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She moved to Boston knowing no English, but ended up a valedictorian



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Saïsa Nicolas's greatest goal is to someday establish an orphanage in her native Haiti.

By Jeremy C. Fox | JUNE 16, 2018

Saïsa Nicolas vividly recalls the sights, sounds, and flavors of her early childhood in Haiti. The street vendors selling crafts and snacks, including the gooey, flavorful patties she devoured; the secret hideout she made behind the mango tree trunks she climbed for their sweet, sticky fruit.

Nicolas also remembers her family's fear when she was just 4 and her aunt was kidnapped for ransom — then a frequent occurrence in the impoverished island nation.

“She was on her way to work. . . They grabbed her in a van,” the 18-year-old said in an interview last week near her home in Hyde Park. “Looking back, you realize, ‘Wow, what a scary moment.’ ”

Such dangers led her family to seek safety in the United States, moving to Boston when Nicolas was 9 and knew no English. She studied hard at a school for students learning the language and in English classes at the local library, where she also checked out books to practice her reading.

After much effort, she mastered English — plus math, science, history, and just about every subject school could throw at her. She grew up to be the valedictorian of Match Charter Public High School in Allston, where she graduated Friday, and this fall she is set to attend prestigious Wesleyan University in Connecticut.

The teenager’s diligence was evident from her first days at Match, recalled teacher Meghan Maloney, who had learned about Nicolas’ potential from the student’s freshman history teacher.

“I remember day two of school,” Maloney said, “him talking about Saïsa and how much of a hard worker she was . . . that she would be one to watch.”

Chris Perez, Nicolas’s ninth-grade physics teacher, said her schoolwork was so precise that he used it to help shape his answer keys.

“Pretty early in the year, I would say by late September, it seemed very apparent that the level of work she would put into a typical homework assignment was just leagues above her peers in terms of the detail,” Perez said.

Along with her academic achievements, Nicolas has also become a naturalized American, surrendering her Haitian citizenship while retaining deep pride in her people’s creativity and resilience.

In her early years in Boston, she relied upon her own strength and the support of her tight-knit family as she adjusted to life in a place where other children initially teased her for her rudimentary English. As Nicolas’ language skills improved, she became an interpreter for her mother, helping her confront complex banking and housing issues.

Mirva Nicolas, 53, is proud like any mother, but also practical-minded. She believes in her daughter’s abilities, she said in Creole as the teen translated, and is pleased that she listens to her mother’s advice and surrounds herself with friends of good character.

“She thinks I’m going to do great things,” Saïsa Nicolas said.

Her fortitude was tested two years ago, she said, when she lost her beloved grandfather, Bernard Nicolas, at 87.

“It really took a toll on me, because my grandpa was my rock,” she said. “I had to learn to live without that rock.”

She took a semester off from Match to attend The Mountain School in Vermont, where she learned to ski — a physical challenge that sometimes left her in tears — and found a voice to express her thoughts on political and social issues.

“I learned so much about myself,” she said. “I learned about personal strength. . . . I used to think failure was bad, but now I don’t always see failure as a bad thing.”

Maloney, who became Nicolas’s adviser at Match, said Nicholas has developed an emotional maturity and empathy that has benefited her classmates.

Grateful for the support of both family and teachers, Nicolas wants to bring a similar kindness to children who haven’t been as fortunate.

She hopes to someday work with UNICEF, the United Nations’ international child welfare agency. Her greatest goal, though, is to establish an orphanage in Haiti where children would receive nurturing and support while they await a permanent home.

Nicolas is concerned about the wellbeing of people around the globe, she said, but her heart is most strongly connected to her troubled home country. She was hurt last year to see reports that the US president had singled out Haiti and other poor nations using a vulgar epithet. “I felt crushed that’s how a person feels about my country,” she said. “I feel like if you’ve never been there, if you do not know any of the history, then you do not have the right to say the things that you say.”

But as with other negative experiences, Nicolas chose to see that moment as a lesson. “I was crushed, but it was also a realization for me that that’s how some people are going to think,” she said. “I have to work twice as hard and prove them wrong.”