

# THE LOST BOYS

AFTER NARROWLY ESCAPING MASSACRE IN SUDAN, SEVEN BOYS TRAVELED TO HAMPTON ROADS IN HOPES OF BUILDING A NEW LIFE, AND ONE DAY, A NEW COUNTRY IN AFRICA. THIS IS THEIR STORY.

BY KRISTEN DE DEYN KIRK | PHOTOS BY KATHY KEENEY

**P**HILIP MAKER STOOD IN ONE OF THE BEDROOMS OF HIS FRIENDS' GHENT APARTMENT. He and six other boys were laughing about something, loud enough to be heard out the window from the far side of the church parking lot across the street. • It was a hot Sunday in June, a few hours before sunset, and the booming guffaws could have been those of any young men blowing off steam, stretching out the last hours of a weekend.

But this laughter was not from an ordinary group of guys.

Philip's good mood continued as he stepped out of the bedroom, smiled and walked into the living room to greet a guest.

He then sank into a worn, blanket-covered couch -- a friendly young man at ease.

The room, crammed with another blanket-covered couch, a blanket-covered chair, five more chairs, two desks, two computers, two TVs, two end tables, a coffee table, two bikes, a non-functioning air conditioner and a crooked watercolor of rams, soon accommodated his six friends.

They were eager to talk about their lives, where they had been, what they had seen during their twenty-some years.

Except, surprisingly, for Philip. His eyes were battling sleep.

He propped his chin on his hand, leaned right, then left. After thirty minutes of listening and only speaking once, he leaned forward, placed his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands.

"Maybe it is time for you to have some [other] questions," he said in a loud voice.

Whether his frustration was from the heat, the long hours he had worked, or the fact that he could repeat verbatim his friends' speeches -- wasn't clear, but one thing was:

He wanted to move on.

"All of our life stories," he said, "are the same."

**PHILIP HAD PROVIDED** only one line of the story:

"It was rainy season," he said half way through the conversation. "In Africa, there are

no real main roads or common roads, so you just walk on the grass or run. It was 2,000 miles."

His friends told the rest.

John Lueth spoke softly, offering the best English he could:

"Actually, our lives have never been easy since we first starting leaving our country in the year 1987."

He says the year slowly, breaking the numbers into distinct words:

Nineteen.

Eighty seven.

So long ago for a young man.

"In 1987, this is the time we left Sudan. I and some of my friends were 5 years old. All of the [other] boys were about 7. We left Sudan into Ethiopia, and on our way going to Ethiopia, we have a lot of problem. Some of friend were taken away by wild animals, and we were walking."

It took John and thousands of others four weeks to walk about 250 miles.

"And when reaching Ethiopia, we also have a lot of problem. Local people killed some of our friends. [We] stayed in refugee camp... Panyidu."

"We stayed there for four years," John continued. "The United Nations and some agencies provide food, and a school was constructed."

"By 1991, civil war broke out, so we had to go back to Sudan. So on the way back to Sudan, the local government attack us, so we were forced to cross the river [Gilo]. They were shooting at us. And this is where we lost a good number of our friends. Drowned by the river, and others were shot down."

Jacob Yaale succinctly summarized their escape:

"If you didn't run fast," he said, "you were killed."

John Aluk remembers other explosions -- from landmines.

Another young man, Simon Deng, jumped into the story, animated with adrenaline:



## MEET THE LOST BOYS

As part of its New Non-Fiction film series, the Naro Expanded Cinema will host the local premiere of *Lost Boys of Sudan*, a documentary by Megan Mylan and Jon Sherk, on Tuesday, June 22 at 7 p.m. (See Arts & Culture in this issue for Greg Epps' review.)

Afterwards, local "Lost Boys" Phillip Maker, Jacob Yaale, Chol Thiong, Deng Awuou, John Lueth, Simon Deng and John Aluk will speak to the audience and answer questions. Call 625-6276 for more information.

People wishing to assist the Lost Boys can contact them at the following numbers: 625-1531 (John Lueth, Deng Awuou, and Simon Deng), 490-0479 (Chol Thiong, Jacob Yaale) and 874-0152 (Phillip Maker and John Aluk).

