by the Home Office. I make appeal. My case was a reject as well. No, all this time I didn't have enough evidence to express all my story where I came. That was the difficult, the second challenge I face. And nobody to advise me, nobody to help me to build my evidence to present my case, to defend also my case. Again, I have struggled to find a good lawyer to help me. We need to have a lawyer. There is a lawyer provided by British immigration, yes, but the lawyers need to work with the heart to help. In every single, every single asylum seeker, that was no my reality.

00:12:48 Jake Gill

Do you think there is enough support for asylum seekers in the UK?

00:12:53 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

I spent almost 15 year, but just after six months to arrive, I've been kicked out from the mass accommodation. I start to become homeless. No place to go. I used to survive only charities. And they provide food around Birmingham. I used to go many cities; Coventry, Wolverhampton, West Bromwich, Walsall, Dudley. Today, you know the

organisation called Salvation Army? They are people who helped me a lot. Red Cross, helped me a lot. The food bank, the drop in. I went to Leicester. Spend time with the friend to the Church, African Church, just in case I can find a place I can sleep, even the floor in the church. You know the winter I came from Africa. I never faced the winter. It was a winter period difficult for me. I'm very big size, difficult to find the clothes can fit me. No money, no benefit, no Section 4, nothing. Homeless, years in the years in the years in the years. I went to Stoke on Trent. I went to Scotland, Glasgow. Only to find the churches, and the church can't help me. I've not received there for 5, 10 years, money or voucher, no Section 4 support, nothing, because the difficulty was to find the good lawyer. And I have opportunity to plead my case, strong. It's took me 10 year, 10 year, almost 10 year to be homeless. I used to sleep in the McDonald's. I have to be honest with you. I used to, most time I spend nights, nights, nights, to McDonalds, 24-hour McDonalds in Leeds, in Sheffield, Bradford, different cities.

00:15:53 Jake Gill

Did Manchester offer you a sense of belonging when you moved here?

00:15:56 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

One thing I have to mention, any different city have different policy, regarding how attention they pay to the asylum seeker and the refugee, or immigrant. Different city, different people, and a different culture, and different attention. The best place, and the city that give me more opportunity, since I'm in England, the city who welcomed me, the place who give me opportunity to meet nice people, people friendly and people very supports about the immigration case is in Manchester.

Manchester is my hometown. I am honest, I will finish my life in Manchester. I will live here for life because if we see Manchester give me opportunity. I have to recognise and to thank Manchester particularly, you know the organisation like RAPAR. One of my friend, we meet in the church, is the person who told me to join meeting in the RAPAR. They are platform, special. You can't meet RAPAR everywhere in the UK, only in Manchester. And is a platform set up, the biggest refugee who supports asylum seeker around the United Kingdom. I will wish the RAPAR to install, to be installed in the different city but, till now, it's still only in Manchester. RAPAR helping me to build organisation for Human Rights to fight dictator and to install freedom democracy in my country. But I could not have this opportunity because every Human Right activist they're arrested, tortured and killed. But I still have my mind set up to build organisation to fight official the regime. So, because I'm here in England where I am protect, I am free to set up my organisation. What I can say Manchester is my land, Manchester is my home; Manchester is meeting people who help me to move on and to start now new professional work, to work with my organisation to change things.

00:19:25 Jake Gill

Do you miss living in the Congo and do you miss your community there? And how do you still connect to your community while living in the UK?

00:19:33 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

There is a quite big Congolese community here and maybe four times a week I tried to go to meet my community, because we talk about what is happening in our country. Every time when we meet, we talk about the politics, we share the opinion, we've got a lot of meetings, and we talk also how to help the new arrivals in the UK to help them to set up here. The Congolese people who keep coming, they need my expertise, so I got myself a lot of responsibility to look after back home, but here also. I still have a contact with Congo, because, you know, I got family myself. I got my blood family who suffer a lot to miss me, I miss them. That is not easy. I try to feel like, to forget little bits, because when I stay myself in my room thinking about Congo, what is happening there every single minute, I am in my computer, to have, to follow the reality of politics, economic, everything in the Congo, the work is very hard. I got a long way to go. Now I have to set up my life here. But I'm still working hard, hard then hard, harder than harder to change things in the Congo.

00:21:28 Jake Gill

Have there been occasions where you felt the opposite of belonging, but instead face discrimination or prejudice for being a refugee?

00:21:35 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

There is some politician who think wrong about asylum seekers, refugees. There are a lot of people who think that immigration is bad things. We come here to get advantage for, or in all aspects of life. That describes British people's life here. So that is very hard. I've been myself a lot of times a victim of discrimination. People think I came here for food or for good life. That is very wrong. It is a big mistake to think like that. And I beg people who keep thinking like that, because they never face what we face in Africa, in our country; not only in Africa, there are a lot of people for Syria and the immigrants from around the world.

