

Lost in America

How Four Teens' Hoop Dreams Turned Into a Nightmare, Sparking a Federal Probe

BY LUKE CYPHERS AND TERI THOMPSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY EDWARD LINSMIER

The calls came around 11 p.m. on a cold January night in 2015, first to the Serbian boy with the little Samsung Android phone, then to the Cameroonians. "You ready? I'm gonna come tonight," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Pack your stuff."

Within hours, four teenage basketball players had hurriedly filled their gym bags with their scant possessions, including the clothes that now hung off their tall frames like cheap drapes, the result of months of having to scavenge for food from a nearby suburban Atlanta strip mall. They sneaked out of the drab townhouse apartments where they slept jammed into small rooms, usually on the floor and often without heat, and silently piled into a rented gray van.

They had never heard of Lake Wales, Florida, the place where the driver of the van, Gordon Gibbons, an assistant coach who had taken pity on them, was delivering them. They didn't care. It couldn't be worse than the place they were fleeing in the middle of the night—Stockbridge, Georgia, and Faith Baptist Christian Academy North. They were sure they had been conned there, and they'd had enough.

Their tribulations began as soon as they set foot in America. Rostand Ndong Essomba, a quick, 6'0" point guard from Yaounde, Cameroon,

was told back home that Faith Baptist North was offering him a full scholarship. He jumped through all the bureaucratic hoops, procuring a coveted I-20 form that grants permission for international students to apply for a non-immigrant visa to enter the country and study in the U.S.

But when Rostand arrived at Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport in Atlanta in October 2014, he says Faith Baptist North's founder, George Flint, took one look at him and told the 17-year-old African he was too short. Rostand says that Flint told him that if he wanted to stay in America, he had to cough up \$2,000. "Where's the money?" Flint allegedly asked his new recruit.

Franck Tsoungui, Rostand's slender, sharpshooting 6'7" countryman, had left a stable situation at a prep school in Maine five months earlier, enticed by Flint's promises of a new program playing a powerhouse schedule that would expose his talents to Division I coaches. What Franck got was a merry-go-round of missed meals and cancelled games.

Mahmadou Ngoucheme had only been at Faith Baptist North for six weeks, but he packed plenty of suffering into that time. He was 7 feet tall, but that was about the only thing he had going for him as a U.S hoops prospect. He was raw, which was a nice way of saying he possessed few offensive skills, and he had a gentle disposition off the court—and on it.

What he really wanted was an American education, but after arriving in December 2014, Ahmadou had yet to attend a single class. Faith Baptist North had held no classes since mid-November.



ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA GAVE UP BASKETBALL IN FAVOR OF SOCCER AFTER HIS ORDEAL AT FAITH BAPTIST NORTH.

Stefan Nakic-Vojnovic grew jaded early. The 6'5" shooting guard from Belgrade, Serbia, had been in Georgia the longest, since July, meaning that he had heard more broken promises than any of them. First there was the matter of the Faith Baptist North campus. There wasn't one, despite the brochure Faith Baptist North circulated to starry-eyed teens around the world via the internet, with photos of a beautiful lakeside compound and state-of-the-art athletic facilities.

The real Faith Baptist North was a football field and a rented gym housing a few unused classrooms behind a small church in Stockbridge, south of Atlanta. Stefan lived first in the basement of Flint's two-story home in Conyers, a few miles from Stockbridge, with as many as 20 other boys, then in a run-down apartment building, where he and some Serbian players pooled what money they had to buy a tiny electric heater to fend off the cold.

During the few weeks of classes held in the fall, Stefan says he took math tests for football players and laughed as Flint lectured students on avoiding bad people. Much of the rest of the time, he says he slept on cold floors and scrounged for food and free Wi-Fi hotspots. He sums up Faith Baptist North in three words: "a big nothing."

The van ride promised something better. For a little while, anyway. About five hours into the seven-hour trip to Lake Wales, a town in Central Florida, Stefan received another call from a Serb who was at Faith Baptist North. Flint now was aware of the getaway, and in response, the founder who referred to himself as a preacher and a man of God had apparently told people he'd cancelled the four teens' I-20s, rendering their student visas invalid.

"We knew that we were basically illegal now," Stefan says. The boys all had the same thought: "What are we gonna do?"

Over the past six months, a Bleacher Report investigation into Faith Baptist Christian Academy North has revealed how the startup school ended up crushing dreams, squandering families' savings and disrupting lives. The four boys who fled Faith Baptist North for Lake Wales are now witnesses in a widening federal investigation into human trafficking, allowed to remain in the country under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

Their flight that January night set off a chain of events that led to the resignation of the Lake Wales High basketball coach and federal raids of Faith Baptist North, which has since closed, and its sister campus, Faith

Baptist Christian Academy in Ludowici, Georgia, a four-hour drive southeast of Atlanta.

THE FOUR BOYS WHO FLED FAITH BAPTIST NORTH FOR LAKE WALES ARE NOW WITNESSES IN A WIDENING FEDERAL INVESTIGATION INTO HUMAN TRAFFICKING, ALLOWED TO REMAIN IN THE COUNTRY UNDER THE TRAFFICKING VICTIMS PROTECTION ACT.

In a letter sent by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to the federal Citizenship and Immigration Services agency on behalf of one of the boys, Faith Baptist's south campus in Ludowici was described as an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE)-certified school that "worked in conjunction with a noncertified northern campus to recruit, exploit and defraud hundreds of international and domestic students."

George Flint, who founded Faith Baptist North, declined multiple interview requests from Bleacher Report by telephone, text and mail, saying in a text message in late May, "I really have no comment at this time."

However, he has denied any wrongdoing to others interviewed by Bleacher Report, including Matthew Sellars, the athletic director at Faith Baptist's south campus in Ludowici. Sellars recalls seeing Flint at a JUCO jamboree in October 2015, seven months after Faith Baptist North

closed. "The first thing out of his mouth was, 'I had nothing to do with that; whatever it is they said, it isn't true,'" Sellars says.



GEORGE FLINT

The 42-year-old coach and founder of Faith Baptist North.

Bleacher Report has learned that the probe, which includes agents from Homeland Security's Atlanta, Savannah and Tampa offices, has expanded its scope beyond Faith Baptist Christian Academy's two campuses to include potential trafficking cases elsewhere in the Southeast.

On May 16, law enforcement officials in Alamance County, North Carolina, arrested Aris Hines, a former Flint associate who sometimes coached players from Faith Baptist North and worked briefly with Flint in a failed attempt to start another prep school, on state law charges of obstruction of justice and obtaining property by false pretense.

Alamance County Sheriff Terry Johnson told Bleacher Report the charges are part of an investigation into human trafficking of athletes. He said the FBI, ICE, Homeland Security, including Homeland's Atlanta office, and the U.S. Department of State have entered the investigation, which involves a 15-year-old Nigerian basketball and football player and

three girls from the Dominican Republic whom Hines allegedly attempted to enroll in a North Carolina high school with false documents and expired visas.

The sheriff's office said the search warrants in the case are sealed and police reports are not available to the public because of the investigation. Hines, who did not return messages left by Bleacher Report, denied wrongdoing [in an interview](#) with WTVD, a North Carolina TV station.

Depending on the source, the Faith Baptist fiasco was either a cascading failure that started with good intentions or a corrupt, cynical grab for money and sports glory at the expense of gullible foreign athletes and their families. It also reveals that in the U.S., there are still Good Samaritans willing to help kids in trouble. Thanks to the actions of the Lake Wales community, and one family in particular, the four Faith Baptist North players still have a chance at an American education.

Anyone familiar with modern prep school sports agrees the system is rife with problems. A number of American prep schools effectively operate as AAU teams with a "school" around them, coaches say.

**THE FAITH BAPTIST FIASCO WAS EITHER A
CASCADING FAILURE THAT STARTED WITH GOOD
INTENTIONS OR A CORRUPT, CYNICAL GRAB FOR
MONEY AND SPORTS GLORY AT THE EXPENSE OF**

GULLIBLE FOREIGN ATHLETES AND THEIR FAMILIES.

