

THE MIRACLE OF THE LOST BOYS OF SUDAN

On September 10, 2001, Daniel Akur (Deng Akur Mabior) boarded an airplane in Nairobi, Kenya, relieved at last to be free from the fear that had pursued him since age six. He slept fitfully as the plane soared through the night sky. When they landed in Amsterdam, where he was to change for New York, he learned that all flights were banned from landing in the United States. The group of Sudanese refugees must remain in Amsterdam until further notice.

Later, in his hotel room, Daniel watched television. Over and over he watched the images of planes hitting the World Trade Center in New York City. He watched people jump to their death from the windows of the flaming buildings, while others ran through the streets of New York. His hopes crumbled like the tall towers that disappeared in smoke and rubble. All his life he had run to escape the horrors of the war in Sudan; now he was heading to war again -- in the United States.

Daniel is one of fifteen Sudanese "Lost Boys" who found a new home in Roanoke in 2001. Eight years later, he and his friends, Peter Alier and John Kon Garang Kuot have told their stories.

At midnight six-year-old Daniel Akur lay sound asleep with his older brother in their hut in the small village of Lualajokbill in Southern Sudan. Suddenly, a thunderous burst of gunfire awakened him. His parents and other siblings were sleeping in other huts. He ran outside, terrified and confused in the darkness and noisy explosions. He heard his father cry, "Run! Run! Run!" That was the last time he heard his father's voice.

Daniel ran. Other Dinka tribe boys were running also; their parents had prepared them for this possibility. If military forces attacked their village, all the boys must run toward the east -- get out of the Sudan and into Ethiopia. The Ethiopian government was sympathetic to the South Sudanese and provided sanctuary to refugees.

A bloody civil war raged in the Sudan. The Sudanese government in the North, Islamic Arabs, imposed sharia law on the southern Sudanese Christians and animists. The southern tribes, unrepresented in the government and unwilling to change their religion, rebelled and formed the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). Northern troops determined to eliminate the rural southern communities, by killing men, women and children, and burning their villages. They particularly targeted young boys, who were potential manpower for the South.

Peter Alier was nine years old and John Garang was ten when they began the journey. They came from other villages in the same region as Daniel, and left under the same circumstances—an attack on their village at night. They traveled in other small groups of boys, but their story is the same -- the daily struggle to stay alive and to keep going to reach safety.

Day by day these boys between the ages of six and twelve prayed for protection as they struggled to stay alive. Sometimes they went for days without food or water. Leaves from trees did little to satisfy their empty stomachs—and on occasion caused illness. Many boys died of starvation and dehydration. Lions, leopards and hyenas inhabit the jungle area of South Sudan, and Daniel, terrified of wild animals, slept in trees to be safe. Boys who were weakened lagged behind the others and became easy prey.

Eventually they left the jungle area only to face the dangers of the desert – scorpions, snakes and lack of water and edible plants.

“I sucked liquid from mud and sometimes drank my own urine to keep my throat wet. I fed on bitter leaves and roots for survival,” Daniel wrote later in an autobiographical sketch for his English class at Virginia Western Community College.

The boys became surrogate parents to one another. Older boys often carried the little ones when they became too tired. These Christian boys, bonded by their mutual adversity, prayed together continuously for God to protect them.

After approximately three months, they reached the Gilo River, which marks the border between Sudan and Ethiopia. Daniel recalled that some boats were available for the crossing and some boys swam across. Peter described how others constructed rafts by lashing light-weight logs together with vines. Those who were able to cling to the raft were carried safely to the other side. Those who slipped off succumbed to drowning or were consumed by crocodiles.

Once safely inside Ethiopia, the boys faced a different set of problems. Thousands more boys arrived. Overcrowded and without proper hygiene, diseases such as chicken pox, cholera, malaria and whooping cough ran rampant. Daniel suffered from malaria and whooping cough, and grew thinner and weaker. Local people brought all the food they could spare and the boys were limited to one meal of maize and beans each day. The government promised to get health workers as soon possible, but they were overwhelmed by the numbers of refugees. They told the boys to get water from a nearby river and boil it before drinking.

