

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Joel Baraka, UW-Madison student majoring in Civil Engineering with an emphasis in construction project management and the founder and CEO of My Home Stars. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Joel Baraka**

I'm glad to be here. Thank you Claire.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, so there's a lot of ground we can cover. But first, it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and why you chose your particular majors at UW.

**Joel Baraka**

Right, right. So as you mentioned, my name is Joel Baraka, I was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which is a country in West Central Africa. By then I grew up in Uganda in a refugee camp called Kyangwali, and that's where I attended school, my primary school, which would be like elementary school here, and then had the chance to go to high school in South Africa, on a scholarship. And then I ended up being in Madison, Wisconsin, at the University of Wisconsin Madison, and I'm studying Civil Engineering. And my decision was really shaped by my early childhood, attending school in the refugee camp, but also living in the refugee camp whereby housing was not really the best. And so when I was growing up, I had very many conversations with my family, asking them, why was housing in Africa, different from say, those ones in the nearby towns, and they told me how people in towns had people call engineers, construction engineers, and these are the people who helped build houses. And so I think those also sort of the frustration of seeing the housing in the camp, but I wanted to go to school studying engineering, and maybe come back to the county to build houses. And so that's my inspiration to become a civil engineer. And I'm glad I'm still doing it. Whether I would do it for my entire life, I don't know. But it's my childhood dream to become an engineer.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And can you talk a little bit about your language background, I understand you speak quite a few languages?

**Joel Baraka**

That's true. That's true. So technically, I'm supposed to be speaking two languages. That's my mother tongue, and then English, which is in the national language in Uganda. But living in the camp, you also find that there are very many people from different places, and then the country you go to has its own countries. So I can speak up to seven languages. Most of them, apart from English, are Bantu languages. So it's like when you learn one, and you put in sounds, you can speak the other one. So that's how I was able to learn those many languages, living with people from other countries in the camp, and then attending schools in Uganda, having very many students from Uganda who can speak other languages.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And can you talk a little bit about the credit and kind of bureaucratic side of your language skills been validated here at UW? Was it easy to navigate that process? Did you have to prove your skills in a certain way? Do you continue to learn languages? What was that kind of like?

**Joel Baraka**

Yeah so as an international student when you come to UW, you have requirements to take, I think, by the time I was taking it in my sophomore year, it was ESL to prove your English proficiency. And then for me, I have to prove that I can speak one extra language apart from English. So ESL or English 201 I think to prove that you can speak English as a foreign language. And then I have to prove that I can speak another language apart from English, which I think in the US people do take like Spanish or another language. And so when you go to that sort of stage, I did know, actually, the School of Engineering would really go hard on me saying that, yeah, the fact that I can speak seven languages doesn't matter. I still have to, like, prove that I can speak. So I was like, Okay, how do I do that? So they connected me to one of the heads for I think Swahili languages actually, which is like my mother tongue. Swahili. So I met with this lady, and then we talked and then she was like, Yeah, I can give you an exam, and I was like fine, I can do an exam. I did the exam. Passed. It was like a four hour exam. It was about a 30 minutes conversation, and then about three and a half hours, written exam composition, and some small things. So she sort of wrote a letter of certification, certifying I had passed. She sent that to the Dean of the College of Engineering, and actually the Dean ended up saying that no, I have to take a semester of the language and that's how they can prove that I can do that language. I am having one of the people, he's like a Dean in one of the colleges, as my advisor because we had a really good relationship. I talked to him and he was very mad. He sent emails to the College of Engineering. But still, they insisted that I should take like a semester taking these languages. And when we were talking about it, some of the people have told me that it's because like, sometimes honestly, colleges, they want you to take classes and pay money. Because if you can prove that you can do it, if you've taken one exam, they still want you to spend a semester. So it's been frustrating, but actually, I'm taking the language next semester, because apparently you're not above the law or above the rules. So I have to do it.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah. And I think sometimes people are just like, oh, just take like the first year of the language and you already speak it, so it's going to be totally fine. But that's taught in a very different way than somebody who's a native speaker learning it. So it might be asking you grammar questions, or uber specific terminology where you didn't learn the language that way. And so it's not as easy as just like, oh, Swahili 1, that's gonna be super fine. It requires effort to and so I think it's important to recognize that. Speaking just a little bit about making the transition to a US-based University, are there certain challenges or adjustments you encountered, or had to make that those who work in education may not realize that newly arrived students are experiencing?

