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Many of the Lost Boys of Sudan, including John Maluak Dit, Mator Mabil Ajak and Abraham Akuien Deng, made a new life for themselves in Phoenix.

## Lost in America

It was supposed to be a storybook tale of young refugees triumphing against all odds. But an alarming number of Sudan's "Lost Boys" have spiraled into alcohol abuse, crime and even fratricide. What went wrong?

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**By Leigh Flayton**



Aug. 16, 2005 | PHOENIX -- When Joseph Abil arrived in Dallas in 1995, he represented the first wave of extraordinary refugees, mostly young men, who became known to the world as the "Lost Boys of Sudan." Abil, 20 years old at the time, had fled civil war in his native country that wiped out his village. He survived a perilous migration across Africa, endless hunger, and harsh conditions in a refugee camp in Kenya. When he settled in Texas, with the help of the United States government, he was finally free to lead a life of hope

and promise.

But life in America presented Abil with struggles and dangers of a different kind. In 1997, feeling isolated, he moved to Phoenix, where other refugees from his Sudanese community had been resettled. He lived alone in an apartment and worked as a stock clerk at a Fry's supermarket. Although Abil took medication for mental health problems, his friend Martin Abucha said Abil had no trouble holding down a job.

Early this year, Abil stopped going to work. One afternoon in February, he left his apartment and headed for the I-17 freeway, miles from where he lived, and started wandering north along the median during rush hour. A highway patrol officer approached Abil, and according to a report from Arizona state officials, Abil grew "agitated" and refused to move off the median to a safe location. The officer fired a Taser at Abil, who retaliated by throwing "baseball-sized rocks" at him. Pulling out a handgun, the officer fired three shots at Abil. The refugee who triumphed over years of hardship in Africa fell dead on the Arizona freeway.

Since the late 1990s, the Lost Boys have made headlines around the world. In 2001, their sojourn was hailed as a remarkable success story on "60 Minutes II." "In Sudan, thousands of Lost Boys fought off dangers we can barely imagine, and are now, happily, flying off to the United States," reported CBS correspondent Bob Simon. In a second story that aired the following January, Simon said of the Lost Boys' lives in America: "There were dark moments. There were bound to be, but they passed." A Kansas City man, featured in the show, said of one Lost Boy he mentored, "He's living the American dream. He's already got a job; he's self-sufficient. You've taken someone literally, almost literally, in the Stone Age and dropped him into a modern civilization, saying after four months you're on your own, and he is, and he's fine."

Many of Abil's "brothers," as the Lost Boys call each other, have indeed made better lives here. They are earning high school diplomas, attending community colleges and universities, and holding down a variety of jobs, typically low-paying ones. Today, nearly 4,000 Lost Boys call America home.

Last December, Arizona's Deng Majok Chol, 27, became the first Lost Boy to graduate from a major U.S. college, Arizona State University, with a double major in political science and economics. In February of this year, People magazine profiled three Lost Boys who had returned to the Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya to help their brothers still stuck there. "In less than five years," reported the magazine, "they transformed from wide-eyed immigrants who had never seen a kitchen freezer to young men working their way through college in San Diego."

But for an alarming number of Lost Boys, their journey to America has taken a much darker turn -- into unemployment, alcohol abuse, petty crime, murder and suicide. Unresolved cultural differences and a lack of support, training and education have led them to fall through the cracks of the social and legal system. Many Lost Boys, advocates and researchers say, suffer from some degree of trauma-related mental illness, most notably post-traumatic stress disorder.

"We want our Lost Boys happy, polite and grateful -- and during the first couple of honeymoon years, that's what we saw," says Ann Wheat, co-founder of the [Arizona Lost Boys Center](#) in Phoenix. The center, which opened in 2003, offers more than 400 Lost Boys a place to gather, speak with career counselors, and get legal and medical advice. "But we do the Lost Boys and ourselves a huge disservice by perpetuating a one-dimensional image of them. If they were all models of emotional health, we might as well conclude that war is good for children, save our time and resources, and all go home." Wheat, who also works as a supervisor for Phoenix's city parks, says that reports of troubling incidents around the country often reach the center through the Lost Boys' own word-of-mouth network. Lately, she says, "It has started to feel like an

epidemic."

The Lost Boys were victims of a brutal civil war in the south of Sudan that began more than two decades ago. The Arizona center's current outreach coordinator, Jany Deng, 26, landed in Phoenix in 1995; he and his blood brother Simon were two of the first four Lost Boys to arrive in Arizona. Their saga had begun 10 years before.

