

# WORLDS APART

Continued from Page 25

By the summer of 1995, Wario's student visas and his tourist visa had expired. Uncertain what to do next, but certain that he couldn't go back to Kenya, Wario became an illegal alien.

Wario had not realized there was a large contingent of Radical Fairies as close as Portland. But as soon as he did, he moved to the City of Roses and got a certificate to teach English as a second language.

"I fell completely in love with Portland," he says. "I'm out to everybody, and ever since I've been here I've never tried to hide that."

But life as an illegal alien was tough.

"If I'd left, I would have been banned from returning for five to 10 years," Wario says.

"I spent four years as an illegal alien, never knowing what was going to happen at any moment," he recalls, the depth of his fear still recent in his memory.

He was careful not to do anything even remotely illegal—no traffic tickets or parking fines, no arguments with jealous boyfriends who might turn him in.

"I was always looking over my shoulder," he says.

What kept Wario going was the support of his friends in the Radical Faeries. Because it was too great a risk to lie on job applications, Wario was forced to take odd jobs that paid cash under the table. He moved around, often staying with friends when he was between jobs cleaning houses and working in construction. Life was all about basic survival.

Finally, in late 1997, there was a change in INS regulations that allowed illegal aliens to have their status readjusted without penalty—if they had a good reason to stay.

Eventually Wario connected with members of the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Campaign in San Francisco, a group that focuses on immigration issues. They told him he might be able to claim asylum and hooked him up with an attorney.

It was a slow process, and it took a year just to get an interview with the INS. But from then on Wario had a pending case, which meant he could come aboveground and obtain a work permit.

In early 1998, the President of Kenya, Daniel arap Moi, joined other unenlightened African leaders in denouncing homosexuals. In an official edict he said, "Kenya has no room or time for gays and lesbians—we will not tolerate it."

Those were the magic words that ultimately convinced the INS panel that Wario's life would be endangered if he returned to Kenya.

On June 11, 1999, Wario's petition for political asylum was granted, and he received an asylee visa, which is valid indefinitely.

"I had dreamed about that moment for years—when I

could finally say, 'I'm here,' without worrying if they're going to come to my door in the middle of the night and take me away," he says.

In July 2000, Wario can apply for permanent residency. If all goes well, after another three years he can apply for citizenship.

Wario expects to follow all these steps, and is confident he will succeed. He's excited about being able to make plans and start putting down roots.

"I can never go back and live in Kenya," he says.

"I still dream about Kenya almost every night," he adds quietly, longing for the famil-

iar sensations of home. "I miss the way the ploughed earth smells after the first rain, and the mountains of fruit in the open-air markets."

Wario has, however, had one recent face to face meeting with his father. In the summer of 1998 his father came to Chicago for an evangelical conference. To prepare him for their meeting, Wario sent his father a letter in which he revealed his sexual orientation and detailed his immigration struggles.

"Of course he freaked out," Wario remembers, "but by the time we met he'd calmed down, and we had this incredibly intense conversation over six days. At the

end we concluded the bonds of our family are stronger than anything else."

Although Wario stays in touch with his family through letters, he believes they're in denial about his new life.

"They don't believe it's true—they think I became gay because I left the church," Wario says, his voice turning sad. "They're praying the heck out of this—they think they can fix what is for them a deep, shameful secret."

Such an unusual career? "At the heart it's about nurturing, it's about taking care of a home," he replies passionately.

"At heart I'm a homebody," he says, adding that his early close relationships with his female relatives undoubtedly influenced his love of things domestic.

And would this single man ever be content to stay home and be the happy homemaker? "Absolutely!" Wario exclaims without hesitation.

His time in Colorado also solidified his love of the Northwest. "That made me realize this is my home," he says.

"I'm settling here in Portland, and I will be eternally grateful to my friends here—our community does have heart," he says with all earnestness.

Best of all, he is out, out, out to everyone. He has instructed his employment counselor at the institute to write on his file "in big red letters that I'm gay," he says.

So, now that his legal battle has been won and his life here is stabilizing, how does Wario evaluate his situation? Any regrets? "I would love to be able to speak my native language, Kikuyu," he says, explaining that he doesn't have any friends from Kenya here.

He does have close African American friends, and they often discuss the differences in their lives.

"It's much easier for me here," Wario says, "because I'm perceived as a good black person, not an angry black person."

He has seen it time and again, that as soon as people learn he's from Africa, their attitude toward him shifts dramatically into acceptance.

Another difference is his own attitude. "There is definitely an 'immigrant mind,' but I don't have that—that chasing of the American dream," he says.

He explains that he socializes mostly with people who "wear beads, as little clothing as possible and hang out in the woods."

He adds: "Earning money has not been my primary focus; my whole purpose for coming here was completely different."

Then Wario smiles, settles back into his chair and says, "I feel I'm very wealthy and I haven't wasted my time."