## SIMON'S ESCAPE

I was born in Juba (the second capital city) in Sudan, Africa... I had been living with my lovely parents until I was accidentally separated from them when our village was attacked by the Islamic fundamentalist government army. This government is located in the northern part of Sudan. The attack was due to political ideologies, religious differences (Islamic versus Christian) and natural resources such as diamonds, gold, mercury and oil.

It was early in the morning when I saw a large number of soldiers running in a zigzag manner. Within seconds I heard sounds of guns everywhere like a thunderstorm. It was almost dawn when my heart was soberly astonished by loud guns, and I was in dilemma of where to go. Immediately I found myself standing in the midst of our home compound alone.

Childishly, I tried to generate a lot of noise by crying, while at the same time looking for my beloved family members, especially my mother, but they were no-

where to be seen. Can you guess what came to my mind next? My subconscious directed me to run into the forest even though it was full of dangerous wild animals. As I was running toward the forest, my grandfather, accompanied by two ladies and three men, came running, but they did not see me. However, I increased my running speed and yelled for my grandfather to wait for me, he quickly looked back for whom ever was calling him. I saw him fall down with one of the ladies and two of the men. I was shocked when I reached where he had fallen and saw blood coming from everywhere on his body. I put my hand on the left side of his heart to find out whether his heart was beating, but it was not. ...I can think of nothing worse than being separated from my lovely family as young as I was. It was a really bad experience, which I still have nightmares of. However, with all of these experiences, I have learned how great the almighty God is, and how to endure the hardship of life.

— from Simon Deng's essay "A Lost Boy From Sudan," as submitted to Jane Howell, an English As-A Second Language professor at Tidewater Community College.

"We had, like, physical damage, because when we were running, we were just falling down and breaking legs," he said, spreading his fingers and chopping the air to emphasize his point. "Nobody knew where he was going."

When the boys arrived back in Sudan, they were chased by what they call the "North Government." Airplanes would fly over the country looking for them.

After four or five months, they began walking out of Sudan again, this time headed for Kenya.

Few had shoes as they walked 2,000 miles southeast.

"You have walk," said Simon, "and when you're tired, you sleep along the road. You would get yourself better and get up and join them."

The boys ate sporadically, relying on food dropped irregularly from Red Cross airplanes and leaves pulled from trees.

"It was about five months without any food," said Simon with a shake of his head.

The food supply didn't improve when they reached a Kenyan refugee camp in 1992. Simon got about a half cup of oil and two cups of corn to last 15 days.

In the middle of recounting his story and listening to the others', Simon suddenly sat up straight and smiled.

He had an announcement to make:

"One thing [that] is missing [from this explanation] is the great thing that caused all this," he said, "was, like, in our country, Sudan was first a land of black people like us. Then we had Arabs come from Saudi Arabia and migrate to our country."

"And after they migrate to our country, they introduced Muslim law and they wanted everyone in the country to worship Muslim. There was no freedom of belief."

People in southern Sudan formed their own government, known as both the Sudan People Liberation Army and the Sudan People Liberation Movement, to fight for religious freedom.

"When this Arab people see that we form our own movement, that is when they send the soldiers," remembered Simon, "and they were more powerful than us, and that is why we ran away from the country."

The soldiers from the north would come looking for boys to kill.

"...Because they know when (the boys) grow up," said Simon, "some time they will do the same in the future, shooting (for the Sudan People Liberation Army)."

**SOMEONE, MAYBE A WORKER** from the Red Cross or the United Nations, dubbed the seven boys now gathered in the apartment — and all of their friends who traveled in and out of Sudan — the "Lost Boys," presumably after the Lost Boys who befriended Peter Pan.

The only difference: The imaginary boys wanted to leave adult supervision.

Many of the Lost Boys of Sudan were orphaned when soldiers shot their parents. Some witnessed the killings, others suspect them. (See *Simon's Escape*.)

John Lueth knows his mother was killed in 1987; Jacob lost his mother in 1983, and his father in 1993, all "because of the war."

Deng Awuou, who shares the Ghent apartment with John Lueth and Simon, isn't sure about his parents. When he left Sudan in 1987, they were alive, but he has "never seen them again."

Sadly, the odds are against Deng:

A 1998 United States Committee for Refugees study estimated that 1.9 million people in southern and central Sudan had died since 1983 due to the civil war.