For decades, the NCAA has tried to crack down on "diploma mill" prep schools designed to make academically struggling athletes eligible for college ball. The incentives to run such programs are strong. Successful programs not only enjoy prestige for winning and turning out star players, they also can earn money from sneaker company sponsorships.

There are also age-old stories of prep and AAU coaches paying handlers for access to players and getting kickbacks for sending players to certain colleges or steering them to certain professional agents. But the international component has added a new dimension—a massive, global pool of athletes to be exploited.

"This whole prep school thing is an absolute scam," says one veteran basketball coach who asked not to be identified. "There are literally hundreds of these bad situations throughout the country."



MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME, THE CAMEROONIAN 7-FOOTER, STRUGGLED THE MOST OF THE FOUR BOYS WITH THE TRANSITION AT FAITH BAPTIST NORTH.

These situations can appear attractive. "Corrupt schools can put up a front; they may look credible on the surface, but once we peel back the layers, we find irregularities," says Lou Farrell, director for the Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP), the arm of ICE that certifies and monitors U.S. schools that enroll international students on an F or M visa. "Schools and individuals who try to manipulate the student visa system for personal gain are being held accountable for their actions."

While human trafficking cases involving sexual exploitation of women are well-documented, trafficking of athletes is a subset of labor exploitation that has only recently shown up on the radar of activists and government agencies. But it is a crime nonetheless, says Katherine Kaufka Walts, director of the Center for the Human Rights of Children at Loyola University in Chicago.

"It's the recruiting, it's the moving, it's the harboring and financially benefitting from the involuntary servitude, debt bondage, peonage, or slavery of another person by force or by coercion," Kaufka Walts says. "The common thread is the economic exploitation of someone else's body, whether it's to perform labor in a field or to perform labor on the court."

At the heart of the U.S. athlete trafficking issue is the quest for I-20s, the necessary form for student visa status. The latest quarterly statistics released by SEVP reveal 1.2 million international students studying in U.S. elementary schools, high schools, colleges and vocational schools. It is unclear how many are athletes—students aren't required to reveal their athletic ambitions to immigration agents—but prep school rosters across the country are dotted with, and sometimes laden with, international players.

The come-ons prep schools use to attract these players can be comical. Until recently, the website of the Evelyn Mack Academy, or EMA, a Charlotte prep school stocked with international athletes, [featured a photo](#) of an imposing domed structure fronted by Ionic columns. The building didn't belong to EMA but to MIT—the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

WHILE HUMAN TRAFFICKING CASES INVOLVING SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN ARE WELL-DOCUMENTED, TRAFFICKING OF ATHLETES IS A SUBSET OF LABOR EXPLOITATION THAT HAS ONLY

RECENTLY SHOWN UP ON THE RADAR OF ACTIVISTS AND GOVERNMENT AGENCIES.

But serious national security issues come into play. Even before 9/11, when some of the foreign nationals who brought down the Twin Towers trained to fly planes in the U.S. due in part to improperly issued visas, security experts worried about bogus student visas being a portal for terrorists.

There are also health concerns: Some players arrive in the country without proper immunizations, and their schools never bother to vaccinate them. Mahmadou, Rostand, Franck and Stefan didn't receive their mandated shots until they arrived at Lake Wales High.

Those are worst-case scenarios, but the everyday abuses are bad enough. Whether through incompetence, ambition or, as several international students allege, corruption, schools like Faith Baptist North can leave aspiring athletes out on the street in a foreign land, disillusioned, vulnerable and illegal.

The Georgia school is rare in that it has precipitated a federal investigation, but as the North Carolina investigation reveals, there are other schools and individuals allegedly abusing the I-20 system, potentially leaving students in deplorable conditions with little or no way out.

"I would try every day to get back in my country," says Mahmadou.
"Because in Georgia, I didn't go to school. I didn't sleep good, eat good. Nobody to tell me how I would do. My first plan was to get back to my country. Because I was..."

He pauses, struggling to find the word. "Lost."



SHADOWS OF THE BOYS IN THE MIDST OF PRACTICE.

As dawn broke over the citrus groves in Lake Wales on April 22, 2016, Lora Watts Donley was in an urgent care office pleading for antibiotics and anything else that would knock out the walking pneumonia the doctor had diagnosed. She felt like hell, but there was no time for coddling a 102.7-degree fever. Lora rarely failed to complete a task, and this one was no different.

It had been more than a year since the four young basketball players, basically homeless in a foreign country, had landed in the Donley home near Lake Wales. Now, Lora was literally reversing their course, taking

Mahmadou and Stefan to a junior college showcase in the Atlanta suburb of Norcross, nine hours away.

Things had gone well for the most part in the year since the boys had fled Faith Baptist North. The Donleys took them in because they believe in helping others in need, and because they have the resources to do it. They go to church, and it's right to share blessings.

David, Lora's husband, runs a family citrus-growing operation and owns land throughout Central Florida. Lora's family lives nearby and owns a blueberry packing house and floral manufacturing business.

Thanks to the Donleys, the boys were finally living the kind of American life they had seen on television and read about on the internet. They had their own space in a beautiful home, nice clothes, plenty of food, good schools to attend and sports teams to play on. The Donleys' generosity included helping arrange for Stefan's mother to come to Florida from Serbia to visit her son.

"Those kids lucked out," says Donna Dunson, the Lake Wales High principal.

But the kids were still witnesses in a federal investigation, allowed in the country as long as investigators found them useful. Homeland Security agents told Lora the investigation could last two years, but nobody knew for certain, and their witness status was set to expire at the end of March 2016. After that, they would be vulnerable, much the way they were in

the van the year before, when George Flint claimed to have cancelled their I-20s.

Lora and David were keenly attuned to any change in the boys' behavior, and it was clear that the ordeal they had endured in Georgia—the lack of food, the threats of deportation, the alienation—had taken a toll. The boys were homesick, yet worried about whether they could continue their educations in the U.S. "They were crashing on me, losing morale," Lora says.



DAVID AND LORA DONLEY

Their family took in the four boys in Lake Wales, Florida.

Lora figured the surefire way to keep the boys on track was to find them college scholarships and the I-20s that came with them. That way, even if the government dropped the investigation and no longer needed them as witnesses, they wouldn't be deported.

Lora had already succeeded with Franck, who had graduated from high school by the time he arrived in Lake Wales and earned a JUCO basketball scholarship from State College of Florida in Bradenton.

For Rostand, Mahmadou and Stefan, however, time was running out, and tensions were high.

Propped up by antibiotics, massive doses of ibuprofen and a sackful of vitamins, Lora loaded Stefan and Mahmadou into the SUV along with Stefan's mother, Lola, and Lora's daughter, Kaylee, and began the long drive north. The destination: the All-American Showcase, an event for unsigned high school, prep, JUCO and international prospects.

As they checked into their hotel and the boys registered for the tournament, Lora described her mission in a Facebook post:

*✓Basketball Showcase weekend : must get the boys a scholarship.
✓Three days of being sick : bed is not an option. ✓Predawn urgent care trip : 2 shots in my butt and a bag of prescriptions. ✓9 hour road trip through a monsoon with fever : we have arrived. ✓God please send the right people this weekend. You know what everyone has gone through to get here.*



ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA

A quick point guard from Cameroon.

Rostand landed in America on Oct. 24, 2014, at exactly 3:35 p.m.; he checked his phone to mark the moment. He arrived with a small suitcase, two pairs of shoes and an inconspicuous belt bag his mom had given him

in which he kept his documents and \$150 in cash. But he felt rich. This, he thought, would be the start of a new life, a chance to gain an education in the United States (annual per capita income, \$55,230, according to [The World Bank](#)) and rise above his station in Cameroon (annual per capita income, \$1,350).

