

## HERITAGE

## Fit for a king

With family roots embedded in Togo's royalty, senior Odran Fitzgerald embraces his ancestral legacy and national identity.



**SUCCESSION**  
Had Fitzgerald's grandfather stayed in Adiakpo, Fitzgerald would be in line for the Togolese throne.

A six-year-old Odran Fitzgerald stands in line with hundreds of other people, waiting to cross the Togo-Ghana border.

Political instability, territorial disputes and waves of refugees have damaged relations between these two countries, with these struggles starting just after the surrender of Germany in 1918. Border guards shake down unsuspecting travelers for cash, and those who fail to pay the toll find themselves either stuck unable to cross or, even worse, imprisoned.

Fitzgerald's mother hands border security her passport. He examines it and glances at the name.

*Oh, 'Elhor!' I know your father. Just let them through.*

Now, as senior Odran Fitzgerald sits on a stool in ceramics class molding clay, he thinks back to his visit to a town in his mother's native country of Togo. He pictures Togolese artisans crafting beautiful, ornate pots, using their hands to spin the pottery wheels.

He looks around the classroom, realizing how different his life could've been. Instead of being a Marksman in the Class of '20, maybe he'd be sitting on a throne as the king of Adiakpo.

If his mother hadn't moved to America in 1999.

If a period of political turmoil and chaos hadn't broken out in Togo in the 1990s.

If his grandfather, Koffi Agbe Leopold Elhor, hadn't left his home village and chosen not to take the throne.

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Fitzgerald's grandfather, Koffi Agbe Leopold Elhor, was the only child born to Amewokounou Elhor, the king of Adiakpo, a small village located in the city of Tsevie. Although he was meant to inherit the throne of Adiakpo from his father, Elhor instead decided to study and work abroad in various African countries, leaving Togo as a young man with his wife.

After his father died in 1972, Elhor returned to Togo but declined to take over the kingship of Adiakpo. Rather, his cousin became the king, and Elhor pursued a career as an industrial architect. In the late 80s, after being a councilman on the city council of Tsevie, Elhor was elected mayor of the city.

"He became mayor at a time when Togo was about to change," Fitzgerald's mother, Sylvie Elhor-Fitzgerald said. "Up until 1990, it was a military regime where we had a dictator. Each county and each city were independent. They had their own elections. They had a mayor."

In Togo, only people from families with village kingship were allowed to run for mayor of a city.

"The thinking was that if you were wealthy enough — you were from a family like that — you wouldn't steal money from the city," Elhor-Fitzgerald said.

During Elhor's time as mayor, protests for democracy broke out in Togo, with primarily young Togolese people taking part in the revolution. According to Sylvie, these people, many of them 18 and 19 years old, began protesting violently and causing destruction in cities. Her father chose to intervene in Tsevie by getting in his car, driving into the middle of the chaos and urging the people to protest peacefully.

"He basically saved the city from a lot of damage by doing that consistently every time there was a protest and people were starting to get angry," Elhor-Fitzgerald said. "He would show up in the middle of it, risking his life, making sure they preserve the city and telling them, 'Go ahead and protest, but there's no reason why you should be breaking stuff.'"

His influence and history with Togo gained the Elhor name fame and renown even to this day.

"When I go to my village, we have to hide because everyone wants to talk to you, wants to touch you," Elhor-Fitzgerald said. "If I do something

official, like I need to get papers or things like that, then people see my name, and they make a big deal."

But Elhor didn't want his children to grow up spoiled by their royal heritage and sent them away to a school outside of their city where their name wasn't as known.

"He did not want us to have privileges just because we were his children," Elhor-Fitzgerald said. "Once he became mayor, he would come home once a week in the capital to see us, but he made sure we did not go to school in the city where he was mayor because he didn't want us to get a big head. It wasn't important for us. We were taught that it wasn't important, that we were people like everybody else and that we should work hard."

Once the political turmoil became even worse in 1993, Elhor sent his seven children, who were adults by then, to various other countries, ranging from France and Senegal to Germany, so they could pursue their studies and careers. Elhor-Fitzgerald went to Italy, where she completed her graduate degree. She met her husband, Barnaby Fitzgerald, there in 1995 and married him in 1999, moving to America and having her son, Odran, in 2002 and daughter, Moira, in 2005.

**For Fitzgerald, Togo** is a home away from home.

His closest cousin lives in Houston, and the next closest in Germany, but the rest are in Togo itself. However, he has remained in touch over the years through the family's reunions, held every few years.

"I talk to my relatives all the time," Fitzgerald said. "And we all try to find a way where we can go back to Togo together and stuff like that. It's pretty integral part of who I am as a person and has shaped how I look at the world."

Despite living over 6000 miles away from Togo, the culture stays with him. From the Togolese clothes his aunt sends him every two months to the Fufu and Akume, both traditional Togolese dishes, that

his mother cooks for him, his time and family in Togo has always had an impact on his life and even on his work on campus.

In Togo, Fitzgerald visited a town in which the Togolese use large kilns to make pottery that's shipped to the rest of the country, inspiring him to do ceramics in high school.

"I saw people just building these pots on wheels that they turn with their hands," Fitzgerald said. "I was thinking about what I would like to do and thinking back to what I saw in Togo and how these people worked and the beautiful stuff that was coming out of their kilns, and that's basically how I decided to do pottery. I haven't really incorporated into my actual work, but in the third trimester I'm hoping to do something with the voodoo figurines that you find just in random places all over the country."

After seeing the kilns and the people of Togo, Fitzgerald learned to not take smaller things for granted as much anymore. His experiences in his Togo have influenced his perspective.

"When you go and live in a country for a year and a half where you don't have hot running water, and you come back home and you boil water every day to pour on yourself during your shower, and you come back home and just turn on the spout and you have a hot water, it's a little bit of a miracle," Fitzgerald said. "One thing that experience has done for me is allowed me to be more thankful for stuff that I usually wouldn't be thankful for and also put myself in other people's shoes. Going to Togo and other countries has opened up my worldview a lot."



**ALL TOGETHER**  
Every two to three years, Fitzgerald and his family visit Togo to see his grandfather and relatives.