

The Found Boys

A typical six-year old's experience? Four Sudanese refugee "lost boys" prove there's no such thing.

When soldiers entered a village shooting, villagers simply ran. Families scattered — losing each other in their terror. Adults who were the prime targets were either killed or captured, leaving the children to fend for themselves. Those who survived joined thousands of others traveling 600 miles eastward — on foot — to Ethiopia.

Most of the children fleeing were between five and seven years old. At five, six, and seven, John Deng, Deng, Santino, and Kuek (pronounced 'Quick') — each from different ravaged villages — found themselves among thousands of other fleeing Sudanese seeking safety and freedom from the civil war.

The walk took several months. The four boys, along with thousands of others, faced incredible hardships: crossing the desert with no water, fording rivers when many couldn't swim, going without food for days and weeks at a time, enduring the rainy season without shelter, and living with the death of friends and family along the way.

When they finally reached the refugee camps, food was still scarce — with one cup of beans often shared among 50 people.

Four years later, civil war broke out in Ethiopia, so the children returned to Sudan. But the Sudanese government and rebel forces saw the thousands of boys returning to Sudan as an opportunity to turn children into soldiers.

So the thousands walked again. This time through Sudan to Kenya, where they lived for nine years in a refugee camp — often hungry, afraid and seemingly forgotten.

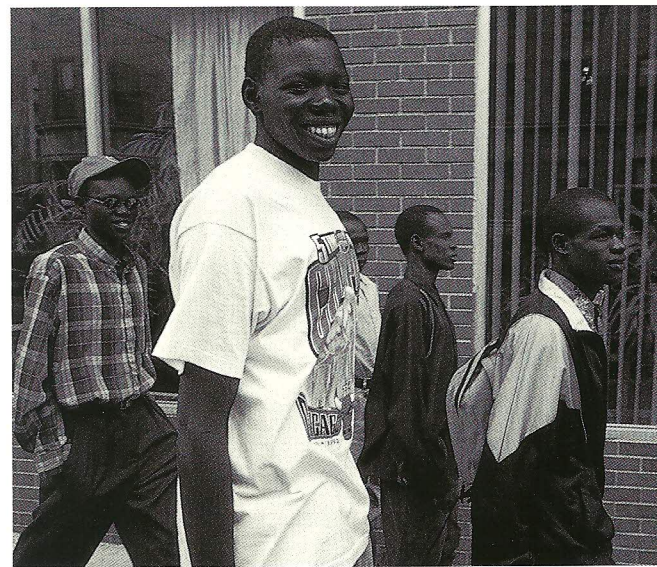
In 2001, the United Nations and the U.S. State Department agreed to bring almost 4,000 Sudanese youth over to the United States.

Through Heartland Alliance's refugee resettlement programs, more than 30 of the Sudanese youth are learning to call Chicago home. Gordon Owali, one of their caseworkers, was resettled by Heartland Alliance when he came to the U.S. as a refugee from Sudan less than two years ago. Gordon now shows the youth how to navigate the city and the CTA (how to go *through* a turnstile after paying, instead of *over* it).

You might think the transition from rural Africa to Chicago has been seamless to hear the boys laugh about their first impressions of Chicago's "wonders" — automatic doors at Target or elevators, for example. But other comments hint at the traumatic memories with which they must live. When he first saw the April trees, devoid of all leaves and seemingly dead, Kuek thought, "Oh no, the trouble is also following us because the trees are all dead." And fireworks on the 4th of July sent Santino running for his apartment, thinking it was gunfire.

All of the youth are taking classes and looking for work. "In the U.S. you can do whatever you want," says Deng. "You can make a right decision for your own future."

Even with all they have experienced, the youth consider themselves incredibly lucky. "They call us the 'lost boys,' but we were not lost from God," says Kuek. "They should call us the 'Lost and Found Boys'."



At ages as young as five, the Sudanese "lost boys" were separated from their families by civil war. After walking hundreds of miles twice and growing up in refugee camps, these young men are now being resettled by Heartland Alliance.