Rostand's first love wasn't basketball. Soccer mattered more. He grew up playing it, and by the age of 14, a local manager offered to take him to Europe to try out with a professional club. But African kids are well aware that unscrupulous managers have promised soccer contracts in Europe and then discarded the kids with no way for them to get back home.

"My dad said no," Rostand recalls. "He didn't want it to happen."

Basketball in the U.S. was different. "I didn't think anything could happen like that in the United States—never," he says. "If you have a chance to go to the United States, you should take it."

THIS, HE THOUGHT, WOULD BE THE START OF A NEW LIFE, A CHANCE TO GAIN AN EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES (ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME, \$55,230, ACCORDING TO THE WORLD BANK) AND RISE ABOVE HIS STATION IN CAMEROON (ANNUAL PER CAPITA INCOME, \$1,350).

American basketball had bestowed opportunity on dozens of players from Cameroon in the past decade. A guy Rostand knew, Landry Nnoko, was playing at Clemson University on a full scholarship. Joel Embiid was the third overall pick in the 2014 NBA draft. And it was another Cameroonian success story, former UCLA star and NBA veteran Luc Richard Mbah a Moute, who helped pave Rostand's path to Atlanta that October afternoon.

Rostand shone at Mbah a Moute's annual summer camp in Cameroon the previous year, earning him an invitation to the NBA's 2013 [Basketball Without Borders Camp](#) in South Africa. Out of 64 players, Rostand says he was among 20 chosen for the all-star game. He met and took a photo with his idol, Cleveland Cavaliers point guard Kyrie Irving, and heard some coaches say he had "a good chance" to play and get an education at a U.S. university.

For nearly a year, though, Rostand heard nothing more. That's not surprising. In the hunt for international talent, big men are the priority. For whatever reason, the U.S. high school system is producing few quality post players. And those rare top-tier prospects—such as Anthony Davis and Jahlil Okafor—are quickly gobbled up by NCAA powerhouses.

Meanwhile, the non-elite college programs have begun spanning the globe for height, with Africa being a favorite focus. Many prep schools also jumped into the fray, stocking their rosters with tall international players in hopes of moving them up the ladder. But African backcourt prospects are rare.

Rostand didn't know this, of course, when a Cameroonian teacher who would teach briefly at Faith Baptist North asked him if he would be interested in a scholarship to the new prep school. He leaped at the chance.

The teenager's American dream lasted about as long as the walk to customs. Officials told him his I-20 wasn't in their files. For six hours, he waited in the airport, not knowing if they were going to put him right back on a plane to Africa.

When Rostand finally cleared immigration and met his new coach face-to-face, he says Flint turned to a colleague and said, "Really? Look at him. He's not even tall."

Not long after, Rostand says Flint demanded \$2,000. "I opened my bag and showed him the full scholarship that I have," Rostand recalls in his French-accented English. He insisted he wasn't supposed to pay anything. Flint's response, according to Rostand: "OK, that means you want to go back to Cameroon, right?"

WHEN ROSTAND FINALLY CLEARED IMMIGRATION AND MET HIS NEW COACH FACE-TO-FACE, HE SAYS FLINT TURNED TO A COLLEAGUE AND SAID, "REALLY? LOOK AT HIM. HE'S NOT EVEN TALL."

Rostand's parents had all but liquidated their savings for their son's plane ticket, but the teenager relented. "I was just getting out of the issue

with my papers, and I was so afraid," Rostand says. "I say, 'OK, OK, OK. I will give you the money.'"

He contacted his family, who somehow rounded up and wired \$500, enough to appease Flint. As bad as Rostand's first day was, his stay in the States was about to get much worse. He was not alone.



SECOND FROM LEFT: DAVID DONLEY, MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME, LOLA NAKIC-VOJNOVIC (STEFAN'S MOTHER), LORA DONLEY AND STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC GATHER ON THE OUTDOOR BASKETBALL COURT ACROSS FROM THE OAKLAND COMMUNITY CENTER IN HAINES CITY, FLORIDA.

Over the past 15 years, dozens of sports-centric prep schools have opened in the U.S. Increasingly, these "Bootleg Prep" schools, as one coach calls them, seek to fill seats by attracting top athletes from overseas, who in turn attract less skilled players and regular students who are willing to pay hefty tuition.

The goal is to become the elite Montverde Academy, near Orlando, Florida, which helped propel Australia's Ben Simmons to the top of the NBA draft board and which has a significant number of international students paying the annual boarding school tuition of \$49,600.

While Montverde was founded in 1912 and has a solid academic reputation to go along with its top-level sports program, Faith Baptist North was the new school on the block in the summer of 2014. And to the four federal witnesses, it looked like a perfect opportunity.

THESE "BOOTLEG PREP" SCHOOLS, AS ONE COACH CALLS THEM, SEEK TO FILL SEATS BY ATTRACTING TOP ATHLETES FROM OVERSEAS, WHO IN TURN ATTRACT LESS SKILLED PLAYERS AND REGULAR STUDENTS WHO ARE WILLING TO PAY HEFTY TUITION.

The photos in the Faith Baptist North web brochure were the clincher. "It was beautiful," says Stefan. "When [Flint] said that he offers me a full ride and he sent me the pictures of the 'campus,' it didn't take my family long to say yes."

The boys did whatever it took to get there, and Flint obliged them. In addition to offering them full scholarships, Flint supplied them with I-20s signed by officials from Faith Baptist's south campus in Ludowici. After the African teacher helped recruit Rostand, the player headed for the U.S. Embassy in Yaounde with his I-20 in hand. He was interviewed by officials there and granted a student visa.

Franck came via a different route. He was already in the U.S., playing at Lee Academy in Maine. But he wasn't on any college's recruiting list.

Gibbons, a former Division II college coach who had retired in the Stockbridge area, had agreed to help coach at Faith Baptist North in its inaugural season, and he was looking for players on short notice. Gibbons saw potential in a video of Franck, and soon the player was headed south.



MADMHADOU NGOUCHEME

A 7-footer from Cameroon with raw basketball skills.

Mahmadou had played against Rostand in some Cameroon national tournaments, but he was just learning the game. He was a 7-footer, though, so Faith Baptist North got in touch with him through one of the "handlers" or "recruiters" who help a player find a school, or vice versa, and coordinate the player's passage to America. The Cameroonian recruiter asked Mahmadou to go to the embassy and get a visa.

It didn't matter that it was already December and the season was well underway. On Dec. 6, Mahmadou landed at Washington Dulles International Airport, and even though he spoke almost no English, he found his way to a bus station and took a 20-hour ride to Atlanta.

Stefan's decision was a family affair—and a family sacrifice. His older brother, Filip, was also a good basketball player, but the family could

afford to send only one of the boys to the States. The other would have to stay in Belgrade to help with the family business, a cafe.

At Filip's insistence, they sent Stefan. "I can never be grateful enough for him giving me the chance to try to succeed in what I love to do," Stefan says of his brother.

With help from a Belgrade-based recruiting agency, Stefan received his I-20 from Faith Baptist. On July 3, his mom's birthday, he was on a plane to the U.S. to meet George Flint.



STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC

An athletic shooting guard from Belgrade, Serbia.

Flint is a stocky, round-faced 42-year-old with an undeniable love of sports, an entrepreneur's persistence and, when he wants to talk, a preacher's eloquence.

In recent years Flint, who now runs a business called Goshen Financial Services, Inc., in suburban Atlanta, has focused on his son's fledgling basketball career. Flint coached his son's AAU teams throughout the boy's teens and kept moving him to different high schools in hopes of helping him land a Division I scholarship.

Jonathan Morgans, an Iraq War veteran, got to know Flint on the AAU circuit. Morgans had coached as an assistant at Faith Baptist in Ludowici in 2012 and '13, and says Flint frequently discussed taking an even bigger role in his son's career.

By the spring of 2014, Morgans says Flint started talking about opening a school and surrounding his son with top-flight talent. He asked Morgans for help. In May 2014, Morgans set up a meeting between Flint and his former employers at Faith Baptist's Ludowici campus.

