

Asylum seeker finds solace in Scrabble club

Olakunle Azeez Omopariola and family forced to flee Nigeria after death threats

PHILIP FINE

Three long tables set up at the Wednesday night Scrabble club in Côte St-Luc are lined with pairs of players hunched over boards. The clinking of tiles can be heard as replacement letters are fished out of cloth bags. Thirty years strong, the group gathers at Pierre Elliott Trudeau Park. It is a mostly white crowd, many of them retired and long-time Montreal residents.

Olakunle Azeez Omopariola, a 33-year-old Nigerian asylum seeker, does not fit that demographic. He has the same game face as the others, though, as he glances from the board to his seven letters and back, rearranging the tiles to find the highest-scoring combination. With just the word “qi,” he makes a 44-point four-word square. He receives the same friendly jeer from his opponent that anyone else would.

Omopariola arrived in Canada from the United States in April with his wife, Moriam, and their young daughters, Adeeva and Zahra. The family walked across the border in Lacolle and was arrested under the Canada-United States Safe Third Country Agreement.

A passionate Scrabble player and champion back in Africa, the man who escaped a dangerous situation has found some normalcy at these Wednesday night meet-ups.

Omopariola sought asylum because of the threat to his life back in his home state of Lagos, Nigeria. It began with his father-in-law's overt

disapproval of his relationship with Moriam, since Omopariola came from very modest means. Despite that, the couple married. “I thought love could conquer all,” he recalled.

In 2014, however, just after Adeeva was born, four men who claimed to be associates of his father-in-law abducted Omopariola for an hour and beat him badly. “I was held hostage and told that if I didn’t leave my wife they would kill me,” he recounted. Omopariola also feared his daughter would be taken by zealots and subjected to female genital mutilation, a practice he said many in his small rural town still support.

After the assault and threats, Omopariola's wife and daughter obtained Italian visas through a woman they thought was a friend, but they returned after just two weeks. “The lady was trying to lure my wife into prostitution,” Omopariola said.

He eventually secured tourist visas to the United States. The family of three arrived in Maryland on July 4, 2016, during an election campaign that seemed like it could go either way. In one platform, Omopariola saw more hope. “Hillary (Clinton) promised a lot to refugees and immigrants without papers,” he said. “When she lost, we knew it was going to be a problem for undocumented immigrants.”

Living in Hyattsville, Md., it was difficult to make ends meet. Omopariola toiled away at low-paying delivery jobs, while his



Olakunle Azeez Omopariola and daughter Adeeva at the Wednesday night Scrabble club in Côte St-Luc. Omopariola, a champion player back in Africa, says he has found some normalcy at the game nights. *PIERRE OBENDRAUF*

wife stayed at home to care for the baby. His mother-in-law visited them and sent provisions, which arrived by freight. When Moriam went to claim the goods, a customs employee noticed her visa had lapsed and called immigration authorities who arrested her. Since she was still nursing, Moriam was released and told she had four months to leave the country. “When she got home and told me about that, I felt my life was over,” Omopariola recalled. “I’m going back to a problem that I’ve been running from for years.”

With the help of a YouTube video, he learned how to claim asylum in Canada. Now a family of four, they travelled by bus to New York City then on to Plattsburgh where they took a taxi to the border. The family was detained for several days, but Omopariola said they were treated well by Cana-

dian authorities. “After I crossed the border, I slept well for the first time in a couple of weeks,” he said.

While staying at the Montreal YMCA-residence on Tupper St., Omopariola secured an apartment. His next move was to search online for a local Scrabble club. When he showed up to the Côte St-Luc club the following Wednesday, Omopariola won three of his four games. In May, he competed in an international tournament and won seven of 13 games, despite the disadvantage of adapting to the North American dictionary.

Omopariola has been working two jobs: one for a courier company and the other delivering take-out meals. He was recently hired by Canada Post; his delivery experience in the United States and his university degree and certificate helped clinch the job. Pending the results of a police background

check, Omopariola should soon become a postal carrier.

At the Scrabble club, Adeeva sits next to her father and tries to stave off boredom. Omopariola just scored a “bingo” — using all seven of his letters in a single turn — by spelling “sleeping” off of a free “s.” His opponent, Claudette Maloney, feigns her displeasure: “You’re killing me!”

The man who once won gold at a Scrabble competition in Lagos wins this game in Côte St-Luc 460 to 260. Later, he’ll drive his friend Norma Lovett home, happy he can do something nice for a woman who has helped him out. His asylum hearing has been postponed indefinitely. That means he and his family will probably remain in Montreal for a while, and the man who said he’s lucky to be in Canada will be a regular at the Wednesday night Scrabble club.