**Joel Baraka**

So the transition wasn't easy, definitely, especially with I mean, it's college, things really go on another level from when you're in high school, but also the fact that I had not lived here necessarily. It was my new place. I mean, it was my first time to experience winter. And actually, my first year in Wisconsin, that's 2017 and 2018. I think those are the years that were some of the harshest winters here. So that was hard. But I've sort of adjusted. I think the hardest part has been managing my academics and social life because you realize that you need friends, you can't do it all by yourself, school is challenging, you need friends. And so I have gotten to this point whereby I really have to think about how much can I get done? And then when do I have to ask for help for profit from professors? And then when I have to find time, for example, to make friends to take care of the franchise, and it isn't only a matter of making friends, you need to make time for them. But overall experience has been good but has not been easy, especially trying to manage classes and trying to manage the social life.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And so now, when you're in the United States, in an area, especially in Wisconsin, where you're probably surrounded by English, like pretty much all the time, do you find like using your mother tongue, it's something where you have to use effortful practice to maintain that language? Are you in contact with family, so it's not super hard? What is that like?

### **Joel Baraka**

Yeah, so the other challenge actually is like, how do you maintain connection with family who are like miles away, because we have like an eight or nine hour difference. So actually, when I'm waking up, they're going to bed and when I'm going to bed, they're waking up. So it's really messy, like to find time to talk to my parents and my family. But they've also gotten better at knowing when I can speak to them, and when I can call them. So that one has been hard as well. But like, it's getting better. When it comes to language. The other day, I was thinking about, you know, classes like, I feel like I'm really putting in a lot of time, but the amount of energy I'm putting in is not paying. So the other day I was thinking like, *What if this class was taught in my mother language?* Because I was thinking I'm like, these questions, I actually have to translate them in my language and like, try to understand, like, what is it like for an American student who's taking this class whose language like, is this and they know the English like, for me, the syllables, the word the words translating, because like, if you have a sentence or four lines, the question, almost like, even that half of the words, yes, I understand what they mean. But actually, sometimes the context of the question changes depending on the word. So I was like, *What if this was not in my mother language? Would they really be struggling like this?* So it's something I'm still processing. But actually, there is not unfairness, but like, it's very unfortunate that you have to run this class and compete with people who are who have like, were born speaking this language because I have another adult not be struggling if discussed or stood, for example, in Swahili, the language that I've been speaking, because sometimes I have to go and search the word and and I don't think like American students have to do. But yeah, language has been another thing that it's just coming to me. I've heard English, I've spoken it from the first day that I went to school. But I've actually been thinking about that, like what they've discovered in my mother language, would they be struggling like this and all that, but maybe I would be, but I think it has been getting me thinking. So language is another thing for sure that's a barrier like

you are learning in a foreign language and then you have your mother tongue that you have to translate things into in your head, of course.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that is such an important point to make. And, you know, it might be like you said, you can do all the math, you can do all the science, you know exactly what's going on in numbers. But when you're giving word problems, and you're like, this is a word that I was never taught in school. Because it's not relevant to 99% of my life, so I have no reason to know it. That's very difficult. So now talking about another area of life that consumes a lot of your time, and is very important to talk about your work with My Home Stars, just giving us an overview of how the idea came to be, how it works, and anyways, listeners can support or kind of follow along with your journey there?

### **Joel Baraka**

First of all, thank you so much for your support. I know you've supported us in several ways. So thank you so much. So what Claire is talking about is a social enterprise that I'm running. It's called My Home Stars. And My Home Stars is something that is really dear to me. Because it comes from the fact that I grew up in a refugee camp and realizing that very many refugee children, the Iraqi resources to continue with school. I mean, right now, I'm at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But like, when I look back to the kids, five, six years ago that I was with in the same class, most of them are not able to go to school. Part of it, some of them didn't perform well, but that not good performance is according to a lot of things like not having enough resources to go to school, and some of them not having school fees. And so I've always wondered what it would be like if refugee children got access to resources, and what we're doing with My Home Stars is to create academic resources that are fun and engaging for children. And we align mostly to work on board games and why board games? I'm coming to this point whereby I'm learning that children love to play and honestly, the current education system, there is a way, it doesn't favor who children are, you know, when you go to class, and then you're expect to sit and keep quiet for about an hour listening the teacher and don't move, sit down. Those are not kids, kids love to move around, kids love to make noise, kids love to interact and just kind of make friends. And so we're trying to find a way we can make our schools fun and engaging for children. And so who they are. And we've made some progress. And we are really grateful for the public because the public has been very supportive in giving us funds to produce the games, we don't sell the games, we give the games for free. And so if people out there can support us in the form of funding, by the way, you kind of buy the games in the form of gifts. That's what most Americans have been doing. They buy the games and then send them to Uganda in the form of gifts. And so we would be honored if they checked out the website and support us in the best way they can.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, I will for sure leave links below in the transcripts if people are curious or want to check that out. Focusing specifically on language, because that's kind of our focus here, what is the language of instruction with the game? Does it align with the language that they're taught in the classroom? How does that kind of work?