Flint was interested in starting up a "sister campus" in Atlanta and using Faith Baptist's certification to issue I-20s to international players. In the previous few years, the Ludowici school had begun to take in foreign students, mostly baseball and basketball players from the Dominican Republic, plus a few from Africa, says Matthew Sellars, the athletic director at Faith Baptist's south campus and the son of the school's founder, Pastor Terry Sellars.

"Basically, we had been playing several schools in some national events, and it just seemed like every team we played, the kids on the other team weren't speaking English," Matthew Sellars says. "I was like, 'What's going on?' And so I started talking to some of my coaching friends, and they said, 'Yes, well we started getting exchange students.' ... So we started it here."

Now, Flint offered a chance to expand that mission. "I didn't know Flint from Adam," Matthew Sellars says, but he introduced him to his dad.

"And they kind of hit it off because [Flint] was pretending he was a pastor and all this Christian aspect."

While Matthew Sellars says Flint "was trying to do something good," he says his dad was taken advantage of. "He is trusting until obviously you bury him," he says. "He wants to be friendly, and he got conned." Pastor Terry Sellars declined to comment for this story, referring Bleacher Report to his son.

Soon, Flint and the Sellars family were in business together. It didn't matter that Flint had no school building, no curriculum, no teachers, no place to house students, no experience running a prep school, and no SEVP certification. It didn't matter that it was May, and he wanted to open the school in September. He had an AAU team, and he had access to I-20s. In a few months, he had eager teenagers from around the world coming to play for him.



SWEAT POURS OFF MADMADOU NGOUCHEME DURING AN OUTDOOR BASKETBALL PRACTICE.

In July and August, Stefan practiced with Flint's AAU team, played some games and heard assurances from Flint that the school was going to be great as athletes trickled in. But when it came time for school to open, classes weren't held at the gleaming, whitewashed campus in the brochures.

Instead, Flint leased the gym, playing field and some classroom space behind New Hope Baptist Church in Conyers. While football and basketball practices started on the site in August, classes did not. "They said school starts Sept. 1," Stefan says, "and like three weeks passed, and we still didn't go to school."

There was no permanent lodging, either. In the fall, several basketball players, including Stefan, stayed at Flint's house. The rest bunked at what was then an Econolodge in Stockbridge. "He populated like half the hotel," Stefan says. Flint's house and the motel were 30-minute drives to the makeshift Conyers "campus" at New Hope, longer when traffic was bad.

IT DIDN'T MATTER THAT FLINT HAD NO SCHOOL BUILDING, NO CURRICULUM, NO TEACHERS, NO PLACE TO HOUSE STUDENTS, NO EXPERIENCE RUNNING A PREP SCHOOL, AND NO SEVP CERTIFICATION...HE HAD AN AAU TEAM, AND HE HAD ACCESS TO I-20S.

When classes finally started in late September, players shuttled between their lodging and the gym in a cast-off yellow school bus Flint had somehow picked up from Canada.

The student body formed a motley crew: more than two dozen basketball players, most from overseas; 35 or 40 football players, mostly American, but including Chidi Valentine-Okeke, a Nigerian-born blue-chip offensive line prospect who now plays at LSU; a couple of Serbian soccer players, who, when they realized Faith Baptist North wouldn't field a soccer team, joined the football team to place-kick and punt; and three girls—a Serb and two Nigerians who left home to play hoops for a team that never materialized.



STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC DRIVES HARD TO THE HOOP. BLOCKING HIS PATH TO THE BASKET IS MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME. UNDER THE BASKET IS THE BOYS' AAU COACH, JACK TISDALE. THE TEAM'S NAME IS "ATHLETIC AMBITIONS."

Scheduling was a joke. Practices would be delayed, and delayed again, and finally called off. The football team's coaches were replaced in October, and the squad kept cancelling games before the season ended.

School was no better. Some days the busload of students would get all the way to the New Hope building and then turn around, students and coaches say. No school today. Once, they cancelled school because it was raining, other times because the heat didn't work. Another time, according to Morgans, they halted classes for a couple of weeks because the three teachers Flint had brought in walked off the job.

"One of the teachers, he said, 'They ain't paying us,' and then it just spun out of control from there," Morgans says. "And then they came back, and the kids were in school again."

At first, there was food. And maybe even some hope that the whole school idea might work. "It was exciting," says Morgans, who often shuttled players between lodging and practices. "We were living in that hotel in Stockbridge. We had three meals a day. Everything was good."

After several weeks, though, "The food started slacking off," Morgans says. "It wasn't the same quality; it started to become bologna-and-cheese sandwiches, stuff like that."

Within a couple of months, Morgans says, Flint could no longer afford the motel, especially after several of the football players left mid-semester. So in November he moved a group of Nigerians to a house several miles away, and another group of Africans and Serbs, including Stefan, into three townhouse-style apartments behind a big-box retail strip in Stockbridge.

Mahmadou, in his limited English, concisely described life in the apartments: "No heat. No food."

After his insulting welcome at the airport, Rostand says he had to endure neglect every night—no bed, sheets, blankets or heat. "I was sleeping with my head on my baggage."

In Cameroon, he says, "I lived in a normal house, sleeping in beds, like a normal kid, living a normal life."

Meanwhile, according to the boys, Flint frequently threatened to pull players' I-20s and constantly demanded money from Rostand and Stefan, despite having promised them full scholarships (the amount, \$25,680 for a 10-month term, was also noted on their I-20 forms). After giving Flint several payments of a few hundred dollars, both say they simply refused, effectively calling Flint's bluff on threats to send them back across the Atlantic.



FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: REGGIE JULIEN, JASON TISDALE (COACH JACK TISDALE'S SON), STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC, DIMITRIUS SMITHIE, MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME. THEY ARE STEFAN AND MAHMADOU'S TEAMMATES ON THEIR AAU TEAM, ATHLETIC AMBITIONS.

Mahmadou regretted his trip from Africa almost immediately. For his first two weeks in America, he lived in Flint's house with no adult there. The power went out for two days; he slept in the dark.

The French-speaking Cameroonian had little knowledge of Western appliances. One day, Stefan was on his phone and noticed black smoke billowing out of the kitchen. "He had put two pieces of bread in the microwave," Stefan says, "and he put it on like five minutes."

"I couldn't read the instructions," Ahmadou says. "They were in English." They laugh about it now, but he nearly set the place on fire.

THE FRENCH-SPEAKING CAMEROONIAN HAD LITTLE KNOWLEDGE OF WESTERN APPLIANCES. ONE DAY, STEFAN WAS ON HIS PHONE AND NOTICED BLACK SMOKE BILLOWING OUT OF THE KITCHEN. "HE HAD PUT TWO PIECES OF BREAD IN THE MICROWAVE," STEFAN SAYS, "AND HE PUT IT ON LIKE FIVE MINUTES."

The worst was December, when Flint and his wife, Maria, left to take Faith Baptist North's national team to play in the Under Armour tournament in San Diego and the Tarkanian Classic in Las Vegas. The

boys remember the Flints dropping off two boxes of pancake mix and a small package of rice to the apartments. This was supposed to last two weeks. "It was gone in like a day," Stefan says.

Attempts to reach Maria Flint through her cellphone and her email address listed on the Faith Baptist Christian Academy North Inc. filings with the Georgia Secretary of State were unsuccessful.

The already skinny teenagers steadily lost weight. Rostand shed 10 pounds in three months. Mahmadou dropped seven pounds in a little over a month. And Stefan saw his weight drop from 200 pounds to 175 from July through December. At one point, Mahmadou nearly passed out after a four-hour practice. "I'd only had one McChicken to eat," he says.

Aleksandar Cosic, another Serbian player who wound up leaving Faith Baptist North shortly after the Lake Wales boys, confirms the dire circumstances. "We were not getting food," he says.

Nigerian players were in particularly bad shape. "Those guys were losing weight," Cosic says. "One guy was 6'10", 240 or 250, but by the end of the year he lost 40 to 50 pounds."