“I lay along the roadside in dry and dusty air like a log of dry wood with no dreams, just waiting death,” Daniel wrote. “I grew up like abandoned child; no mother, no father and no future, just waiting for my world to end. I don’t know why I survived; maybe it was something God planned.”

The boys were registered and since they were not sure of their birthdays, January 1 was established as the birthday for each of them. Conditions at the camp improved somewhat and schools were established with as many as several hundred students in each outdoor class. They began to learn English, beginning with the letter “A” which they scratched in the dirt, lacking paper and pencils. For four years they remained at the Panyido camp in Ethiopia. Because they did not know if their families survived, they were classified as orphans, and they became known as “the Lost Boys of Sudan.”

But civil strife, resulting in the overthrow of the Ethiopian government, forced them to flee again. The new government was no longer sympathetic toward the Southern Sudanese. Ethiopia became an ally of the Northern Islamic Sudan and came with tanks and helicopters, firing at the children as they prepared to cross the Gilo back into Sudan.

This time the crossing occurred during the rainy season and the swollen river with its powerful current increased the danger. There was no time to construct rafts or seek boats as they rushed to escape the tanks and guns of the Ethiopians. Thousands of lives were lost to drowning, crocodiles or shelling by the armed militia. Those who survived continued to run through the southeast region of Sudan, now chased by the Northern Sudanese army.

Once in Sudan, John Garang considered trying to return to his village, but knew he could not survive alone under the horrible conditions. He decided to go with the other boys and seek refuge in Kenya. This time they were helped by the SPLA and the Red Cross, who helped to transport them to safety.

When the Lost Boys finally crossed the border into Kenya, their number had dwindled to 10,000-12,000 --- only about half of the original boys. Once over the border, they became international refugees and the Red Cross provided food and shelter for them. They remained nine long years in Kakuma, a refugee camp in Kenya.

Although conditions at Kakuma Refugee Camp were far from ideal, the boys were able to attend classes where they learned to read and write Arabic and English. The leader of the Sudan People’s Liberation Army, Dr. John Garang, (of the same tribe, but not related directly to Lost Boy, John Garang) spoke to the boys in Kakuma and inspired them to become educated. He told them they were “the seeds of a new Sudan” – they must become educated and help build a new Sudan after the war ended.

They continued to support each other and to pray that life would improve. In each of the refugee camps they studied and attended church services regularly. Daniel says he believes the boys' prayers and prayers of others who were touched by the story of "the Lost Boys of Sudan" resulted in the decision of the United States to help them.

In 2001, the United States government offered to resettle over 3800 of the boys in America. John recalled the tension in the camp as the boys watched to see which names would be listed for interviews. Sometimes the stress of watching day after day without seeing his name would cause a boy to lose hope and commit suicide.

Once a name was listed, an interview would take place. John explained this was to insure that those admitted to the United States were of good character and would be good prospects for citizenship. "Dinkas have an advantage," he said, "since Dinkas take only one wife."

Most Dinkas are second or third generation Christians. Peter said his uncle is a pastor.

Roanoke received 15 boys who were housed in apartments on Grandin Road, near Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church. They were easily recognized by their long, thin legs and jet black skin as they walked along Grandin Road. The church welcomed them and "The Lost Boys of Sudan" became a mission project for members who were touched by their stories. Eager to help them learn English (American version!), prepare for their GED exams, and learn to drive a car, these volunteers helped the Lost Boys adjust to a radically different culture.

On his interrupted journey to America, Daniel waited four days in Amsterdam before his group continued their flight to the U.S.A. He was sent first to Norfolk, but asked to settle in Roanoke because his cousin had arrived in Roanoke on an earlier flight. His request was granted. Relieved to learn that the United States was not a war zone, he was astounded at the cultural differences he encountered in his new home. People in Roanoke welcomed him, and he said he would always be grateful for their help.

