



Finding Their Way: 'God Grew Tired of Us' tells the stories of young Sudanese refugees who came to the U.S. after escaping brutality in their homeland

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John Dau doesn't mind being called a "Lost Boy," even though he is no longer either. Dau is 33, recently married (to a "Lost Girl") and a new father living in Syracuse, N.Y. He is, literally and figuratively, thousands of miles from the chaos of his youth in Sudan.

"My organization is American Care for Sudan Foundation. We have raised \$170,000 already for the Duk County Lost Boys Clinic. We are sending seven volunteer Americans to Sudan next month to start building," said Dau, who is also the director of the nonprofit Direct Change's Sudan Project.

"His is an impressive story, an immigrant's tale: coming to the U.S., working three jobs, saving as much money as you can, helping others," said Christopher Quinn, director of the documentary "God Grew Tired of Us," which opens next Friday and follows Dau and other Lost Boys from Sudan as they make their way from refugee camps to America. "He's an amazing human being. It's been incredible spending the last five years with him," Quinn said.

That's quite an evolution from the 13-year-old boy who fled his village in the middle of the night as Arab militias attacked.

"I was lucky, I got out," said Dau. "I saw somebody running and thought it was my father. We ran that night through the water, the mud. When we saw militia, we ducked in the grass until they passed and then ran until daybreak. Then I realized it was somebody else, not my father; my neighbor."

Thus began Dau's journey as part of a generation to come of age without families and under siege. They fled on foot to Ethiopia and later to Kenya, without food, extra clothing or shelter. More than 20,000 children walked about 1,000 miles, half of their number dying along the way before the survivors found safety in a U.N. refugee camp.

"God Grew Tired of Us," which won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at last year's Sundance Film Festival, follows three of the 3,800 Lost Boys lucky enough to gain passage to America, including Dau. The film details their adjustment to a new culture while they keep one eye on Sudan, looking for relatives.

Quinn said one audience member had "expected to get a talking to about Sudan, but they came away with an appreciation for what's really important in life -- and they were struck by what they learned about

America too.”

The documentary doesn't dwell on the Lost Boys' epic walk or the savagery of the militia attacks, but those events unquestionably shaped Dau.

“There was nothing to eat,” he said of the exodus to Ethiopia. “We'd chew some grass so we could stay alive. Sometimes there was no water, so some of us would eat mud; others would drink human urine. I'd rather forget that life.”

The refugees formed improvised families, with older boys such as Dau taking leadership roles. But even in the Ethiopian camp, starvation and epidemics forced grim duties on them as their younger charges died in large numbers.

“We had to take them to the cemetery, but there were no tools to dig deep,” he said. “By the time we came back the next day, we found they were eaten by hyenas and other animals. But there was nothing else we could do.” A 1991 coup forced the Lost Boys to flee once again, but as they headed for the border, Dau said they were fired upon by the new government's troops. The survivors eventually reached the U.N. refugee camp in Kakuma, Kenya, where they lived for several years. It was there that Quinn and his crew found the film's subjects: boys granted the chance by the International Rescue Committee to start anew in America.

“John actually appealed to us, to help get his friends who he'd be leaving behind, to go to the U.S.,” said Quinn of meeting Dau in 2001, “so we knew he was a pretty special person.”

After running out of funds for the film, Quinn showed a rough cut to some friends, actors Catherine Keener and Dermot Mulroney, who along with TV writer Eric Gilliland were able to bring Brad Pitt into the fold. With the four producing and Nicole Kidman narrating, the documentary was completed.

“A woman who saw the film at Sundance said she went back to her hometown in Utah and found that [refugee] Somalis were living there,” said Quinn. “She got 50 volunteers organized and has been helping them with tutoring and day care. We had a viewing in a high school and the kids had a bake sale and raised money; they raised \$1,000 for the Lost Boys clinic.”

Dau believes the economic power of ordinary citizens and the political and military leadership of the United States can force the Sudanese government to honor the current peace accord. It's a message he travels to his new country to spread as the leader he has become.

“If the world lets us down, I don't know if I could bother myself to say there is an international community,” he said. “I don't know if I would want to live on Earth.”

“Help us. Please. You are our only hope. Even if the U.S. don't want to fight, this is the war you should fight. We are helpless.”