The war and the deaths mean that young Sudanese boys are more familiar with refugee camps and rations than villages and family dinners.

Along with a few girls and some "elders" who had directed their three-country and five-year journey, the boys and 10,000 others settled into the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya in 1992.

They formed new families, with older boys looking out for the younger ones and everyone doing their best to live on meager food supplies. Refugee workers opened schools and taught the boys English.

In 1999, the United Nations and the United States devised a plan to transplant the "boys" (as they call themselves) to America. Relief workers were overwhelmed as they struggled to help not only the boys, but other refugees totaling 65,000 from seven African nations.

Simon remembers learning of the plan: "We were worried," he said, "that was the main thing, we were worried. Don't know who is going to be there to show you around, to be your friend."

John Lueth was concerned about the weather.

His region of Africa is moderate, he says. The boys heard some places, like Texas, were too hot and others, like New York, were too cold.

Their preferences — hot or cold weather, big or small city, near or far from their Lost Boys families — wouldn't matter.

"[The decision] wasn't from us," explained John Aluk. "So a big company or a big church, they decide different place. They just say OK, these people go to Virginia, these people go to Florida."

The seven boys learned of their assignments in America in mid-2001. John A. arrived in Hampton Roads on April 30, 2001; Philip on Aug. 27; Deng, Aug. 28; and Jacob, Chol, John L. and Simon on Sept. 4.

(About 1,000 Lost Boys remain in the refugee camp — reportedly held back by concerns over the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. About 3,400 are in America.)

As they walked off the plane, they didn't know where they would live nor where they would work.

John A. and Philip would fend for themselves.

Instead of obtaining sponsors through a country-wide program, they worked with immigration to arrange their move to Newport News.

The other boys were luckier. They were sponsored by churches — Simon by St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Norfolk; John L. and Deng by Christ and St. Luke's in Norfolk; Jacob and Chol by Episcopal Church of the Messiah in Newport News.

For several months, the churches supported the boys financially, assisted them with finding apartments and jobs, and educated them on American customs.

"Coming here, for the first few months," said Chol, who settled in Virginia Beach with Jacob, "life was, like, it was sweet. I can say that. We weren't working, we were just sitting, we didn't have a job at the time, and we were supported by the churches. Then from there, it keep changing, you know, keep changing, keep changing, keep changing."

**AS HE SPOKE** about his time in America, Chol's eyes were redder than the red T-shirt and the red button-down shirt he wore.

Simon noticed and offered an explana-



Jacob



Deng

tion — probably because he's tired of employers and others asking if the boys drink alcohol or smoke.

"Our eyes are red because we can't sleep," he said. "Because when we get home from work, we do our [school] assignments.

Chol works 12-hour days at a flooring company, and on the weekends, he works for a caterer. He also carries seven credit hours at Tidewater Community College.

Philip, whose eyes were involuntarily closing during the meeting in his friends' apartment, blames his two car accidents on his demanding schedule. He works, attends Thomas Nelson Community College, does his homework, and wakes up after four or five hours of sleep.

Simon has had it even worse: At one time, he juggled three jobs and school.

Even with a good work ethic, it's hard for the boys to end the month with cash in their wallets.

Deng was the first to discover just how small a menial-job paycheck is:

"I was paid \$5 an hour," he wrote in an essay for college. "I got my payroll check and started paying many bills. Within two months, I discovered the problem when I summed up all my expenses to know how little I was paid monthly. At that point, I realized that my income is less than my expenses."

In addition to paying rent (about \$250 with shared apartments), they pay for utilities, groceries, gas, and tuition.

Ironically, the boys earn too much to qualify for financial aid — but they provide it for others back in Kenya: They've taken on the responsibility of sending tuition money home for loved ones.

They say they each mail about \$200 a month.

(Deng and John L. especially wish they could send more: Both have three brothers and three sisters to support.)

The boys also dream of starting a school named after them in Sudan. They'd like to save money to do so — but for now, they must take care of today's bills.

Playing financial dodge ball wasn't the boys' game plan. Coming here was supposed to be their chance to earn a college degree — each in a different field needed in Sudan.

(Chol wants to be a lawyer; Simon a pharmacist; John A. an accountant)

With their degrees, they would return to Sudan and build a new country.