Both Peter and James arrived earlier in 2001, during the summer, and did not experience the delay that Daniel encountered on September 11. The Refugee and Immigration Center found living quarters for the Lost Boys and helped equip them. Daniel recalled that the first night he "could not open the light." The only light he had was in the refrigerator! He didn't keep the refrigerator open, however, but sat in the darkness. The next day someone showed him how simple it was to flick the switch. The boys also needed instruction in opening cans of food, storing foods properly, and a myriad of other tasks we take for granted. John said the greatest surprise to him was having to pay rent!

Raleigh Court Presbyterian Church gave a birthday party for all of the Lost Boys on January 1st, 2002, and since these tall, long-legged “boys” (now in their twenties) loved to play soccer, their gifts were equipment for that game.

Meanwhile, Sandra Whitt, a Raleigh Court member, organized a group of volunteer tutors to teach the boys English and prepare them for the GED examination.

“Sandra taught me to speak English,” Daniel said, “and Bob and Mary Ellen McClung taught me American history.”

Tutors also provided help with computer skills, math, literature, science and other relevant subjects. Tutoring continued for those who wanted it even after the GED was passed, helping them with homework when they enrolled at Virginia Western Community College. Peter continued to receive help with his homework at Virginia Western. He also has his citizenship and hopes to continue his studies at a university, hopefully becoming an attorney. Recently four of the Sudanese men graduated from Virginia Western.

Besides becoming educated, these young men needed work to pay their living expenses and to repay the cost of their ticket to America. Many of them found jobs at Rowe Furniture Company in Salem. Later, when Rowe went out of business, they worked for a company in Salem that made parts for Volvo trucks. That business also failed eventually. Daniel was fortunate to get a job with Jatek Automotive. He continues to work and take classes at Virginia Western. Peter and John work at Westport, a company that assembles axels for Volvo trucks.

A Sudanese peace agreement was signed in 2005. The South was allowed representation in the government and communication was restored, allowing the boys to search for relatives. Daniel learned that his father and two older brothers had died in the war, but his mother and younger siblings were still living. Both of John’s and Peter’s parents survived. However, the parents had assumed, due to reports from others, that their sons were dead. Peter said his mother refused to believe he was her son when he talked to her by telephone.

“I had to tell her things I had done when I was a little boy before she would believe me,” he said. ” Then she cried and cried. It’s like being raised from the dead!”

Trips back to Africa for reunions with family have been joyous occasions. John said his father killed a bull and had a big celebration to welcome him. Daniel’s mother did not recognize him after twenty years absence, but was delighted to have her tall son return. When she introduced him to a girl at

the celebration, he said he remembered her from his childhood. She had changed a lot, too! Before he returned to the United States, they were married. He hopes to bring her to America after he becomes a citizen. That process has already begun with having his fingerprints taken.

A passion for education, which they believe is the answer to Sudan's problems, motivates the Sudanese, not only for themselves but for relatives back in Sudan. They work hard to save money to send their families to assure the children a chance to learn.

"My brothers were killed in the war, and I am like a father to their boys," said Daniel.

The Sudanese Mission group has developed projects to raise money for a Sudanese Educational Fund, to help with text books and tuition for students here and in Sudan. One source is the program "Kroger Cares," which allows customers to purchase a Kroger gift card and use it to purchase groceries. A portion of each dollar spent is credited to the Sudanese Education Fund. Donations from individuals touched by the story, who want to do something concrete to help, have also been received.

When one considers the ordeal these boys endured – growing up without adult caregivers, witnessing death in most horrendous ways, wondering each day if this will be the last day, and whether death will come by wild animals, crocodiles, starvation or bullets from their own government – one wonders how they survived to be ambitious, energetic, enthusiastic individuals without the psychological scars one would expect under such circumstances. When the "boys" – now young men in their thirties – are asked to what they attribute their survival, their answer is unanimous: "God did it."

--- Mary Jo Shannon