While herding cattle in 1985, Jany and other boys from his village witnessed the destruction of their homes by government-backed Islamic militias. They took off running, beginning a multiyear exodus that spanned East Africa and countries around the globe. Many of their parents were murdered and their sisters raped, enslaved and killed. (As a result, there are fewer Lost Girls.)

For years, tens of thousands of Lost Boys walked more than 1,000 miles across East Africa, thousands dying of starvation, disease, and militia and animal attacks. Jany and his group first went east to Ethiopia, where Jany was reunited with Simon, who had made it there with another group of Lost Boys. But when civil war flared up in 1990, they fled back to Sudan. They returned to nothing: Their family and village were gone. Eventually they trekked to Kenya, winding up in the Dadaab refugee camp. After a year in Dadaab, they were among the first few relocated to the United States.

In the 2003 documentary film "[Lost Boys of Sudan](#)," one Lost Boy expresses the shared perception, while in the Kakuma refugee camp, of what it will be like to leave for America: "This journey is like you are going to heaven."

When Jany and Simon arrived in Arizona, Jany, then age 16, was sent to live with a foster family; Simon, 23, shared an apartment with two older boys. It was a pattern that continued from coast to coast as more of them came; the minors were resettled with families, while older Lost Boys were placed in dingy apartments, often cramped together, in rough city neighborhoods or on the outskirts of towns.

In Phoenix, Jany attended school, made friends and joined the track team; Simon couldn't keep a job. He told Jany that "people looked at him different and made comments." By the spring of 1997, Simon had grown despondent. He wanted to bring his girlfriend from Dadaab to Arizona, but to no avail. He had no money or job prospects. According to Jany, Simon began to speak of suicide.

On Apr. 10, 1997, Simon bought a 9MM rifle and rode a city bus toward the Catholic Social Services office building in North Phoenix. He got off the bus, took the rifle out of its box and fired it in the parking lot of a Circle K convenience store before heading to the office. A police helicopter and officers responded as Simon entered Catholic Social Services at lunchtime. Once inside, Simon looked for his caseworkers and, according to the police report, began firing his gun in the air. No one was hurt. The police arrived at the building and Simon shot at Officer Terrence Kobza. Kobza returned fire and killed Simon with a bullet in the arm and another in the chest.

Today, Jany still hasn't made peace with Simon's death. "Why here?" he asks. "He could have died over there. I could have died over there," he says of Africa, his words breaking into a stutter. "The way it happened, it was not a good way."

Local news and police reports from the past eight years, along with accounts from advocates and Lost Boys themselves, reveal a trail of tragic events.

In August 2001 in Boston, Daniel Majok Kachuol, 19, was charged with assault and rape, just six months after his arrival. In September 2002 in Rochester, Minn., Christofar Atak, 31, ran in front of a police car in the street, shouting, "I want to die!" Under disputed circumstances, a police officer ended up shooting Atak point-blank in the back. Atak, who survived, had a blood-alcohol level that indicated he was severely intoxicated. That same month, Phillip Ajack Cham, 33, entered an immigration office in Houston demanding to be repatriated to Sudan; he grabbed a gun from a guard, firing it and threatening suicide before being subdued by officers.

In April 2004 in Fargo, N.D., Chol Deng Chol, 25 -- considered "one of the most promising students we've seen in a long time" by a mentor at North Dakota State University -- was charged with the rapes of two teenage girls after a night of drinking. In Atlanta that summer, Ajuong Manuer, 21, died following an alcohol-fueled fight -- over \$10 -- with fellow Lost Boy Mayen Biar Diing, 25. And in May 2005 in Seattle, Kero Riiny Giir, 27, stabbed to death an ex-girlfriend, Lost Girl Roda Bec, 16, for being "rude" to him, as he would later tell police. After fleeing the scene, Giir had jumped off a highway overpass in an apparent suicide attempt.

"We have a lot of angry Lost Boys, and it has not been brought to the attention of the community," says John Aza, 40, director of the Southern Sudanese Resettlement Program in Tucson. Aza left Sudan in 1996 and is currently earning a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering from the University of Arizona. He does not count himself among the Lost Boys, though he is close with the community. At the end of July, Aza visited six Lost Boys who had been released from jail -- some arrested for driving while intoxicated, two for arguing with police officers after a fight in a club. For Lost Boys who lack jobs and community support, and who have a hard time adapting to American culture, says Aza, alcohol is often "the nearest comfort."

"A lot of Lost Boys have been picked up for DUIs," Wheat says. "It appears to be a growing problem in the Sudanese community, but it's something that's kept a dark secret. They don't deal with it. We could start an AA meeting at the center and nobody would come."

