

Jirair Chichian's speech to the UNHCR High Level Panel on Nationality, November 3 2016

Greetings to everyone! You know, today's meeting means a lot to me, and that's why I left my problems behind and came here today to stand in front of you and give other stateless persons hope and to inspire them, and you, to take action and solve the problem of statelessness in the world. I hope that my life story which you are about to hear, will change a lot in your life and the lives of your children, and that you will have an idea of how difficult it is to live the life of a stateless person. By origin, I am Armenian. I was born in Georgia in 1993, a very difficult period following the collapse of the Soviet Union. There was no work and my father was doing one-time jobs, then he went to Russia. It was very difficult for our family, because money is not the most important thing to our family. The most important are family relations and to be close to each other. That's why we moved to Russia, for my family to be together. I was five years old at the time.

I grew up there, I studied at school there, I always liked to play sports – Greco-Roman wrestling. I was a very good athlete and participated in many competitions, and won most of the time. But I could not join my team members in competitions abroad because I had no nationality. I am a stateless person and I never had an identity. It hurt me that I was always left behind, even though I was as good of an athlete as them. When they went for wrestling competitions, I was smiling and was always happy for them. I was never jealous, and I carried my smile for them. But I never showed my pain which was eating me from the inside. When they participated in different competitions, I felt like a handicapped person strapped to my bed.

I want to share something with you. I had a lot of opportunities to go to Europe together with my team, and we were waiting, hoping, preparing, and working hard for this moment. One day, our coach called us together and said "tomorrow bring your passports, we are going to Europe for wrestling competitions, we need to get visas, etc." Then he turned to me and said "What do I do with you now, my son? I would love to take you with us, but you do not have a passport." It was so painful for me. I was speechless and could not tell him how I felt. At that moment, I felt like a bird without wings. After this, my family began to try to obtain documents for me. It was very hard for my parents, we had a big family, and they were trying to take care of all of us. My parents loved all of us and I cannot be upset with them for leaving me without documents. They really tried very hard, they asked different government structures, different organizations several times to support us with identity documents, but most of these agencies were asking for bribes, and we did not have the money to pay such amounts. Then my coach helped me to get work as a bodyguard at one of the cafes, and I was saving money from my salary for the bribes needed for my documentation. One day, after my hard work, we gave my savings to the agent. She told us to wait for three-four months, and when we came for the answer, she disappeared. I lost all my money, and I still did not have documentation. Nonetheless, I did not give up and I carried on with strong faith inside of me, I continued to wrestle. I was sure that God would appreciate all of my hard work and open the sunlit way for me so that I could have citizenship. After that I would always be a winner and I would not be different than others. I would have the opportunity to learn, to continue playing sports, and to be a winner.

Two years ago, I learned that my grandfather was very sick and I came back to Georgia to take care of him. After he passed away, I remained with my grandmother. Then I started application process here in Georgia for documentation. The problem was that they were asking for some documents which were in Russia and that we could not provide. The Ministry of Justice of Georgia started to work on my documentation and luckily over the summer UNHCR invited me to a meeting with stateless youth. When the guests from Geneva spoke English, I did not understand their language but I could understand by their faces and their smiles that they took our problems very close to their hearts. For me, the meeting was an opportunity to meet with other youth in the same position as me, and to tell my story. After this meeting, UNHCR did a report on stateless children in youth and by the way, my picture is inside. Shortly afterwards, I received an official travel document. For the first time in my life, I had an identity. And in five years, I can apply for Georgian citizenship. This is the result of my faith, I am so grateful to UNHCR and to the Georgian government which helped out of this very difficult situation. Thank you very much. Holding this document in my hand and standing in front of you today, it feels like the time when my coach would take my hand and lift it up after I won a competition. Now instead of my coach, you are taking my hand, and I am counting this as a life win for me.