

Faces of HMEA - June 2005

Kukor Pope was born in Liberia, the seventh of eight children. Her mother was a midwife and her father worked for the Public Works Administration; the children went to school, the parents to work, and they were all very involved in their church. Every Sunday meant church and prayer, and often on Saturdays, they worked in the churchyard. Family members, and members of the community all took care of one another. The children were taught by their parents, Joseph and Johnetta Miller, to love all mankind.

After Kukor graduated from high school, she studied accounting for two years. At the age of 22, she married and had a son, Albert, a few years later. Things were peaceful for a while, and then civil war erupted in the country. There were dawn to dusk curfews, people who worked couldn't get paid, sometimes for months, and the country was in a state of unrest. In October 1989, Kukor was at home when she received a call that her husband, James Pope, was dead, and she was asked to go and identify the body. As she stated, "my whole world changed" on that day. (She still does not know who killed her husband, who was an Assistant Minister of Construction at the Ministry of Public Works.)

One of Kukor's sisters had emigrated to the U.S. and was living in Rhode Island at that time. In January 1990, her sister convinced her to come to visit for a vacation; she was supposed to go back to Liberia in three months. Her son remained behind in the care of his grandmother. While she was here, she received a phone call from another sister in Liberia, who told Kukor that the troops had bombed her house. She said "they're looking for you; it's not safe for you to come home". Kukor filed for political asylum and stayed with her sister in Rhode Island.

She studied to become a CNA and worked for many years at that job. Eventually, she met the man who is her other two sons' father. Kukor now has two sons who are U.S. citizens: Everett Couyou, who is 11 and Antoine Dougba, who is 8. "My children are my first



priority" she says, and she also frequently speaks with Albert who now lives in Ghana. She would love to return to Liberia, but is afraid because there is still civil unrest; in addition, she says they have not built the country back up from the devastation of the war.

Three years ago, in October 2002, a fire destroyed the apartment in which she and her sons were living. They lost everything they had in the fire, except for the nightclothes they were wearing. The fire had started in her sons' bedroom, and Everett ran into his mother's room and told

her that there was a fire in his room. They all managed to escape injury. Kukor said that three organizations gave so much to her family; her sons' school, HMEA, and her church. Her pastor allowed her and her sons to live in his home, without charge, until they could find another place to live. The school provided uniforms, books, and many, many other things. HMEA employees, most of whom Kukor had never met, provided clothes, money, furniture, dishes, pots and pans, bedding, and most of what the family needed. Kukor could not believe the generosity of "strangers"; she said that the table in her kitchen today is one that was donated by an employee. She feels overwhelming gratitude for the kindnesses she received. She says she will not leave HMEA until "God tells me to leave".

When asked what she likes about working here in addition to the generous and caring employees, she said that if can she make somebody laugh, give somebody a cup of water when that person couldn't do it herself, do something good for somebody else, that makes her feel good. It's obvious that she truly cares about the people she works with; the individuals she supports, her co-workers, and community members. ♦

*Kukor was interviewed by **Karen Slowick**, chair of the Diversity Committee.*