We face things, we were born with the dictator, we grow up with the dictator, we live Congo the dictator. We came here, we leave the dictator continue over there, but if you not welcome us you put us in more danger. There are nice people, there are also people different who get us wrong. Badly treated I face, but people need to understand what

is immigration. They don't only to listen to what politicians say bad about the immigrant. The life is very precious. Life, human being life, is more than food, more than everything we can, is more than money, money no make peace life, money, no brings life, money no save life. But your attention, your welcome me, it saved my life. I set up in this society. I have responsibility to work hard, to pay tax here, to find a job to give back UK that British people give to us. We are here as well to help this society, this country, we must respect the law of this country. I never broke the law, but I am going to find a job, I'm going to work very hard to support this country because this country give me opportunity to save my life. My determination is to give back to the UK people for some of them to change mind to think not everyone is a bad person. Don't have a negative judgement for someone, just by no proof, that is something is affect a lot, a lot people, as well before to move on... you know, we came from countries speak French. English is not my first language. I haven't speak English since I was born, I never study English. I came here, I used to speak only 'good morning', 'goodbye', 'What is your name?', 'good evening' and 'thank you', that's it! But I want to learn English for my integration in this society. So, if I got a difficult, I can express to you, but there are a lot of people they can't speak English and when you see them, you put discrimination to them. So, people need to understand. Immigration, even we are here, we face a lot of problem. The first barrier is language. I'm learning English culture. I am part of this society. England is become my second home, my second country. I love this country and I want as well British people even not to love us, but to pay small respect, that is very important.

00:26:37 Jake Gill

How do you think that Manchester Museum could help to support refugees to make sure they feel comfortable living in the city and feel a better sense of belonging, integration and assimilation? Is it also, more important for British people to better understand refugee stories as well, and do you think museums could be a part of the process to help make that happen?

00:26:55 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

In my opinion, I respect the work they do is very hard, the job they open the door to people, but to help people to be integration to British society, like in Manchester community, museum have a big part to work, because if we see like library, people go to library to study, but there is no one in library to help people, to explain them, what is their right? How they can do things? How they can try to be involved of this society? Or in the museum they can go to learn. If you invite one small group of asylum seeker to understand British culture, is only in the museum where we can learn, not in library, no to the college but to understand the British because we need to learn British culture. I give you an example. I get remain to live, but I still long way to go. I have a plan in a few years to apply for British citizen, but I'm gonna face to the exam to speak about British

culture. We have no chance to go back in Congo. We don't come here as a visitor, we came here to be part, to set up live here.

00:28:38 Jake Gill

Do you also think it would be good if Manchester Museum offered more space for refugees to put exhibitions on as well? It is definitely important more refugees feel like they belong in this country so I definitely think having that open space where people can come and connect with each other and learn from each other, discuss cultures, which will then lead to less discrimination and less prejudice because people will understand each other better.

00:28:58 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

That is, the opposite part of the responsibility. For museum, the job they must do to help a refugee to understand more about British culture, British history. In other sides, British people need to have a space to the museum to learn about the refugee. Let me tell you one things, there are a lot of British people, they don't know what is asylum seeker. Museum needs to give space to help call British people call immigrant, have a chat, discuss what you think about me, what I think about you. We have a chat, we discuss, so we can understand each other more. Nobody gonna accuse, but because no one would give us opportunity to face this challenge, confrontation, let us speak, let us talk, Museum, Manchester can give British opportunity to learn, to understand, to have the contact, direct contact to the refugee, one you describe in your mind, the definition, the work, what is museum means is a platform, bring people together, to learn to know each other, is can be beneficial for both parts. Creates one platform to set up peace in this society, whatever your country you came from, whatever your culture, whatever your religion, we need to live together in peace.

00:31:03 Jake Gill

So, thank you today for joining Jenny and I think it's been really great discussion about what museums can do to help refugees to fill a better sense of belonging, also for just opening up about your story and your struggle just so people understand more about what refugees and asylum seekers actually go through in this country because I still think it's something that isn't discussed enough and so just being able to open up and hear your story and have a discussion about it today makes it a lot easier for people to actually just understand what people are going through.

00:31:31 Jenny Dakosta Van Mputu

Thank you very much for the opportunity you give to me. I appreciate it a lot. I have only to thank you all the rest of my life. Thank you for opportunity. Thank you to support me. Thank you to being there for me. It was long way long journey and I achieved a lot, today, the result is a very positive thank you very much.

00:32:06 Lowell Wallbank

To find out more about the work that Jenny does or to support some of the organisations in Manchester, helping refugees check the show description for more links and information.