

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

Refugee plans to film conditions in Sudan

Author(s): Andrew Marshall Close-Up Correspondent **Date:** May 15, 2008 **Page:** **Section:** salt lake

Dodging bullets and running for his life, then-12-year-old Kon (pronounced "cone") Akoy desperately thrashed across a river between Sudan and Ethiopia. Civil war had broken out in Ethiopia and Akoy was caught in the middle of it. He was lucky.

Many of those running at that time were killed. Others drowned, never having learned how **to** swim.

Akoy survived, something that can't be said of his parents, who were killed earlier during a different war in Sudan. His story is one of grief, terror, determination and success.

Akoy, 29, now lives in an apartment at the University of Utah. He works for ARUP and will graduate in May with a bachelor's degree in medical laboratory science. He now wants **to** return **to** Sudan **to** find his remaining family and document the difficulties the people face there. Akoy lived in tumultuous, war-torn Sudan and Ethiopia from the age of 7 **to** 12. He became one of Sudan's "lost boys," a group of boys whose parents were killed and who found refuge in the United States.

His animated face illustrates the difficulty he passed through as he remembers his struggle **to** survive on the bloody battlegrounds of Africa.

"Three months without food. No food. This is the real truth," Akoy said. "We'd catch some fish. If you're lucky enough **to** catch some fish that's a good day for you. We'd eat some fruit. That was really a tough three months for the whole thing."

After arriving in Salt Lake City with **refugee** status, Akoy found different challenges awaiting him. While he had the luxuries of food and shelter he had **to** work two jobs, learn English, start his college education and attend driving school.

"It's hard **to** teach an old dog a new trick," Akoy said. "When you come here as an older person, it's hard **to** adapt **to** a new culture because you have your old culture."

Akoy is beginning **to** adapt **to** the Salt Lake scene. He's gained new friends and new interests.

"I do like bowling," Akoy said. "[And] I like watching basketball all the time."

While he is becoming more assimilated and comfortable with the American way of life, Akoy's heart still yearns for home.

"[I miss] my family the most. There's no way that I can talk with them," Akoy said. "In Sudan where they are, there is no networking or any way for me **to** talk with them."

He has not seen or heard from them directly since leaving. He knows his step-mother, half-brother and half-sister are still alive thanks **to** friends who have returned and relayed the news **to** him.

Family is the primary reason Akoy wants **to** return, but not the only one. He **plans to** travel there for three months with friends and document what's going, with the intention of enlightening people elsewhere about the country's challenges.

"It's an important thing because, if I just go out today and say, 'my family, my friends are suffering' you're not going **to** believe me," Akoy said. "But if I go back there and take pictures and come back and tell you and show you what's happening [you will believe me]. That's why it's really important for this **to** happen."

Jeff Combe is project coordinator and Akoy's good friend. The International Studies major at the University of Utah will go **to** Sudan with Akoy this winter and **film** what he sees.

"I think what we're really hoping is that by filming things, by taking pictures of Kon returning home, for people **to** see something more tangible than stories," Combe said, "we can bring this back and make some sort of rough documentary and really get people excited about helping the people back [in] Sudan and exposing the lost boys that are here."

Freelance photographer Hannah Galli will also accompany Combe and Akoy **to** Sudan **to** capture Akoy's reunion and the Sudanese life with still images.

"I caught the 'humanitarian bug' a couple years ago while traveling in Peru," Galli said. "Now I work on a regular basis with Somali **refugees**."

Combe took on the project, in part because he is inspired by Akoy's attitude toward challenge. "He's been through more than I can imagine, more than any of us, especially at such a young age," Combe said. "And he's such a positive person, and has worked so hard. I think we take for granted how much we have and really how easy life is."

Want **to** help?

The group is still in need of donations for travel and living costs which can be made at any Zions Bank under the Kon Akoy donation. For more information Combe can also be contacted at golfball23@hotmail.com or at (801) 750-9677.

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