The two dozen or so boys living in the cul-de-sac apartments survived by combining resources. Stefan talked his parents into sending him \$30 a week, which he pooled with his fellow Serbs to buy groceries. He and Franck cooked for the group.

Then they would go to a CiCi's Pizza in a nearby strip mall and wait until closing time, when the manager would give them the leftovers from the buffet. Days were filled using the Wi-Fi at Starbucks and hanging out at LA Fitness, where the boys circulated free guest passes among the group and would sneak each other in.



STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC, A 6'5' GUARD FROM SERBIA, SAYS FROM JULY THROUGH DECEMBER HE DROPPED FROM 200 TO 175 POUNDS WHILE AT FAITH BAPTIST NORTH.

Complaints about the conditions in Stockbridge and Conyers began to trickle south to the Sellars family in Ludowici throughout the fall.

Dominican kids in Stockbridge began talking to their countrymen at Faith Baptist's south campus, says Matthew Sellars. The DR players in Stockbridge reported sleeping on the floor, and that the power would cut off at night, and that they weren't getting enough food.

"A lot of times, in programs like this, kids complain all the time," Sellars says, admitting that he hadn't personally visited the campus and had only seen it depicted on Flint's website. "So I played it off."

"ONE GUY WAS 6'10", 240 OR 250, BUT BY THE END OF THE YEAR HE LOST 40 TO 50 POUNDS."

- ALEKSANDAR COSIC, SERBIAN BASKETBALL PLAYER

But the stories kept coming, now from Nigerians and Serbians at the north campus. Sellars says he confronted Flint about the players on the south school's I-20s, telling him, "You're treating them bad, and it's going to make us look bad." He says Flint responded by saying, "No, man. We're doing the right thing."

Pastor Sellars sent Flint a cease-and-desist letter on Oct. 31, 2014, cutting official ties with the north campus, and relocated 15 kids out of Stockbridge to Ludowici.

Sellars says the south campus rescinded the I-20s for the students who didn't transfer to Ludowici—which would have meant the remaining teens were technically illegal from November on, long before Stefan and the boys worried about their status on the ride to Lake Wales.

"We told George, 'Look, by this date, we're terminating the I-20s,' so they probably did have a terminated I-20 as a result of his school not having SEVIS status," Sellars says of the Student Exchange and Visitor Information System the government uses to track students, adding that Flint would not have had the authority or access to SEVIS to cancel the I-20s himself.

While the living conditions and the dispute with the sister campus led to Faith Baptist North's downfall, the lack of coursework proved the final straw.

"The first problem was to go to school," Mahmadou says. "I asked Coach George every day, 'When do we start school?' And he said, 'The next week.'"

And every week, through November, December and January, there was still no school. There wasn't much basketball, either. From the end of November through mid-January 2015, the schedule grew littered with cancellations—until there were more cancellations than actual competitions.



MADMADOU NGOUCHEME (LEFT, GRAY SHIRT) AND STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC (RIGHT, BLUE SHIRT) GET INSTRUCTION FROM COACH JACK TISDALE.

By the second week of January 2015, two of Flint's coaches, Morgans and Gibbons, decided Faith Baptist North was untenable, both for them and the students still there. They hatched a plan to move players to schools where they could actually attend classes.

While Morgans was seen as Flint's right-hand man, responsible for driving players to and from practice and trying to maintain some order in their living quarters, Gibbons was a retired coach who had won more than 450 games at NCAA Division II schools Florida Southern and Clayton State, in Georgia, and who was inducted into the Florida Association of Basketball Coaches "Court of Legends."

From the beginning, Morgans says, Flint ignored his employees when he wasn't micromanaging them. "You've got Gordon Gibbons, who's a Hall of Fame college coach," Morgans says, "and you're telling him he don't know what he's talking about?"

Morgans says the only reason he and Gibbons stayed as long as they did was "to make sure nothing happened to them kids."

BY THE SECOND WEEK OF JANUARY 2015, TWO OF FLINT'S COACHES, MORGANS AND GIBBONS, DECIDED FAITH BAPTIST NORTH WAS UNTENABLE, BOTH FOR THEM AND THE STUDENTS STILL THERE.

Gibbons, especially, felt a responsibility to the half-dozen students—including Franck and Cosic—whom he had recruited to play at Faith Baptist North through his web of college and high school connections. Through Franck, Gibbons had gotten to know the other Cameroonians, Rostand and Mahmadou. Gibbons didn't recruit Stefan, but he had grown close to him as he coached him on the high school team.

"We were all loving Coach Gibbons, who was a really great coach, and he was really caring about us," Rostand says. Stefan says Gibbons was the only adult in Georgia telling them the truth. So when the coach pulled Stefan aside during a practice in mid-January and said, "There's no future for you here, kid," and told him he knew a coach at a public school in Lake Wales, the player replied: "Take me tomorrow."

The Lake Wales boys weren't the only players to bail on Faith Baptist North. Just about the time the boys were leaving, a group of Serbian immigrant families in the Atlanta area banded together to take several other Serbs from Faith Baptist North into their homes. Dragan Milakovic, a mining expert who lives near Atlanta, saw the boys' living conditions.

"They got some macaroni in the morning ... that's all for them all day. They [the Flints] didn't share heating, they didn't share nothing."

By contrast, Milakovic and his wife took in a pair of twins who came to Faith Baptist to play soccer, as well as Cosic. They helped Cosic transfer to Faith Baptist's south campus so he could graduate in the spring, and Gibbons helped him get a college scholarship to Union University in Jackson, Tennessee.

**"THEY GOT SOME MACARONI IN THE MORNING ...
THAT'S ALL FOR THEM ALL DAY. THEY [THE FLINTS]
DIDN'T SHARE HEATING, THEY DIDN'T SHARE
NOTHING."**

Gibbons was reluctant to be quoted for this story, saying he didn't want to criticize Flint or Faith Baptist. He says he believes Flint had good intentions.

But he does offer this explanation for pulling the kids out of the school: "My role in moving players from Faith Baptist North to other schools was simply because I thought they needed to get in school so that they could finish a second semester, and I was not sure that was going to happen," he says. "I found some schools that would take them."

Moreover, "I just felt like there wouldn't be a basketball environment for them," he says. "That was what they came here for."



MADMADOU NGOUCHEME SQUARES UP AT THE TOP OF THE KEY AGAINST A TEAMMATE.

When Gibbons called Randy Lee in Lake Wales and asked if he might help him out, Lee reflexively said yes. His late father, Jim, had been

Gibbons' best friend when Gibbons coached at Florida Southern in Lakeland, and Randy had grown up watching Gibbons' teams and had grown close to the coach.

As the head basketball coach at Lake Wales High, a public charter school about 30 miles from Lakeland, Lee was in a position to help. He even had experience with international students.

Lee's previous job was at Tennessee Temple, a small Christian college in Chattanooga. While there, Lee and his father started a now-shuttered business called Global Prep LLC, using the college's K-12 academy as a landing spot for international players who paid tuition to hone their skills and academics.

Lee wanted to import Global Prep to Lake Wales and tried to sell Lake Wales principal Donna Dunson on the idea, presenting her with a 50-page business plan during the 2012-13 school year. Dunson listened but passed.

"I thought it could be a conflict of interest," Dunson says.

It was against this backdrop that four tall kids showed up on the Lake Wales campus, seemingly from out of nowhere.

To the boys from Faith Baptist North, Lake Wales was a vast upgrade. They went to real classes every day. Though they couldn't be part of the Lake Wales team, Lee allowed them to practice basketball. Most important, says Rostand, "People were caring about us."

But there were still big problems. When they arrived from Georgia, the boys moved into a small house leased to the girlfriend of one of Lee's assistant coaches. The boys shared the space with two single mothers, who had four young children between them. In a rough neighborhood, the house was crowded, and the boys slept in the living room.

"I was sharing a couch with a 7-footer," Stefan says. "It didn't really work."

