



Elizabeth Ngatia, BA '23, LEAP student. Photo by Jeremy Wangler

Single Steps

For Elizabeth Ngatia, a Journey of a Thousand Miles Winds up at Washburn

By Brad Porter

For Elizabeth Ngatia, BA '23, entering Washburn University School of Law is the culmination of a journey. This journey began 8,744 miles away in Mombasa, Kenya. The fact that it has ended up with her and her sister both earning college degrees – the first in their family to do so – and Ngatia going on to law school in Topeka, Kansas, required an enormously unlikely confluence of circumstances, and more than a little luck. Enough so that, upon receiving her bachelor's degree in political science at this spring's commencement and seeing the scope of her achievement written on her parents' proud faces in Lee Arena, Ngatia commented to a nearby reporter "this is literally the American Dream."

She's right, but given that Ngatia, as the highest-ranking member of the 2023 senior class in the College of Arts and Sciences, was just honored with the Washburn University's Sibberson Award, and has already spent the last year taking law classes and earning praise as part of the Law School Early

Admissions Program, it might be Washburn Law's dream too. She is exactly the kind of person the LEAP program is designed for, and exactly the kind of student Washburn wants.

A New Continent

Ngatia's journey started in southeast Kenya, where she and her sister were born, growing up speaking Swahili. Ngatia's father worked in a printing house several hours away, and the family also operated a small shop. Her parents' hard work allowed them to get by, but they yearned for better opportunity.

Like many Kenyan families, Ngatia's parents applied for the Green Card Lottery, an annual program run by the U.S. State Department that represents one of the only legal pathways to immigrate to the United States. It was such a longshot that even when Ngatia's mother received her letter announcing she had won, she assumed it was a scam. If her father hadn't found the letter weeks later in a pile of junk mail, and then managed

to make arrangements in a hurry, including only gathering up money for airfare two days before they had to depart, the opportunity might have been lost forever.

Even during the trip itself, they were still at the mercy of fate. While in the air, the host family they had lined up in Boston backed out at the last minute – they had nowhere to stay, and the possibility loomed that the family might need to be split up. But Ngatia’s father hit the payphones in the airport, and eventually a family member who had attended ministry school in Kansas City, found someone willing to host them. All they had to do was move to some place called Fort Scott, Kansas.

A New Life

The family settled in Fort Scott, sight unseen, and began their new lives in America. Both of Ngatia’s parents got jobs at a Wendy’s, and Ngatia and her sister started school. The small town didn’t have much of an immigrant community, so the

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family learned the ropes of American life from the relationships they built, beginning with a local Presbyterian church. Over time, those relationships helped her mother get a job in a senior living home and Ngatia’s father a job at a print shop.

Ngatia and her sister worked hard too, not just in their studies as they had to quickly get acclimated to life as American kids, but also in the workforce, with both getting jobs as soon as they were able. Liz’s sister has gone on to be a nurse, but Liz got set on a different path when she got a job in high school working for the Bourbon County Attorney’s office.

“Pretty much all of the lawyers there were Washburn grads, and they told me a lot about the university, the law school, life in the capital city. Then I went on a campus visit and just fell in love with the place and the community. I was hooked,” she said.

A Standout Ichabod

At Washburn, Ngatia followed her parents’ example by working her tail off. She showed an early interest in political science. Back in Kenya, there was a great deal of local corruption, so as a young child, she had become interested in good government. She became involved in student government at Washburn, including serving as diversity and inclusion chair, and got involved in the Pre-Law Club. She worked as a resident assistant and as an office assistant on campus. She even studied abroad, visiting European capitals as part of a trip organized by the political science department.

Not long into her undergraduate experience, Ngatia became convinced of two things: She wanted to go to law school, and she wanted to stay at Washburn. She applied to the law school’s early admittance program and was accepted. As part of the accelerated program, that meant she took first year law school courses as an undergraduate senior, with those classes counting to both finish her undergraduate degree and begin her juris doctor.

“Coming into Washburn Law, I definitely had some imposter syndrome,” Ngatia recalled. “Here I was a first year without even a bachelor’s degree. But I figured out pretty quickly how common that was. None of us felt like we knew anything, even those first years who had master’s degrees or PhDs. I got over it and just got to work.”

Now, having finished her first year, Ngatia earned her bachelor’s degree and this summer has a job lined up interning at Stinson LLP, first in their offices in Kansas City, and then embedded in-house with one of their larger local clients, Hallmark. It’s a long way from Wendy’s in Fort Scott where her parents started their family’s journey in Kansas.

“I push myself hard because I know what my parents put in to get me here,” Ngatia reflected. “Everything I accomplish is not just for me, it’s for them as well.”

This fall, when Ngatia returns to campus, she’ll still be working hard – now as a small group mentor helping other incoming 1Ls make their own transitions to Washburn Law. Because if there’s one thing Ngatia is an expert on, it’s making transitions, one incredible step at a time.