

Spotlight on Alier Thon

When Alier received the letter from United States Homeland Security informing him that he had been approved for relocation to America, he made a promise to his parents. “I will come back one day,” he said. “To be with my family.”



Twenty one years after leaving his birth place of Bor in Southern Sudan, Alier made good on that promise, traveling from his new home in Massachusetts back to homes of his past. In Kakuma refugee camp in northern Kenya, Alier was reunited with his mother and four younger siblings. Traveling through Southern Sudan, Alier met with family members as if for the first time; so many years had passed that some didn't recognize him. But, the trip home afforded Alier the unique opportunity to both remember his past and celebrate all of his more recently accomplishments.

Born in 1978, Alier's earliest memories are of lending a hand in the “family business:” taking care of the cattle, goats, and sheep and helping his father harvest the maize and corn that his mother would then prepare for the family to eat. Life in Alier's village was peaceful, even well into the mid-1980s when other areas of Southern Sudan began to feel the affects of the civil war which had broken out in 1983. In fact, news of the war had failed even to reach the residents of Bor, until one day in 1987, a surprise attack caught Alier's family and neighbors by surprise. Alier remembers hearing a loud “BOOM” at around 4am one morning, from a camp where he was tending his herd, roughly an hour's walk from his village. He could see the burning houses, soon to be remains of his home, from his post in the distance, and so began to run with the other boys his age, tending their own family's cattle in the fields as was he.

And so, Alier came to be one of the “Lost Boys” who survived the walk through Southern Sudan to Ethiopia. Being amongst the first to arrive safely, Alier beat even the United Nations (UN), which was not yet prepared to accommodate the influx of Sudanese refugees crossing the border. So, for the first several months in Ethiopia, Alier slept under the trees until the UN was able to get Pinydo Refugee camp, Alier's home for the next four years, up and running.

But, Pinydo proved a temporary safe haven, as Khartoum in the early 1991s instructed militia groups to ignore state borders and target Sudanese living in Ethiopia. Alier and others were forced to flee again, walking through war-torn southern Sudan, to Kenya where, again, Alier found... nothing. In August 1992, what is now thriving Kakuma was a camp equipped only to meet the basic needs of new residents. As he had in Pinydo before, Alier watched over the years as life in Kakuma sprouted up around him. Schools were built, and it was there that Alier received the education to which he credits his ability to secure employment quickly (14 days to be exact!) upon eventual arrival in the United States.

And, that day came in 2001 and brought with it a new set of challenges. Alier, pushing himself to take advantage of new opportunities kept a grueling schedule: Red Cross training classes to become a medical assistant began at 8am and continued until 4pm, at which point Alier would go to English as a Second Language classes from 6pm to 8pm, all before beginning his full-time job working the night shift at Kmart which kept him awake until 7am the next morning. Talk about workaholic! By 2002, Alier had received his medical assistant certification and began work at Brigham and Woman's hospital, all the while attending night classes, first at Bunker Hill Community College and then transferring to Salem State where he majored in Social Work. As of this past May, Alier is a college graduate working as a patient counselor who aspires to one

day obtain his Masters of Social Work. No doubt that, if he put his mind to it, Alier will accomplish his goals.

Best of luck, Alier, and heart felt congratulations!