After a week of going to class, Rostand missed the next five school days with migraine headaches. "I was feeling really bad," he says.

"I WAS SHARING A COUCH WITH A 7-FOOTER. IT DIDN'T REALLY WORK."

- STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC

His absence triggered a visit by the Lake Wales High dean of students, Stacey Butcher, who immediately told them to pack their things. In a [later report](#) issued by the school, the living conditions in the house were described as "deplorable," which Lee disputes.

In any case, the boys were on the move again. Now, so was the school. A call for help went out to the Lake Wales community, and parents in the school responded immediately. One parent knew of a vacant unfurnished house; another family, the Donleys, loaded up a trailer with furniture for the boys.

What David and Lora Donley gave the boys was reassurance, something they hadn't felt in months. Rostand recalls the first day he met Lora, helping her unload the truck full of furniture and wondering about this woman who looked too young to be a mother.

"That day was funny," he says. "She wasn't knowing me, she wasn't knowing anything about us, and she said, 'Don't worry. We will do something for you guys.' And I never forgot about it. Never."

Rostand's deep voice and generally implacable facial expressions tend to hide his emotions. But they're not up to the job when he's talking about Lora. "Since that day," he says, "I felt like I met with an angel here in the United States."

A March 4 visit to Lake Wales High by Jon Morgans, Flint's former right-hand man, triggered an investigation into how the boys had ended up at the school, first by detectives from the Polk County Sheriff's Office, and then federal Homeland Security agents.

Morgans says he was only there to see how the boys were doing, and that he went to the school office and was invited into Lee's classroom. He says he chatted briefly with the boys, who Morgans says asked to see him.

Lake Wales administrators saw it differently. In the school's official report to the Florida High School Athletic Association, Dunson says, "I was alerted there was a man from the Georgia school on campus, and the boys did not want to see him."

Lora Donley happened to drop in on the boys that day. As they sat in her car eating lunch, she says, one of them slumped down in the seat to avoid being seen by Morgans, telling her, "He's probably here to get us."

"I FELT LIKE I MET WITH AN ANGEL HERE IN THE UNITED STATES."

- ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA ON MEETING LORA DONLEY

Events escalated quickly. Dunson questioned "why a total stranger from the Georgia school would show up on our campus," and why Lee would suddenly help enroll four basketball players in the school without telling her personally. Lee says he had notified other school administrators and assumed Dunson knew.

The principal wondered if Lee was trying to build his old dream of Global Prep using these students from the Georgia school. Lee denies he had any plans to use the Faith Baptist North kids as part of an athletics program. "Our goal from the start, Coach Gibbons and myself, was to get them educationally in school," Lee says.

Dunson disagreed. Less than a week after Morgans' visit, she put Lee on administrative leave, and soon after that asked for his resignation.

"Randy said, 'I'm just trying to help them because this school is closing,' and it may be true," Dunson says, referring to Faith Baptist North. "But three Cameroonians and a Serbian? What's going on?"

Lake Wales had opened an in-house inquiry into eligibility issues with the new students. Within days, her school was part of a much bigger probe.

On March 9, after having been alerted by Donley to Morgans' appearance at the school and the boys' situation, the sheriff's detectives and state workers from the Department of Children and Families questioned Dunson and her staff at the high school. "I'm glad you're here," Dunson told them. "Help us solve this."

On the morning of March 25, it was Homeland Security's turn. Agents took the four boys out of school to interview them about Faith Baptist. Within hours, the federal government would step in.

Nothing much was happening in Ludowici, Georgia, on the afternoon of March 25, 2015, as Matthew Sellars coached his Faith Baptist Crusaders through a baseball practice. He noticed a couple of news crews on the street, but he thought they were there to get video of his squad, which had some talent that spring.

"And then, boom, all these cars pulled up," he says. "And these guys got out—looked like anybody you'd pass on the street. Well, they were all federal agents from Homeland Security."

Five in all, Sellars says. They searched the Ludowici campus founded by his father, the pastor, in 1979. A couple of dozen kids were living in the gym building and in adjacent rooms built onto the back. Fire officials shut down the gym for code violations and removed 30 students who

were living there, placing them with the Red Cross. All with the cameras rolling.

"AND THEN, BOOM, ALL THESE CARS PULLED UP, AND THESE GUYS GOT OUT—LOOKED LIKE ANYBODY YOU'D PASS ON THE STREET. WELL, THEY WERE ALL FEDERAL AGENTS FROM HOMELAND SECURITY."

- MATTHEW SELLARS

Aleksandar Cosic, who had seen terrible conditions at Faith Baptist North, was there when law enforcement raided the Ludowici campus. Faith Baptist's south campus wasn't as bad as Faith Baptist North, but it was no picnic, either. Cosic says dozens of teens lived in poorly ventilated rooms that surrounded the basketball court, and that he lived in a room that had no power for much of the day and night. Food was limited to two meals per day, according to Cosic.

On the day of the raid, Cosic spent more than two hours answering investigators' questions about both schools. "Then they made us all, like 30-40 of us, sit on the bleachers," he recalls. Officers read off a list of names of students who supposedly had I-20s from the Ludowici campus. "There was like 60 names, and there was only like 30 of us there."

He recognized some of the names and knew that those players were in schools in North Carolina, Florida, elsewhere in Georgia—but not in

Ludowici. "I remember the agents were really surprised when they were reading the names," Cosic says. "If they read your name, you put your hand up. But there was nobody to raise those hands, because they were not there."

The agents were learning what dozens of foreign athletes already knew. An I-20 from Faith Baptist in Ludowici didn't necessarily mean you attended school there.

A week later, 240 miles to the northwest, Homeland agents were searching George Flint's home and the New Hope church property that had served as Faith Baptist North's campus.



ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA RIGHT AT HOME ON THE COUCH IN THE DONLEY HOME AS MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME PLAYS FOOSBALL WITH LORA DONLEY'S NIECES AND NEPHEWS AND ALLY DONLEY. FROM LEFT: ROSTAND ON THE COUCH, MORGAN WATTS (ORANGE SHIRT), ALLY DONLEY (BLUE SHIRT), COLE WATTS (YELLOW SHIRT PLAYING FOOSBALL), RUSTY WATTS (NEXT TO MAHMADOU), MAHMADOU, AND SAVANNAH WATTS (SITTING ON THE BALL).

When a call went out to find furniture for four international students who'd hit some hard times and needed help, Lora Donley answered like she always does. "That phone call changed my family's life," she says.

When they met the boys, they were all polite enough. "It wasn't until we started asking them questions that I realized something wasn't right," Lora says.

At the mention of Georgia, they shut down completely. Stefan explains: "I was very suspicious, cause I mean I come from a country like where everybody's corrupted, and everybody just tries to look after themselves," he says. "There's not really people like her who just help people because they love to."

The charity only grew. After Morgans' visit spooked the school, everyone decided the boys needed an adult around. The Donleys stepped up. They had a nice house, with a swimming pool and a basketball court on five acres—plus a game room with a pool table. And an iron gate at the head of the driveway that nobody could get through. It was like George Flint's brochure, only real.

Plus, there were kids. The Donleys had two teenage boys, Brandon and Chris, and two younger girls, Kaylee and Ally. Not one of them flinched at taking in the tall boys. "They had open arms," David says.

They were already a close family. Now they were just a much bigger one. Still, the boys had issues. Most pressing was their immigration status, and their role in what would soon be a sprawling investigation. But there was also the matter of their athletic careers.

Lora wanted the boys to have a chance to pursue their hoop dreams, a tricky proposition to be sure. Franck had exhausted his high school

eligibility; there was no way he could play at Lake Wales, or even attend classes. He had already graduated.

"He was devastated," Lora says. "He asked me if he could just go to classes anyway because he liked school so much." To stay in the States, he had to find a college willing to take him.

Mahmadou was an even tougher case. He had no sports eligibility left at Lake Wales. He needed a prep school where he could work on his game and his English. Stefan and Rostand each had a year of high school eligibility remaining, but they needed to prove that to skeptical state high school athletic administrators.