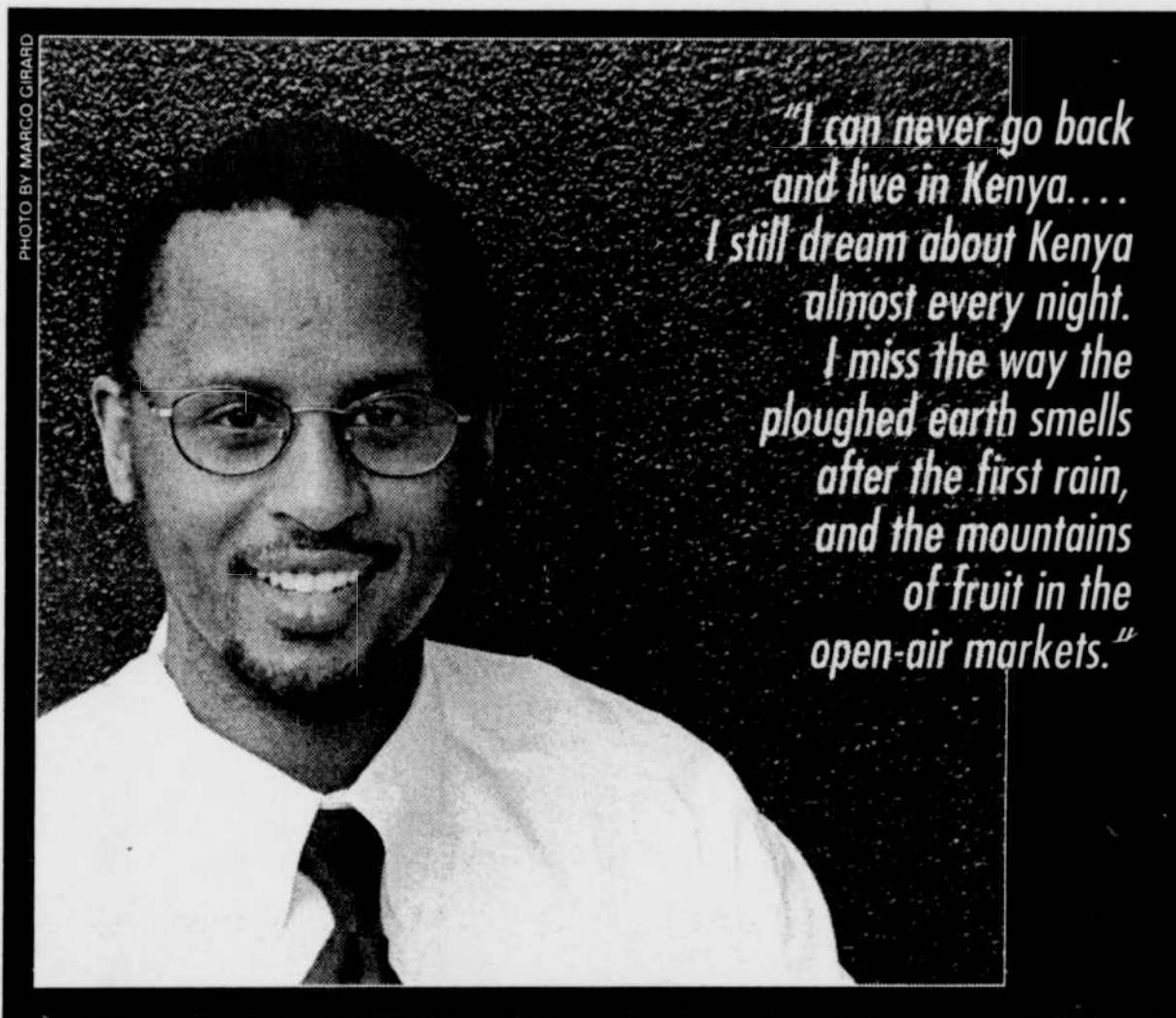
Talk of the winter holidays excites him, yet when his thoughts return to Africa, a sadness envelops him.

"I love the concept of Kwanzaa—that shows what we can salvage after the devastation of Christianity. *Kwanzaa* means 'first fruits of the harvest' in Swahili, and I'd love to take the celebration of Kwanzaa back to Kenya," he says wistfully, knowing that adventure will have to wait.

The irony of this is extreme: A man born in Africa is forced to leave because Western religious influences have poisoned attitudes toward sexual minorities; then he seeks sanctuary in the West, where he's able to celebrate Kwanzaa, a spiritual holiday originated by an African American to restore indigenous African heritage to Westerners.

But one day this ardent lover of freedom who found his liberty in the Western world may very well achieve his goal of restoring to his homeland concepts that were destroyed by Western invaders so many years ago. And wouldn't that be poetic justice? Wouldn't that bring Kahunya Wario's two worlds back together?

ORIANA GREEN is the Entertainment Editor of Just Out and feels honored to have met Kahunya Wario.



*"I can never go back and live in Kenya... I still dream about Kenya almost every night. I miss the way the ploughed earth smells after the first rain, and the mountains of fruit in the open-air markets."*

end we concluded the bonds of our family are stronger than anything else."

Although Wario stays in touch with his family through letters, he believes they're in denial about his new life.

"They don't believe it's true—they think I became gay because I left the church," Wario says, his voice turning sad. "They're praying the heck out of this—they think they can fix what is for them a deep, shameful secret."

Such an unusual career? "At the heart it's about nurturing, it's about taking care of a home," he replies passionately.

"At heart I'm a homebody," he says, adding that his early close relationships with his female relatives undoubtedly influenced his love of things domestic.

And would this single man ever be content to stay home and be the happy homemaker? "Absolutely!" Wario exclaims without hesitation.

His time in Colorado also solidified his love of the Northwest. "That made me realize this is my home," he says.

"I'm settling here in Portland, and I will be eternally grateful to my friends here—our community does have heart," he says with all earnestness.

Best of all, he is out, out, out to everyone. He has instructed his employment counselor at the institute to write on his file "in big red letters that I'm gay," he says.