Advocates across the country, including from large enclaves in Atlanta and Jacksonville, Fla., express serious concerns about publicizing the Lost Boys' problems. They say the refugee community is extremely sensitive about them, while some fear a backlash could undermine fundraising, scholarships and the ability to enlist volunteers and mentors. Wheat also worries that news of dark-skinned refugees falling into violent crime won't be well received, especially in America's post-Sept. 11 political climate.

But shining a light on the troubling cases could be critical to helping the refugees, says Apuk Ayuel, who serves as deputy spokeswoman for the newly established Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, a nonprofit support group based in Los Angeles. Ayuel, 24, fled Sudan with her mother and arrived in Houston in 1996. She currently studies political science at the University of Texas at Arlington. "It seems like the way it's depicted is that every single Lost Boy has gone through -- that their situation is all equal, that all of them are getting educations," she says. "But there are a lot of people who are falling through the cracks. Their deeper stories are not being told."

Some of those stories involve dozens of Lost Boys who have been victimized themselves. Violent crime -- often in racially charged circumstances -- including assault, robbery and murder, has led to the deaths of at least four Lost Boys. They have also been involved in a rash of car accidents. Many Lost Boys saw their first cars just a few years ago and so have little driving experience; according to Wheat, more than two dozen had serious accidents in Arizona alone in 2004, including two fatalities.

Wheat says she knows of at least a dozen around the country who've attempted suicide.

While the details of various tragic cases remain murky, researchers see at least one clear thread tying them all together: trauma-related mental illness, mostly left untreated. David Berceci is a trauma therapist and founder of [Trauma Recovery Assessment and Prevention Services](#) who worked in Sudan between 2001 and 2004. Berceci, who counseled a group at the Arizona Lost Boys Center in July on post-traumatic stress disorder, says he's troubled, but not surprised by the pattern of incidents. "With people who have been put through years of life-and-death experiences, untreated fear and anger can develop into hatred and rage," he says. "It becomes an uncontrollable energy."

In June, Dr. Paul Geltman, a professor of pediatrics at the Boston University School of Medicine, published a study measuring the assimilation and well-being of 304 Lost Boys who arrived as minors in the U.S. from late 2000 to early 2001. While many fared relatively well, the study concludes that 20 percent of them suffer from PTSD.

Geltman says the rate of PTSD does not necessarily go beyond "what would be expected" of a traumatized refugee population. At the same time, he adds, he finds it remarkable that the prevalence of PTSD isn't higher. "I'd love the opportunity to do a large assessment of the older Lost Boys for comparison," he says. He notes that the problems of the older Lost Boys are probably "much greater" and would amount to greater levels of dysfunction, considering they've received less attention and support, and fewer services, than the minors. But even the minors, Geltman says, have not necessarily received the mental health help they've needed. As a result, his report concludes, the Lost Boys face lasting difficulties in being integrated into U.S. society.

Advocates, including Sudanese who have become leaders among the refugee community, share that view. According to Ayuel, many of the Lost Boys still suffer nightmares about the horrors they witnessed and endured. "They're normal most of the time, but they'll have the same nightmares over and over," she says. "There are some people in the community of Lost Boys and Girls who will say, 'Yeah, they're a little crazy.'" Ayuel says therapy is a concept as foreign to the Sudanese natives as refrigerators and fast-food restaurants once were. In fact, therapy is taboo to them.

Peter Deng (no relation to Jany; the name Deng means "rain" and is common in Sudan) found his way to Phoenix in 2001. When he arrived, he recalls, "I was thinking about food." During his nine years in a refugee camp in Kenya, he ate food provided by American relief agencies. "So I was thinking that America is a good country," he says. "Maybe if I go there I will make money; I will go to school."

In his first year in Phoenix, Peter was beaten up, carjacked and wrongly accused of fathering a child. He was fined \$1,200 for driving without a license or insurance, which he had no idea he needed. He learned about the U.S. court system when he had to file a restraining order against a former girlfriend, who threatened him by saying, "You are just a refugee here in America. I can kill you." These days, Peter rarely goes out in public, especially at night, and he says he fears going to jail. "If I go to public places, the mall or a club, somebody might hurt me for that," he says, seated inside the Arizona center one afternoon.