Lora refused to hear the word no. The boys needed an AAU team to play on. She started one herself. It didn't go well, really, but the exposure helped, and the coach at State College of Florida in Bradenton gave Franck a scholarship. One down.

Mahmadou played for an AAU team in the Tampa area, and a prep school in Clearwater agreed to take him. Two down.

Rostand and Stefan required a bureaucratic battle with the Florida High School Athletic Association, but they had Lake Wales High on their side.

Dunson and the administration engaged another Lake Wales High supporter, a prominent lawyer named Robin Gibson, who also serves as the general counsel for the high school, to help build a case for both boys to stay in school and for their right to play.

"We've never seen anything like this," Gibson says. "Here they are, way on the other side of the world almost, from home. They're 17, 18 years old. They have no family, and they are wanting to play basketball in the hopes they can get an education in the United States. Now how can you fault that?"

After some back-and-forth with the FHSAA and letters from Homeland detailing their situation, Stefan and Rostand were declared eligible to play sports during the 2015-16 academic year. Lora was 4-for-4.

"WE'VE NEVER SEEN ANYTHING LIKE THIS. HERE THEY ARE, WAY ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE WORLD ALMOST, FROM HOME. THEY'RE 17, 18 YEARS OLD. THEY HAVE NO FAMILY, AND THEY ARE WANTING TO PLAY BASKETBALL IN THE HOPES THEY CAN GET AN EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES. NOW HOW CAN YOU FAULT THAT?"

- ROBIN GIBSON, LAKE WALES HIGH SUPPORTER AND LAWYER

Ever since, the tall boys have grown. Rostand learned how to swim on a boat trip out on a lake. They've learned how to hunt and fish, American style. "They're becoming redneckified," jokes Lora. After coping with lean times, they've learned to enjoy the plenty that America offers, too. They go to the beach. They play on the farm. They laugh a lot.

When he first got to Georgia, Rostand says, "I was shocked about the conditions we were living in, but I had always had that faith that things were going to be better."

The Donleys had faith, as well. "I don't know what that's saying about us—it could be twisted the wrong way, like we didn't think it through," David says. "But we never hesitated. And everyone just got along so well, we just rolled. Plus we're obviously faithful people, so we knew there had to be a reason. There has to be."

The transition into the 2015-16 school year went smoothly, all things considered. Stefan, the most talkative of the four, thrived. He started on the basketball team, made the National Honor Society, made friends and got his driver's license, helping immensely with the family's various commutes.



ROBIN GIBSON, THE LAKELAND, FLORIDA, AREA LAWYER WHO HELPED BUILD A CASE FOR ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA AND STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC TO STAY IN HIGH SCHOOL AND PLAY BASKETBALL.

Rostand began to realize America has a lot of good point guards but not so many gifted soccer midfielders. To help ease the congestion at the Donley house, he moved into the home of Lake Wales High teacher and soccer mom June Ullman at the beginning of the school year. He also reacquainted himself with the beautiful game, starring for Lake Wales High and drawing recruiting interest from D-I and D-II schools, including North Carolina-Charlotte and Queens University in Charlotte.

He lost a love in basketball but gained a potential meal ticket.

Mahmadou was another matter. Of the four boys, he had the most problems adjusting. He was so tall, for one, and not an accomplished or confident athlete. And his English was by far the worst of the four. His stay at the Clearwater Academy, a Church of Scientology school in Clearwater, Florida, was short-lived.

The school did not have a basketball team and the courses were rudimentary, says Lora, and after a few months, Ahmadou came back to Lake Wales. Basketball was going nowhere, again. But at least he was back with his friends, safe, in school and home.

For how long, nobody knew. They were here now as government witnesses. As Lora says: They weren't legal. They weren't illegal. They would be allowed to stay in the U.S. at the discretion of federal investigators.

HE LOST A LOVE IN BASKETBALL BUT GAINED A POTENTIAL MEAL TICKET.

So far, no state or federal charges have been brought against Faith Baptist or anyone affiliated with the Stockbridge or Ludowici schools. Matthew Sellars says SEVP does little to help campuses comply with federal immigration laws but admits that his school was in the wrong by issuing I-20s to Flint's athletes at a non-SEVIS approved school.

"We really don't have a defense," Sellars says, "because ignorance is not innocence."

He insists it's unfair to say the Ludowici campus was involved in trafficking or any kind of document fraud. He points out that the school remains certified by SEVP to issue I-20s and that he continues to bring in international students. "The way I look at it is if they didn't want us bringing any more kids in here, we wouldn't still have status."

He says that when agents asked him why Faith Baptist issued visas to postgraduate players, who technically needed no courses to be eligible to play a sport and weren't really students, "I just responded, 'Well, you approved them... We printed the paper off your website. We sent it overseas, and they met with your agents, and your agents approved them.'"

Six months after Homeland Security agents spoke with George Flint at his home on March 31, 2015, about Faith Baptist, Flint had moved on. By

August, he was trying to start a new school, Blue Ridge Christian Academy in northern Georgia. His basketball coach? Aris Hines. The school never materialized into more than a website.

The Department of Homeland Security will say little about Faith Baptist. A public affairs officer for ICE in central and northern Florida apologized to Bleacher Report for not being able to speak about the issue, "as it is an open investigation."

But Lora Donley says agents told her that investigations out of the Tampa and Savannah Homeland offices were completed and the case would be centered out of Atlanta. "They have to do something," Lora says. "Someone has to be accountable for this."



MADMADOU NGOUCHEME WINS A TIPOFF AGAINST A TEAMMATE.

In April of this year, the U.S. Attorney in Newark, New Jersey, announced 21 arrests of people who had allegedly brokered fraudulent I-

20 forms for international students. Federal agents set up a fake school, the University of Northern New Jersey, to issue bogus I-20s that were snapped up by brokers eager to sell them to foreign nationals who wanted to get into the U.S. but often had no intention of actually studying here—what's known as "pay to stay."

Such schemes "not only damage our perception of legitimate student and foreign worker visa programs, they also pose a very real threat to national security," U.S. Attorney Paul Fishman [said in a statement](#).

It is easy to see how I-20 abuse by prep schools could create security risks; many of the students who come to the U.S. for a chance to play basketball hail from strife-torn areas that have bred terrorist groups.

But the schools only recently have become a focus of federal government attention. A 2012 Government Accountability Office report scolded ICE for lack of oversight of schools issuing I-20s as part of the SEVP program.

SUCH SCHEMES "NOT ONLY DAMAGE OUR PERCEPTION OF LEGITIMATE STUDENT AND FOREIGN WORKER VISA PROGRAMS, THEY ALSO POSE A VERY REAL THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY."

- U.S. ATTORNEY PAUL FISHMAN

The [GAO report](#) was shocking given that the entire U.S. immigration system was overhauled after Mohamed Atta and Marwan al-Shehhi, two of the 9/11 attackers, had attended U.S. flight schools on visitor visas, without proper student credentials. The potential doorway for terrorism seems to have gotten Homeland Security's attention.

Whatever the reasons, trafficking of basketball players has lately attracted scrutiny. In 2015, Harper's Magazine published a [wrenching account](#) of African boys recruited to the U.S. by unscrupulous AAU coaches, then discarded and left homeless. But abuses of young international athletes, particularly from Africa, have been going on years, says Ed Bona.

Born in what is now South Sudan, Bona played basketball at Fordham in the early 1980s and was among the first Africans drafted by the NBA, one year ahead of Hakeem Olajuwon. He has since settled in the U.S. and helped manage the late NBA player Manute Bol's international foundation.

During the past two decades, he has helped a handful of talented Sudanese kids find opportunities to play in the U.S.—including the Deng brothers, former UConn player Ajou and current Miami Heat forward Luol Deng.

What he has seen at some prep schools disgusts him. He recalls being called to help a Sudanese player in the mid-2000s who was stuck in rat-infested housing with no food available on weekends.