Having to pay the bills has slowed their studies and altered their view of the Sweet Land of Liberty.

"When I was in Africa," said Philip, "I didn't thought (sic) America was like this place, thought it was like, to me, in my mind, it was a place of honey or something like that. America is good. You can get a lot of opportunity here. But it is so hard."

The boys have encountered other challenges as well:

In Kenya, friends could easily gather, talk, shout, laugh, and hold hands with other boys.

Now life is too busy to meet in person — and they've learned that hand-holding is not interpreted as friendship in America.

It's also difficult for the boys to approach women. Back home, they could say hello, introduce themselves, and be asked back to the girl's home to meet her family.

Here, the boys are too afraid to even say hello: They've been laughed at by girls when they go to the mall. They're not certain, but they think they're ostracized because their skin is darker than that of most African-Americans.

**THE BOYS' HEARTACHES** are more numerous than their years: John L. is 24; Philip, 21; Simon, 21; John A., 21; Jacob, 23; Chol, 22; and Deng 21.

Or at least those are the ages they've been given.

Simon laughed and explained: "When we left our country, we were very young," he said, "and we don't know the day we were born."

Refugee workers assigned each boy an age, and the United States assigned them all the same birthday: January 1.

According to Chol, the birth years vary for the Lost Boys from 1978 to 1984.

While the other boys were laughing about their "birthdays," Chol turned serious:

"It bothers me sometimes," he said, "because I might think I'm younger than that (22)."

Life could have been easier if his assigned age was younger:

"Some of the boys that came over with us, and they were younger than us," he said, "they were given support and they would go to (high) school, but for us, we have to do everything for ourselves."

"They say to us, why not go to school full time and work part time. Most of them, they are in [four-year] colleges now. Some of them stay at home. They don't understand [what it's like to support yourself.]"

One coping tool that the boys use "a lot," said Chol, is prayer.

They have for a long time:

"We believe we couldn't have come through this if there was no God," said Jacob. "I pray all the time, and I get plenty for it. We know God is number one, we put God first."

John Lueth, who, along with the others, attends church every Sunday, finds one thing amazing in America:

"Religions here ... have no problem with other religions. We have never heard a person talking about Muslims being a bad people."

"Northern Sudan (the area with Islamic fundamentalists) had a problem with Christianity in the south, but in America we are Christian, and everybody is free."

While the boys take comfort in their freedom to worship, their worries are never far from their mind.

As the hot summer night grew darker and the Ghent apartment somehow warmer, John L. dug out a fan from his bedroom. He turned it on to offer relief to his sweltering friends — and the talk once again focused on struggle.

Jacob, wearing a big smile, tried to emphasize the positive, but he couldn't help but share his real desire:

He longs for sleep.

Not just on this night, but every night.

"I'm working for a construction company, plumbing, and that kind of job is not good for going to school," he said. "You get out of work, and you are really exhausted muscles, and you get really tired. So you got to class, and your head is already dropping but you can't do nothing about it. But we hope, based on the situation we've been through, right, yes, things are difficult, but maybe we will work on that, overcome it one day."

"You know," said John A., "the full-time job and the full-time school are really affecting us. Our aim here, if you ask three quarters of the Lost Boys, they would say we have to get a good education. We will help our country. But full time is setting us back."

Deng considered a question from his guest: *If America wants to help you, we should do more than just bring you to this country, we should give you money for school?*

"You know, America they are very nice," answered Deng, "and if you're serious about help us with our education, you might give us a scholarship, and if (we) get a scholarship, you know, that would help us earn a degree."

Chol would also appreciate a tutor and professors who understand his situation and his limited knowledge of English.

Philip, too. And he'd like health insurance. He can't get it at his job, and he earns too much to qualify for Medicaid. He has two extra ribs, and his chest inches inwards more than it should.

Can someone tell him how to get help? His chest is aching, but he can't afford to go to the hospital.

He's still trying to pay off a \$300 bill from an earlier visit.

When Philip finished speaking, Simon, the boy who earlier explained why he and his friends had to leave Sudan in 1987, looked around the room.

Nobody had said it, so once again, it was up to him to make a big-picture declaration: "We need something," he said, "that can bring peace in our country." ■

