

# UW-Madison: Learning constellations, new game helps refugee camp kids become academic stars

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MADISON – Once a refugee himself, University of Wisconsin-Madison senior Joel Baraka has long dreamed of helping children in refugee camps get ahead in life. Now, he's invented a board game for students across sub-Saharan Africa that turns learning into fun.

Baraka and his civil and environmental engineering classmate Anson Liow created a board game called 5 STA-Z for children in refugee camps. The game incorporates core curriculum subjects taught in Uganda – math, science, social studies and English – and breaks them down into easy-to-understand parts.

“It's collaborative and competitive, and something we want to be fun and engaging,” Baraka says. “At some point during the game, children have to challenge each other for some questions, but there are also points where they can ask for help.”

Baraka was born in Congo, but his family fled to Uganda's Kyangwali Refugee Settlement to escape civil war in his home country. He grew up in the camp, where he completed his primary education before attending high school at the African Leadership Academy in South Africa. At ALA, Baraka explored the possibilities of attending school in the United States, and came to UW-Madison through the King-Morgridge Scholars program.

He knows firsthand how challenging learning can be for children in refugee camps.

“In a refugee camp, there aren’t many resources that children can use,” Baraka says. “They rely on teachers as the main form of learning. Classes can have up to 200 children, and that can be very frustrating for students and teachers.”

During his entrepreneurship class at ALA, Baraka and his peers were tasked with looking back into their communities and identifying challenges they would want to solve. Given his passion for education, Baraka wanted to work on school-related challenges in his village. As a high school student with an interest in civil engineering, he initially considered trying to raise funds for a library as a way of supporting the children there and giving them opportunities for a brighter future. He says the idea was perhaps a bit too big for him at the time. However, that idea, along with advice from his teachers, put his mind on the right track for when another opportunity arose.

STORY CONTINUES AT <https://news.wisc.edu/new-game-helps-refugee-camp-kids-become-academic-stars/>