

Tutor becomes lifelong friend

By Alexis Blue
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When UA law student Laura Conover became a volunteer tutor for the Lost Boys of Sudan in 2001, she simply wanted to help them adjust to their new lives in America. But three years later, Conover says she's learned more from them than they have from her.

In summer 2001, Conover, then a Spanish and political science major, was preparing to enter her senior year at the UA when she decided she wanted to volunteer with the Sudanese refugees who had moved to Tucson that year.

Conover said she was overwhelmed by coverage of Sudan's civil war and the Lost Boys in the Arizona Daily Star, and decided she wanted to help the Lost Boys in Tucson by teaching them to ride bikes.

"I had a real desire to try to help," Conover said. "I didn't know how much my life would change."

With the assistance of former UA Honors College adviser Mari Helne, who was volunteering with the Lost Boys at the time, Conover was introduced to some of the refugees and became the first UA student they met.

"We start to introduce ourselves and they're very excited that I'm a Wildcat, that I'm a real UA student," Conover said.

But when Conover, in a room with 17 refugees, announced her idea to give lessons in bike-riding, she said the response was not what she expected.

"There's a long pause and (one of them) says, 'We already ride bikes. You are a U of A student, yeah? ... We need to pass the GED and become college students immediately. You will do that.'"

Conover said, impressed by their confidence, she agreed on the spot to become their tutor.

After recruiting two of her friends to help, Conover began holding regular Sunday tutoring sessions that focused mainly on reading and writing English, and continued in some form for the next three years.

"She was the first girl we met," said Jok Mabior, a nursing junior who started at the UA in the fall. "She has been really good for us. When we were going to Pima full-time we had a really hard time, but she made it easier, coming every Sunday and helping us."

Peter Ayuen, a political science junior in his first year at the UA, said meeting Conover in 2001 made him realize it wasn't too late to go to college.

"What I said was, 'Wow, I am 22 years old and I didn't even pass through high

Continued on opposite page >

The struggle to survive

Continued from page 13

country as refugees. By August 1992, only 16,000 remained alive, Khoor said.

"Everyone has a tragic experience, and everyone has their own stories," John said.

The animals were the biggest threat at night.

"During the night we lost a lot of people coming from Ethiopia to Sudan," Daniel said.

Practically anything walking, anything crawling, posed a threat, said Abraham Deng Ater, 25, physiology and pharmacy junior.

"You didn't know how you were going to survive," Abraham said.

To avoid starvation, they searched for leaves and berries. When those ran out, they tried trees.

The situation did not improve

once they reached the refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya, in 1992.

There, they were given corn, two handfuls of beans and sometimes wheat flour

every two weeks, Daniel said. Abraham estimated they received a total of two pounds of food every two weeks.

They had to make it last, so even though the United Nations was providing food, the boys still went days without eating.

"There was not enough food," Abraham said.

Dinkas are known to be the tallest culture in the world.

Dinka basketball player Manute Bol, who played in the NBA in the '80s and '90s, was 7-foot-7, and Abraham said the Lost Boys knew taller men in Africa.

The physical challenge of survival took a toll on the boys.

"We grew very skinny, (but) still grew tall, from nature," Abraham said.

He is 6-foot-3 and said if he and the other boys hadn't been refugees, they would have been bigger and taller.

The men in Tucson range from 5-foot-4 to 6-foot-6. Abraham said among Dinka, he is of average height.

Besides underdevelopment, they had to struggle against their own wills.

"I wanted to die. I felt useless," Khoor said.

He said he felt like there was nothing he could do to help himself or others, and that he tried to die during the long treks.

"I waited to die but I couldn't," Khoor said.

Once, when they tried to stop for a rest, the boys were attacked by people from a nearby village.

In that attack, 12 boys were killed, which Khoor said was a low number.

"That was a good thing — very few died of 16,000," Khoor said.

After walking from Sudan to Ethiopia and back, the boys walked along the southern border of Sudan until they got to Kakuma, Kenya.

They stayed in Kenya from 1992 to 2001, where they went to school, played basketball and lived together in the clay homes they built themselves.

— Religion —

Khoor said he was confused about the conditions they faced, as boys kept dying and British missionaries tried to introduce religion into the boys' lives.

"Sometimes I think, 'If there is a God, why did he let this happen?' To punish a child who has not done anything is not good," Khoor said.

When the boys reached Ethiopia, missionaries took care of them. Most of the Lost Boys were baptized there and chose their Christian names.

John said he wanted to follow in the footsteps of the disciple John, so he adopted his name.

"He's the only one that wrote the theme of the Bible," John said, "that God so loved the world, God loved all mankind."

Khoor said he waited longer to accept God. He wanted to make sure he could believe in such a thing before being baptized.

Khoor left Sudan in 1987 when he was nine, and became Christian in 1992.

Most of the other Lost Boys converted in 1988 and 1989.

"I became Christian last because I was looking for the



Daniel Keetch, a pre-business sophomore, washes a bowl at his house near North Park Avenue and East Prince Road. Five Lost Boys live in the house.

God," Khoor said.

Khoor was in Pochalla, Sudan, on the journey between Ethiopia and Kenya when that search ended.

He was fishing in a river when a lion walked by. When the lion didn't attack him, Khoor, whose name means "lion," said he thought it was God who had protected him.

Missionaries arrived in Sudan in 1905, and by 1991 most of the Dinka tribe was baptized, Abraham said.

It took a while because the Dinkas didn't trust the missionaries at first.

"When the missionaries came to Sudan, they acted like traitors — they would take a child and never come back," Abraham said.

"That's what missionaries did. Some were Christian and they really want people to know the word of God, (but) some were not."

When Abraham met the missionaries in Ethiopia he said he was ready to convert.

"Oh yeah, I was happy — that's what I was looking for," he said.

Many of the Lost Boys in Tucson go to an Evangelical church, Grace St. Paul's, near campus every Sunday.

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