"They may as well have stayed behind in a refugee camp," Bona says. He blames corrupt flesh peddlers bringing over dozens of kids at a time in the hope that some will hit it big and kick back part of their paychecks to the handler.

That's an illusion, Bona says. He has worked with perhaps 20 African players in 20 years, some with real talent. "Only one made it to the NBA," he says, "and that was Luol."

"THEY MAY AS WELL HAVE STAYED BEHIND IN A REFUGEE CAMP."

- ED BONA, ONE OF THE FIRST AFRICANS TO BE DRAFTED IN THE NBA

By the second day of the JUCO Showcase in Norcross, the meds had kicked in, and Lora was keeping the entire Lake Wales community informed on Stefan and Mahmadou's progress with feverish Facebook updates.

"One and Done! Dou finished with a dunk and bucket ... Stefan settled with 18. Success!!"

Lora had been half expecting to run into George Flint at the tournament, and she and Stefan's mother had talked about confronting the man they believed had exploited the boys. They never saw Flint, but on Sunday as they prepared to head home, they took an informal vote. Lora, Lola and Mahmadou opted for a side trip on the way back to Lake Wales: a somber tour of Stockbridge and Conyers.

"37 mi to our first stop," Lora posted on Facebook. "The home of the man who brought our boys to the States. The man who forever changed their lives. The moms in this vehicle want to see what our boys saw. We want to know where they walked, played and prayed."

Forty-five minutes later, as they drove past Flint's house in a relatively upscale neighborhood in Conyers, the passengers were mostly silent. "My stomach's flippin'," Lora said. She had flicked on a video camera and began posting live on Facebook. Stefan streamed the video to his "Serbian crew."

They moved on to the rough neighborhood in nearby Stockbridge and the shabby apartment buildings. "This was the Serb house," said Stefan, pointing to a two-story brick structure in a nondescript cul-de-sac.

Mahmadou pointed toward a neighboring house, in front of which a pickup truck was parked. "That's where we were stealing Wi-Fi," he said softly, referring to a hot spot where the boys could communicate with their families. Thinking back to their time at the apartments, Ahmadou continued, "Twenty people in there... No food... Bad memory."

They drove past the Starbucks where they took the call from Gordon Gibbons and pointed out the CiCi's Pizza parlor. "Shoutout to my boys from CiCi's," Stefan said. "They gave us free pizza every night."

By now, Lola was sobbing softly in the car. She was hearing and seeing the story of her son's journey for the first time, as was Stefan's father, who was watching the live feed back home in Belgrade.

Lora comforted Lola. "He's better now," she said.



FROM LEFT: STEFAN NAKIC-VOJNOVIC, MAHMADOU NGOUCHEME AND ROSTAND NDONG ESSOMBA HOOP IT UP IN THE DONLEY FAMILY ORANGE GROVES.

They love America. And these days, what's not to love? The Donleys take them to school, the playing fields and courts, the beach, the lake, and give them every opportunity to flourish. "It is easier than back home," Mahmadou says, his voice as gentle as orange blossoms. "Here, the people have a lot of opportunity."

Stefan could not be more patriotic about his homeland. He wears Serbian T-shirts, sports a flag in his room and a Serbian rearview-mirror ornament. "I would do anything for my country," he says. But in the States, "You can be whoever you want to be. The most important thing is you have a chance. There is something you can look forward to."

It's up to Lora to be outraged for them. "It's not fair," she says. "This should not happen to anyone else."

Someone took their money, which their families had scrimped and saved, selling off jewelry, even their clothes, to obtain tickets to America. Worse, she says, people in this country "messed with their dreams and goals. That takes it to a completely different level—so much bigger than just the money. Such a violation."

For nearly two years, often with only each other to rely on, the four boys have seen America's all-too-corruptible sports system from multiple angles. Yet as Mahmadou plays with Ally, holding his hand above his head and challenging the spunky nine-year-old to jump up and slap a high-five, there is no bitterness to be found. None.

When Dunson asked Stefan in January to speak about his experience to an assembly at the high school, he stepped hesitantly onto the gym floor and began telling his story. "Your lives here are so good, and you don't even realize it," he told the students. "I've seen the real world, and it's not pretty. Life here, during these days at Lake Wales High, they're a blessing."

**SOMEONE TOOK THEIR MONEY, WHICH THEIR FAMILIES
HAD SCRIMPED AND SAVED, SELLING OFF JEWELRY,
EVEN THEIR CLOTHES, TO OBTAIN TICKETS TO AMERICA.
WORSE, SHE SAYS, PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY "MESSED**

WITH THEIR DREAMS AND GOALS. THAT TAKES IT TO A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LEVEL—SO MUCH BIGGER THAN JUST THE MONEY. SUCH A VIOLATION."

- LORA DONLEY

Finally, in late April 2016, the government granted its blessing on the four boys, upgrading the "deferred-action" status they had been under for a year and approving "continued presence" for another year, meaning that as victims of trafficking they are considered refugees, allowed to remain in the country as long as they are valuable to the investigation.

Just last week, as Homeland's investigation appeared to be winding down, the boys met with the special agent in charge from Atlanta for follow-up interviews. The agent had emailed Lora a couple of weeks before to schedule the meeting, thanking her "for everything you have done to push this case forward." Mostly, the agent added, she would need to develop a rapport with the boys "since they will be witnesses for me up here."

Once the Homeland investigation is complete, agents will present their case to the Atlanta office of the U.S. Attorney, which will then decide whether to accept the case for prosecution.

When the investigation concludes, regardless of where it leads, the four witnesses can apply for citizenship, a process Homeland agents told them could take up to three years. Meanwhile, the boys do not have

student visas or green cards and were told by agents that leaving the country even to visit their parents could jeopardize their status.

On June 3, a warm, windy Florida night with lightning cracking in the distance, Rostand, Stefan and Mahmadou graduated from Lake Wales High School alongside the Donleys' two other sons. The sky darkened, but the rain held off.

"God let us have that moment, and it didn't rain a single drop," Stefan says. "The setting was beautiful. Everything was so great."

Things had mostly fallen into place on the college front, too. The trips to the showcases, the endless online college applications, the phone calls to schools—all were paying off. On the day after Mother's Day, Lora loaded up the SUV again and headed for a signing ceremony at Polk State College, a JUCO in nearby Winter Haven whose coach offered Stefan a scholarship to play on the basketball team. There was a cake and platters of food, and a horde of supporters.

Donna Dunson, the Lake Wales principal, brought along just about the entire administration, along with Stefan's teammates and 15 classmates. His AAU coach, Jack Tisdale, came, and, of course, Lora, David, Brandon, Chris, Mahmadou and Rostand were there.

"It was as if he were signing at the University of Florida," Lora would say.

Stefan made a little speech, and when his mother was handed the letter of intent to sign, she told the group that she was making room for two signatures—hers and Lora's.

"Lola cried," Lora says. "The principal cried." Lora cried, too.

Things were looking up for Mahmadou, too. A coach at Oakland Community College near Detroit, Terrell Polk, had seen Mahmadou play at the JUCO showcase back in April and offered him a scholarship to that school. Rostand, perhaps the most athletically gifted of the boys, was seriously considering an offer to play soccer from Warner University in Lake Wales and planned a visit to Flagler College in St. Augustine for a workout.

They all want to stay. After seeing so much of the United States, bad and good, they want to see more.

"My dad always tell me, 'Nothing's easy in life; you have to go through some bad things to get what you want,'" Rostand says. "It's really the best country in the world, but it's just humans. It's the best country, but it's just humans who do bad things."

Teri Thompson is the former Managing Editor/Sports for the New York Daily News and the creator of the paper's Sports Investigative Team. She has worked at the Arkansas Democrat, the Rocky Mountain News

and ESPN. She is the co-author of American Icon, The Card and American Huckster.

Luke Cyphers has worked as a reporter and editor at Dow Jones & Co., the New York Daily News and ESPN The Magazine, and has taught journalism at SUNY Plattsburgh.