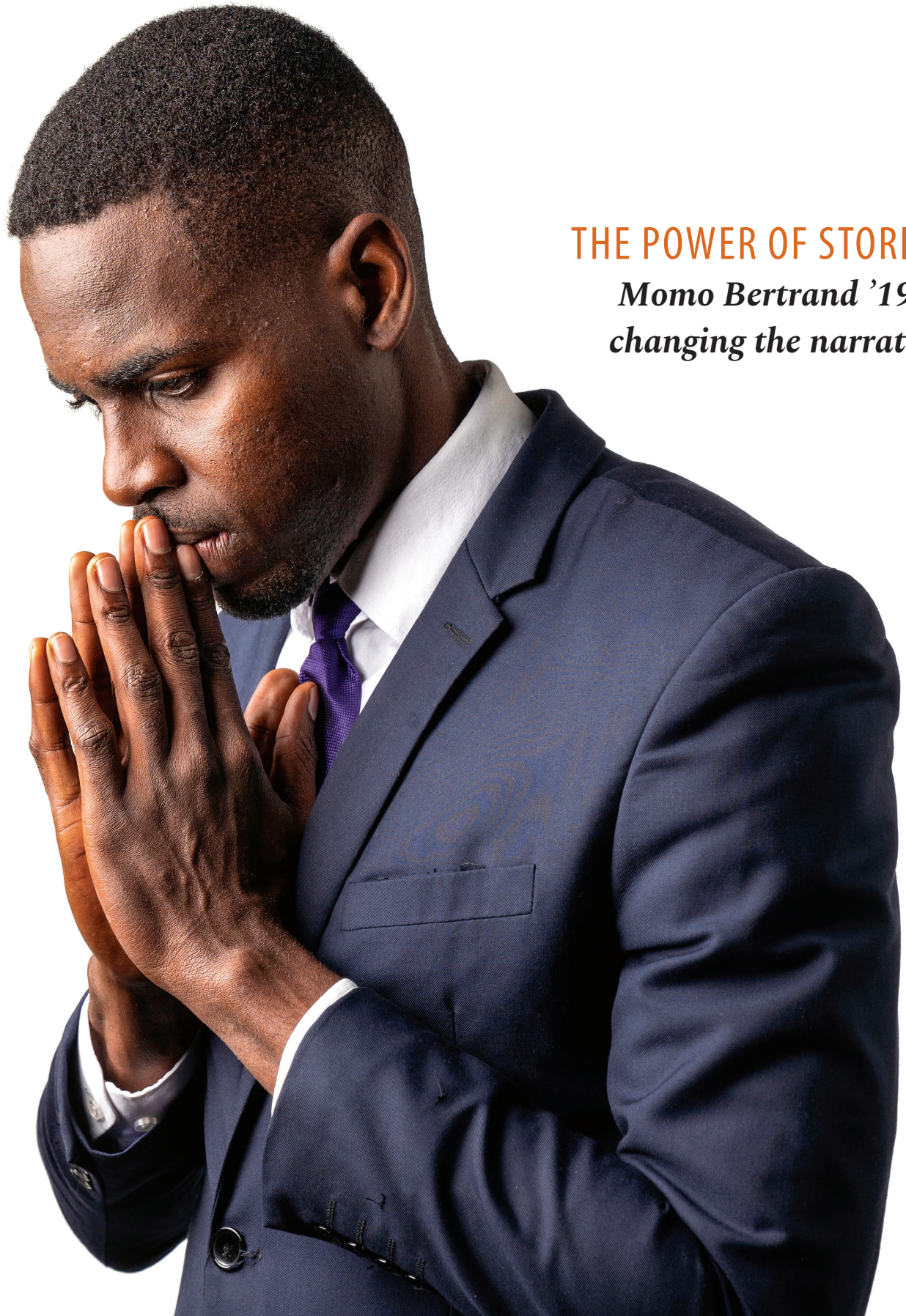


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## THE POWER OF STORIES

*Momo Bertrand '19 is  
changing the narrative*





*Momo Bertrand '19 (MA) received merit-based awards and the Wasson Social Innovation Scholarship, which was funded by Kroc School Advisory Board Member Wes Wasson. He says he established the scholarship "to help aspiring social innovators who want to do more than just talk about the next big thing. They want to make it a reality."*



