



**He Escaped Sudan, But Not the Tug of A Heavy Heart**  
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What debt does a man owe his past? Do survivors have an obligation to the dead?

As a boy, John Bul Dau ate mud, drank urine and swam rivers to outrun the men with the guns. He survived a 1,000-mile trek from his village in southern Sudan to refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. He dug shallow graves to bury children who collapsed. The next day, a hand or foot would be stretching out of the earth, gnawed by hyenas.

As a man, John Dau is a 34-year-old security guard and college student in Syracuse, N.Y. He's recently married, a brand-new father and a citizen of a strange country called the United States.

But Dau, the subject of the National Geographic documentary "God Grew Tired of Us," which opened in Washington yesterday, is using his life here to try to improve the lot of people back home. Life in its fullest sense, he says, is something in which connections remain, over the years, over the oceans.

"I'm getting into the 'my my my' and 'I I I' thing here. But I need to stay in my culture, to be able to say, 'This is ours.' I want to combine the 'I' and the 'us.'"

It's that sense of the language, and rumination on what this life means, that makes Dau the unlikely star of an unlikely hit -- an 85-minute film about a few of the young Sudanese refugees who fled the government extermination of their ethnic kin in the late 1980s. (The title stems from a haunting soliloquy Dau has in the film.)

He's talking in a small office in the National Geographic headquarters in downtown Washington, soft of voice, shy of manner. He's wearing a leather jacket and a Disney "Cars" watch. He is 6 feet 8 inches tall. Last week, *Variety* reported that at the Hollywood premiere of the film, you could pretty much walk up to producer Brad Pitt and chat as long as you wanted. Dau? Forget it. The man was mobbed.

More than a decade ago, Dau and the 25,000 or so of his young compatriots were dubbed, in someone's idea of a fundraising gimmick for aid organizations, the "lost boys" of Sudan, a moniker that has more to do with Peter Pan and Western imagery than it does a brutal conflict bordering the Horn of Africa. But it was effective at highlighting the plight of thousands of young men who, once in a sprawling refugee camp in northern Kenya, couldn't go home again.

"Their suffering, even on a refugee scale, was as acute as humanly possible," says John Prendergast, senior adviser at the International Crisis Group, who has been going into Sudan for 20 years. "The extremities of

violence and horror they had to endure, alone, without their families, just set them apart.”

After nine years in limbo, a few thousand young men were granted asylum in the United States.

Dau, a natural leader, was one of those chosen, and the film follows his 2001 journey, along with that of two others, into the complications of life in a place with grocery stores, swimming pools, indoor plumbing and confounding realities.

“We came with maybe the wrong perception of America. People thought it was so easy here. You’d tie a green card around your neck and you could go to any restaurant and eat,” he says.

He became the focus of the film by happenstance. There was a message board in the refugee camp -- this was a place of 80,000 people -- to which people would stampede to see who had been granted immigration acceptance.

Film director Christopher Quinn: “We were standing there at the name board, and John had already been chosen. He came up to me and asked, ‘What happens to my friends left in the camp?’ “

So even as Dau landed in America, with one inglorious job after another -- factory worker, burger flipper -- he sent money back to the refugees. He also helped create a tiny nonprofit at a local church, the American Care for Sudan Foundation ([www.acsudanfoundation.org](http://www.acsudanfoundation.org)). It’s all volunteer, with 100 percent of the proceeds going toward building a hospital clinic in his home region.

He’s just starting work at a new nonprofit, Direct Change ([www.directchange.org](http://www.directchange.org)), that is trying to push the clinic funding from its current \$180,000 level to its \$230,000 goal. They’re scheduled to start construction next week.

“I’m really looking forward to that,” he says. “Our women have never given birth in a hospital before.”

What does a man owe his past?

John Dau, day by day in America, is finding out.