

SPOTLIGHT: John Manyiel

Guom (if you ask his father), Bay-sak (if you ask his mother), James (if you ask the officers at United States Immigration), and John (as he is best known to his family and friends in America) was born in 1978 in Juba, the regional capital of Southern Sudan. When John was born, Sudan was enjoying a brief period of peace. Five years prior to his birth, the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed, bringing the First Sudanese Civil War to a close after 17 years of north-south conflict.

The peace would not last, and fighting broke out again when John was only five years old. By that time, John and his family had moved to Wau, a southern Sudanese village on the bank of the Jur River, in West Bahr al Ghazal state. The situation in Wau deteriorated rapidly, as Sudan once more plunged into war which pitted the south against the north. Southern sympathizers, “rebels” from the Northerner’s perspective, began disappearing without a trace, though rumors spread of torture and murder. John’s father was one of those casualties, last seen by his then 7-year-old son going out for a bicycle ride.

By 1987, Wau had become too dangerous, so John and his family picked-up and moved north to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan and a different world from that to which John had become accustomed. In Khartoum, Islamic culture prevailed, and people spoke in a tongue John had never heard before...Arabic. Despite not understanding the language, John enrolled himself in school where he was the only non-Arabic speaking, the only southerner, the only Christian, in his class of 50. Notwithstanding the odds, by fifth grade, John had emerged as one of the top students at his grade-

level, reading and writing in Arabic so fluently that his teacher once accused him of having an adult do his homework for him!

John graduated from high school in Khartoum in 1996 and was accepted into university, to begin in 1997. The Sudanese Army, though, had different plans for John and other young boys his age. Instead of receiving his diploma, John was taken to a desert training camp where he was subjected to the propaganda of the military, planning jihadist warfare against John’s native south. Fearing for his safety, John escaped from the army camp and spent two months in hiding at home in Khartoum compiling exit papers which would allow him to leave the country.



Thanks in part to his brother in Australia who bought his plane ticket and a sympathetic guard at Khartoum International Airport who took pity on a young man traveling alone and passed him through the security check-point, John left Sudan for Cairo, Egypt where he would live for the next three years. In that period, John supported himself by working odd jobs and, in the hopes of eventually convincing the United Nations to grant him refugee status, began to teach himself English. His hard work paid off when, in 1999, the United Nations, together with the United States Department of Homeland Security (after a successful interview with Maryanne, the Homeland Security officer who approved John’s application) offered him the opportunity to move to America.

On March 26th, 2000 a flight left from Cairo for New York City, and John was on it! He would eventually make it to Nashville, Tennessee where he was reunited with a sister who had also made it out of Sudan and arrived in America six months prior. After working for several months, John enrolled in a two-year technical school, which only reawoke his desire to obtain the university degree he would surely have received had not the Sudanese Army withheld his high school diploma back in Khartoum in 1996, preventing him from continuing his education. And, so, after graduating from technical school, John moved to Boston where he enrolled at the University of Massachusetts Boston to pursue his bachelors degree. As if a full-time course load were not enough, John also served as the Coordinator of the Sudanese Education Funds’ technology program from 2006 to the present. But, the combination of work and school was not too much for John... he graduated this spring with a degree in economics.

CONGRATULATIONS TO JOHN AND TO HIS BEAUTIFUL FAMILY!