**Joel Baraka**

Right, right. So when I talk about these educational games, actually, one thing I forgot to talk about is the fact that we're trying to make them align to the national curriculum of Uganda. And that's important, because again, we're trying to help children be able to perform well at school. And so we're trying to make sure that yes, it's fun. Yes, it's engaging. But it's also helping children to continuously learn the content, they need to know because they need to do exams at the end of the day. And hopefully, they can pass really well and continue with cool. And so we've also tried to make it connected to English, one, because it will help them continue to strengthen their English. Yes, I wish the education curriculum was in their local language, but they have to study in English. And so their game is also in English. Of course, we have parts of the game that are helping them learn English. But the whole thing is in English to help them get acquainted with the school content that they're supposed to cover at school and get better at it.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, I cannot say enough good things about your group and everything you're doing. I don't know how you have time, but it's absolutely amazing. The last question that I asked everybody, is we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in English, in Swahili, in one of the five other languages that you speak, or a mix of all of them, why it's a superpower to speak more than one language?

**Joel Baraka**

I think I'm always amazed by how like, one word, for example, translating into something different, like, for example, you can have one word in Swahili and then when you go to Luganda, which is the language in Uganda, it means something totally different, you know? And so it's just like, amazing for me to like, can I say like, think that in my head and then say, I'm like, well, this one actually means something, actually, which can be very good. And then the other language means something that is really bad. And so to me it's amazing. I feel like I also missed your question. Were you asking like, why the language or why as a person?

**Claire Darmstadter**

Why it just makes you more worldly and more connected, why it's so cool that we have this ability to communicate in completely different languages with one another and why being a multilingual individual is such a cool thing.

**Joel Baraka**

Oh, I see, I see. I think for me, it's how I'm able to connect with people when I go to different parts of Uganda. Like, for example, when I'm going to Ghana, like I shared with My Home Stars, I get to go to lots of different schools. And so kids are always fascinated when I go to their school. And for example, it's like maybe in western Uganda, and I can connect with them in their local language. Of course, for example, if I'm introducing myself, I will be speaking in English. But when it comes to playing the game, I'll be talking to them in their local language and making jokes and that creates, can I say, a connection with them that they're like, oh, he can speak our

language. Yeah, he's Congolese, and he grew up in a refugee camp, but he can speak our language. And the same thing with teachers. There's a way people feel at home. There's a way you're able to get I'm like, I'm not seeking acceptance. But like, there's a way you get accepted really fast. And people feel like you're a friend. Like wow you know, a language. It's like, they like, imagine if you came to Ghana, and then started speaking Luganda, people will just be probably following and like, oh, wow, this lady from America, she can speak our language. So there's a way you're able to reconnect with people quickly. Because I will not lie to you like right now I have probably, like any part of Uganda would qualify. And I'm like, oh, how are you doing? And because like, part of it is when we are going to school, I could speak their language. Maybe when I go to meet their parents, I could tell them hello in their language or speak a few words in their language. And so there's a way it's able to help you connect with people, easily without making a huge effort.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And it's definitely a sign of respect, right? It takes a lot of effort often to acquire language and feel to speak it. So I think that is very important. Of course, it's not acceptance as the ultimate goal, but is a great way to show people that you respect them and you care about them. Well, thank you so much for chatting with me for a couple minutes. You're up to so much great work here at the university. And I know we're so lucky to have you. So I hope you have a great rest of your school year and that the winter wasn't too bad this year for you. But I know it's been a little bit difficult.

**Joel Baraka**

Right, right. Thank you so much for having me. Keep up the good work. I appreciate it and you're one of the people that amazes me, so keep up the good work.