Peter has received important assistance from the center, which helped him find a job as a file clerk for a company that sells concert tickets. Located across the street from the state capitol in a dodgy part of downtown Phoenix, the center shares a parking lot with a plastics recycling plant. Sudanese folk art and black-and-white portraits of Lost Boys at the Kakuma refugee camp add touches of familiarity to a place

that offers help with foreign struggles like disconnected phone lines, eviction notices and shopping for groceries and clothes. (Lost Boys in Phoenix, according to Wheat, have been bilked for thousands of dollars by disreputable companies.) The center has partnered with Target, PetSmart, Phoenix's Sky Harbor airport and other businesses to arrange some 150 jobs for Lost Boys.

Peter earns \$8.50 an hour in his clerk job, and works on his skills at the center's computer lab in his spare time. He watches a lot of television and movies, citing "Rush Hour" as a favorite film. Like many of his brothers, he says he wants to earn enough money to move back home to Sudan, find his missing family, marry and help rebuild the war-ravaged country. For now, Peter remains a homebody, struggling to make it day to day in Phoenix.

Jany, the center's outreach coordinator, shares Peter's ambitions, as do a great majority of their brothers, of helping to rebuild Sudan. These days, of course, the country faces a grave crisis in the western region of Darfur, where genocide at the hands of the notorious government-backed Janjaweed militias has created a new generation of physically and psychologically brutalized refugees. To date, the U.S. government has not formally resettled any of them here.

Jany points out that the prospect for peace darkened considerably on July 30, when longtime southern Sudanese rebel leader and newly elected Vice President John Garang died in a helicopter crash, plunging the country's fragile peace into an unknown future -- and hitting the Lost Boys community across America with a new wave of grief and fear. "It's a huge blow," Jany says. He adds that many Sudanese people don't believe Garang's death was an accident, and fears that the Sudanese regime is going to kill more of his community's leaders back home. "It's on everybody's mind," Jany says.

The plight of his fellow refugees in America also continues to weigh heavily on him. Jany, who plans to graduate next May from Arizona State University with a bachelor's degree in social work, says he loves his work counseling his brothers and helping them to find and keep jobs. But cultural differences, he acknowledges, continue to exacerbate the Lost Boys' problems. In Sudan, he says, young people don't trust police, who regularly kill civilians. "We were taught to fight our own battles," Jany says. So it's no surprise, he continues, that many Lost Boys in America are wary of police and governmental authorities.

Some Lost Boys also have had trouble adjusting to American sexual mores. Unfamiliar with America's system of dating, Jany says, the younger men sometimes mistake friendliness for sexual interest, and so being rejected by women can stoke feelings of frustration and alienation, and even lead to violence.

Eight years after his brother's death, Jany keeps his spirits up by immersing himself in his work at the center. He is also a marathon runner, which he calls his passion and "getaway thing" -- he has qualified for next year's Boston Marathon. He says he's so busy taking care of everyone else that he sometimes doesn't look after himself enough. Jany seldom has the energy to make it through his homework after a full day of school and work. He has suffered from anemia; he collapsed last January while running a marathon.

Last December, he fell asleep behind the wheel of his car. The car flipped over three times and was totaled, but luckily Jany managed to escape without a scratch. Lately, he says, his grades have started to slip and he sometimes feels dizzy -- yet, his own training aside, he says he isn't sure what else he should do. "I'm abusing myself," he says, smiling, when asked if he thinks he might suffer from PTSD.

Aydin Bal, a researcher and doctoral candidate at Arizona State University who has worked extensively with Arizona's Lost Boys, affirms that the upbeat image of this remarkable group of survivors is authentic. In

spite of a harrowing past, he says, they remain determined to fit in and succeed in America. "They have shown an enormous amount of resiliency," Bal says. "Of course they are not trying to find food or drinking water now," he says. "But they are still trying to find their past, their memory."

Unfortunately, support services for the Lost Boys are drying up. According to Wheat, if the Arizona center can't raise \$250,000 before a core grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services expires on Sept. 30, the doors will close. Several Lost Boys organizations in other U.S. cities are also strapped for funds. In 2002, the federal government's Office of Refugee Resettlement cut general mental health funding, previously about \$2.8 million per year, from its budget.

In the meantime, some Lost Boys in America who struggled the most with fear and grief reverted to the one way of escape they knew best. Earlier this year, a 23-year-old Lost Boy, diagnosed with schizophrenia and convinced that people wanted to kill him, disappeared from his home in Syracuse. By June, he'd wandered more than 2,100 miles to Mexico City. And then there was Abil, the Lost Boy who was shot and killed on the Arizona freeway. "After all the miles he walked in Africa to escape hell, he returned to walking," Wheat says. "I wonder where he was heading. I wonder if he knew."

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### About the writer

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