

Coumba's Story

By Mary Gail Hare

In her native West African country, Coumba Konte might have prospered and lived her life surrounded by family and friends.

"In African, family is not just the immediate people in your life," she said. "It is a big circle. Even your good neighbors are part of that circle."

Now that circle is even wider. It extends to Baltimore and includes new friends among the students and staff at the Caroline Center.

Coumba, 47, recently earned certification as a nursing assistant at the center and is working with a home nursing program.

"The course was easy for me and enjoyable," she said. "The staff was so friendly and helpful."

Life has changed dramatically for this mother of three, who still often wears the traditional attire of her native country – a full-length, multi-colored dress and matching head scarf, intricately wrapped to frame her face.

In Mali, the country of her birth, her future seemed bright. There was a rich family life and work. She had studied in Russia and earned an advanced degree in veterinary science. But there was also the specter of a ritualistic tribal tradition that would maim her daughter, then 7. Rather than subject the child to an archaic practice, she left her country. She and the children joined her husband, who had immigrated to Baltimore ahead of them.

The family settled into a home in Gwynn Oak. Her husband worked as a driver for a limo company.

Although Coumba spoke little English, she wanted a job to help support her family.

"I needed to work and I like to work with people," she said. "I wanted an opportunity to do something here."

A woman from Cameroon, who became her first American friend, told her about the Caroline Center. She enrolled in the nursing program.

"They really prepared me for this work that I really like to do," she said. "Before the classes, there were many things I did not know."

She enjoys working with elderly clients. It brings back memories of the time she spent caring for her grandmother, she said. In perfect English, delivered with a lilting accent, she often tells her clients tales of Africa.

"This is an opportunity for me to do something for my family and for others," she said. Encouraged by her success at the Caroline Center, she also is planning to continue her education in the nursing field.

Her oldest son just graduated from high school and plans to attend community college. Her daughter and younger son are faring well in city schools. She has found gainful employment and is referring friends to the Caroline Center.

"I have given their number to many friends," she said. "And I go back often to say 'hello.' I want to stay in touch. Because of them, I am very happy with what I am doing now."