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Business School Personal Statement

Growing up, I have admired the people who were not necessarily the most successful in terms of traditional values, but who have made an impact with respect to improving the world around them. As a soccer-obsessed kid living in New Orleans, I was enamored of Arsène Wenger, coach of Arsenal Football Club, who revolutionized English football by introducing possession-based play, a more strict diet, and fitness regimens. Although Wenger is one of the most successful coaches of all time -- his teams have won numerous trophies -- he is best known for his general impact on the game. For me, a young Congolese immigrant to the United States, watching Wenger's squads, which were loaded with talent from West Africa and the Caribbean, made me feel as though I could attain similar heights. However, though I searched diligently throughout my youth, I couldn't find change-makers of his stature who looked like me in my home city of New Orleans.

While I have never thought deeply about why this was the case, I've come to understand that what matters most to me in life is being able to make an impact within my community and being a catalyst for change. In my own life, a pattern for this is clear: I have always felt energized and focused when I've changed the course of a conversation or the way in which my colleagues and fellows analyze a problem in search of viable solutions. For example, Jared Diamond's *Guns Germs and Steel* is the book that led me to pursue a master's degree in international development. In the classroom, I often used lessons from that book, as well as from Dambisa Moyo's *Dead Aid*, not only to provide a historical perspective on the analysis, but also to make the case that aid may not be the proper tool for addressing certain policy issues. I can also find similar instances in my current work at the Vera Institute of Justice. For example, after a series of unproductive meetings, I was recently able to convince our public defender's office to increase the number of bond motions that they file by showing them that they could meet their internal target by filing two to three more per day. This quick calculation, which utilized the database management software SQL, helped to make the difference between the success and failure of one of our initiatives.

I mention this in order to point out that the city of New Orleans, to which I emigrated as a young child and which has made me who I am today, has reached a turning point: in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, New Orleans has experienced dynamic growth in the non-profit sector, and is now beginning to see similar business growth, though this has not been distributed evenly across all communities. I have come to realize that an injection of capital is needed to spark economic growth and diversify the city's economy. Although the world of petroleum products -- the entire value chain -- has played a disproportionate role in the New Orleans economy for decades, this is becoming environmentally unsustainable. Data are now "the new oil" and have the capacity to impact all sectors of the economy. In my current work, I have seen the power of big data in situations such as the one I've described in the public defender's office, and I hope to multiply the impact of big data in my future work.

In order to provide this spark, with the power and leverage provided by a Stanford education, I intend to establish a venture capital firm in New Orleans that will be staffed primarily by minority investors who will be keen to invest in minority entrepreneurs and help change perceptions of what a person of color can become in New Orleans. Although I didn't grow up in affluent circumstances, I was fortunate to have educated parents who were role models for what I could become. More children need that opportunity and this venture would make that a possibility. At present, New Orleans is home to few large corporations; I believe that somewhere within the city there is a minority entrepreneur capable of building a firm that is sufficiently innovative and profitable to further rejuvenate the city's economy. Local black entrepreneurs such as Damon Burns have publicly stated that a focus on minority entrepreneurship is "long overdue." I share this sentiment and look forward to having a long-term impact on New Orleans through my work, in order to build a brighter future for my city.

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