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Business School Personal Statement

Growing up, the people I have most admired have never been necessarily the most successful in terms of certain traditional values alone, but the most impactful with respect to improving the world around them. As a young, soccer-obsessed youngster, growing up in New Orleans, I was enamored with Arsene Wenger, coach of the Arsenal Football Club, who revolutionized English football by introducing possession-based play, a more strict diet, and fitness regimens. While Wenger is one of the most successful coaches of all time in terms of numbers of trophies won, he is most known for his enormous impact on the game in general. Even more than that, as a young Congolese immigrant to the United States, watching Wenger's squads, which were loaded with talent from West Africa as well as the French Caribbean, made me feel as though I could attain similar heights on the field. Search as I may, throughout my youth, I have been loath to find many change-makers of this magnitude who look like me in my home city of New Orleans.

While I have never put much thought into why this was the case, I've come to understand how much of a premium I place on being impactful within my own community and being a catalyst for change. The pattern for this is clear in my own life, as academically and professionally I have always felt most energized and focused when I have been able to change the course of a conversation or how my colleagues, family, and fellows have been analyzing a problem in search of viable solutions. For example, Jared Diamond's [Guns Germs and Steel] is the book that brought me to do my master's degree in international development. In the classroom, I would often use the lessons from that book, as well as from Dambisa Moyo's "Dead Aid," not only to provide a historical perspective to ongoing analysis but also to make the case that aid may not be the proper or ideal tool for confronting certain policy issues. In my current work, I was recently able to convince the organization where I am currently employed to shift our policy and work more closely with a local membership-based organization. This shift has allowed us to be more effective by employing an inside-outside strategy in a local policy battle with the City of New Orleans. This partner organization was encouraged to take a more rigid policy stance, while we remained a more modest voice in that discussion.

I write all of this to say that the city of New Orleans, the city that I emigrated to from the Congo as a young child, has reached a turning point. In the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, the city has seen dynamic growth in the non-profit sector, but it is now starting to see similar growth in the private sector. While that growth has mostly been concentrated in the tourism and hospitality sectors and not distributed evenly across all communities in New Orleans, I have come to realize that an injection of capital is needed to spark economic growth and diversify the New Orleans economy. It also looks as though New Orleans will be primed for that spark in the coming years. While the world of petroleum products – the entire value chain – has played a disproportionate role in the New Orleans economy for many decades, this is becoming environmentally unsustainable. Data is now "the new oil" and has the capacity to impact all sectors of the economy. I have certainly seen the power of big data in my own work in criminal justice policy at the Vera Institute of Justice. For example, after a series of unproductive meetings, I was recently able to convince our local government partner to increase the number of bond motions they file by showing them that they could meet their internal target by filing two to three more per day. This quick calculation using the sophisticated database management software SQL helped make the difference between the success and failure of one of our initiatives.

It is for the reasons outlined above that I intend, with the power of a Harvard education, to establish a venture capital firm in New Orleans focused on investing in firms that leverage big data to gain a competitive advantage. My aim is to staff this venture capital firm primarily with minority investors who will be more keen and willing to invest in minority entrepreneurs and to help change perceptions of what a person of color can become in New Orleans. Harvard Business School is without a doubt the best place for me to turn this dream into reality. As someone transitioning from the non-profit sector to business, I'm looking forward to focusing on developing a core business skillset in my first year. I personally take great joy in lively classroom discussions, and I am sure that the case method will be the best means for me to learn core business skills as well as to develop other core competencies for my future work. In order to learn more about venture capital as an industry, as well as to network with students on similar career paths, I am looking forward to joining the Venture Capital and Private Equity Club. Aside from the opportunity to meet and work with other students, participation in this club could be instrumental, as my short-term goal is to join a venture capital firm invested heavily in big data such as Accel, where a number of Harvard alumni currently work.

While I certainly did not grow up well off, I was lucky enough to have educated parents who were examples of what I could become. More children in New Orleans need that opportunity, and this venture could help make that a reality. Growing up, I could see the inequality in the city on my streetcar commutes to and from school with other working-class folks, passing down affluent St. Charles Avenue, studded with million-dollar homes, as we headed to our more modest homes. New Orleans is currently home to few large corporations, but I firmly believe that within the city there is a minority entrepreneur capable of building a firm innovative and profitable enough to rejuvenate and expand the Crescent City's economy. Local black entrepreneurs such as Damon Burns share this sentiment and have publicly stated that a focus on minority entrepreneurship is "long overdue." I share that sentiment and remain committed to the city, as it made me who I am. I look forward to having a long-term impact on the [city of New Orleans] through this work supporting business leadership and to building a brighter future for all.

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