# THE POWER OF STORIES

MOMO BERTRAND '19  
IS CHANGING  
THE NARRATIVE

by Karen Gross

photography by Chris Park

“A round the dinner table, my mom would tell me all these stories,” Momo Bertrand says, eyes twinkling at the childhood memory. “I know some of them were not true.”

Like the one about her great-grandfather, and how she saw him actually transform himself into a black panther.

“She had all these myths. It sort of shaped my belief system. I feel like there’s nothing as powerful as a story.”

At just 24, Bertrand’s own story is a vivid example. He was raised in Cameroon, in Central Africa, by a single mother who became widowed when he was small. She was the first in her family to finish high school and went on to support 11 siblings and five children.

The family ran a home-based printing shop. “Every holiday, we would go down to the basement and work. When I look back, I think that was really instrumental,” Momo says. “My mom didn’t have any idle time. She told us, ‘If you really want to make it in life, work every moment you can.’”

He took that advice so seriously that he’s been working nonstop ever since. After graduating from the Catholic University Institute of Buea in Cameroon with a bachelor’s degree in management, Bertrand — who’s fluent in his native French as well as English — saw an opportunity and jumped on it.

“I looked at emerging trends around the world and noticed Cameroon was lagging behind in terms of digital communications,” he says. “Even the biggest companies didn’t have a Facebook page.”

Momo opened his laptop and launched a digital marketing agency from his house. He collected a number of clients, including two Fortune 500 companies, and quickly added four employees. He also wrote a novel about a child displaced by a terror attack and sold it to raise money for the thousands of refugees who were crowding the northern part of his country. He traveled to the city of Mora to work with them.

“One of the things I’m most proud of is that we raised awareness about the issue, and let people know that we are not free until each person is free.” That’s when Bertrand’s personal story evolved into a grander one, one about helping other people share the hidden stories about Africans that we all too rarely hear.

“Every time I traveled out of Africa, people would talk about safaris or Ebola or poachers chasing elephants,” he says. “But what I saw were entrepreneurs chasing their dreams. I felt a need to transform the way people look at the continent.”

In 2016, he attended the Hansen Summer Institute at USD and decided the Kroc School’s master’s in social innovation would give him the skills he needed. A full scholarship helped it happen.

From the first day, Bertrand’s teachers and classmates were impressed with him. “He’s really smart. He works really hard. He’s a perfectionist,” says Kumba McGill, ’19 (MA). “And he has a way of communicating with people and connecting his message.”

“He’s an incredibly passionate and amazing storyteller,” adds Gordon Hoople, an assistant professor of integrated engineering who taught Bertrand in his Drones for Good class and also served as his graduate research advisor. “He understands how to draw people in with an important and powerful message.”

But Bertrand isn’t just telling stories, he’s doing work worth telling stories about. There’s the innovative program he developed to help build life skills among local refugees through basketball. There’s the time he entered an essay contest on campus and took first place for a piece he wrote about tackling poverty in the U.S. And, along with Casey Myers ’19 (MA), he was part of a team that won second place in the first phase of the Fowler Global Social Innovation Challenge for their project, One Digital World, which aims to teach English and digital literacy to refugees in Greece.

But perhaps closest to his heart is his capstone project, Tori Labs, which he hopes to launch in Cameroon within the next few years. It’s an after-school program that trains high school and college students in digital marketing, while familiarizing them with their local markets so they can get hired and share African success stories far and wide.

“Some aspects of it might change, but ultimately, I think this is my life’s ambition,” Bertrand says. “It’s my life’s goal to train the next generation of changemakers and storytellers, and ultimately, change the narrative of Africa.” 🌍

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