

**Refugee Interview
John Thon Majok**

Where were you born?

I was born in Baping Village, Jonglei State, Southern Sudan

What name were you born with?

Thon Majok Deng

How old were you when you left your country?

I was about seven years old

What was your occupation or line of work in Sudan?

Looking after calves, goats, and toddlers

What were your reasons for leaving Sudan?

I left because of the civil war, which killed 2 million and displaced more than 4 million people.

What country did you travel to America from and in what year?

I came to America as a refugee from Kenya in June 2001

When you left, were you forced to leave anyone behind?

Yes – mother, sister, friends.

What type of transportation did you take on your journey?

From Sudan to Ethiopia and to Kenya, I walked on foot. From Kenya to America, I took the plane.

Why did you choose to come to the United States?

It was not my choice; it was the choice of the United Nations and the U.S.

How did you finally end up in Arizona?

I was taken to Arizona by the International Rescue Committee (IRC)

How did you learn to speak English?

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I went to school and learned it in class. (refugee camp schools in Ethiopia and Kenya-taught by Episcopalian missionaries)

What is your life like now that you live in the United States?

Though I am a foreigner, my life is similar to that of the Americans. Compared to life in the refugee camps, it is better here.

What type of jobs, or work have you had since coming to the United States?

Skilled and professional jobs. (First job at Target, then after hearing his Pima graduating speech in the TCC John was offered a job with

What is your favorite memory of the United States?

My graduation from the University of Arizona – 2006 (*valedictorian of Pima graduating class 2004, outstanding Senior in the Eller School of Business – 2006*) and wedding days. (*April 2007 – John returned to the refugee camp in Kenya to marry the girl who has waited for him for six years – Yom*)

Do you want to stay in the United States? Why or Why not?

Time will determine. If the situation that forced me to leave my country has improved, I may go back home. Otherwise, I will be here physically but working mentally to resolve the issues back home. There is no place like home and I have missed it.

I am so honored to be back here at Green Fields Country Day School tonight to introduce your graduation speaker, John Thon Majok, a young man whom I am proud to call son. He came into our lives almost six years ago in June of 2001...almost accidentally. So many of the great moments in life are serendipitous. My son Jonathan and I took the place of volunteers from Grace Episcopal Church who had offered to help drive a group of newly arrived refugees – Lost Boys of Sudan - to classes to help them make the transition from refugee camp to apartment living in Tucson.. I'm a librarian, I'm a news junkie – but I am ashamed to say I had never heard of the Lost Boys of Sudan until I got that phone call.

The heart connection to John was instant. He was the spokesman for the group, a natural leader. I learned later that his father had been a chief. Of course.

During those first weeks I also learned the horrifying story of the Lost Boys of Sudan – about the 20 year civil war which had claimed more than 2 million lives – I learned about John's village being burned to the ground as he watched from bushes outside the village – he was six years old. I learned about the 1,000 mile journey that he and other boys made – barefooted to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. They were there for 3 years before the guns came again in the night and drove them into a flooding river. More died – drowning, crocodiles. The survivors walked over the mountains, ate mud, miraculously survived – arrived in Kenya as walking skeletons. Every refugee in those

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camps has horror stories, but somehow the story of these young men touched everyone. They were called the Lost Boys. Their story even touched Washington and a special program was begun to bring these boys to the United States. John learned in Kakuma Refugee camp that he was selected to go to Tucson, Arizona – just a few months shy of his high school graduation.

He arrived at 11:59 pm on June 5th. after making a 36 hour flight from Kenya to Brussels to Tucson. There are many stories to tell about John's first months and years in the U.S., but I remember most the moment when I first got a glimpse of his amazing determination, optimism, and strength. We were in his apartment and I told him we needed to make a list of all that he and his roommates needed – dishes, clothing, bedding, book shelves...I wanted their shoe sizes – I had the idea that I would publish the list in the Green Fields newsletter and start gathering donations. He reached over and stopped me from writing my list. He said, Mom, I don't need stuff. What I need is to go to school. I'm here for an education. Help me get into school. My advice to him was that it was too late to get into Pima that semester, that he should give himself a few months to settle into his new job at Target, his new life. But John didn't listen to me. He found a way.

Two months after his arrival in the United States, John earned his G.E.D. and was admitted into the Honors Program at Pima Community College.

That fall John made his first memorable visit to Green Fields Country Day School. The Junior Class was planning Issue Day and the topic they chose was Human Rights. I was their Advisor and we were brainstorming ideas for speakers. I told them the story of John Majok and suggested he might be a good speaker for one of the workshops. After meeting with him the class invited him to be the keynote speaker. I was worried about how he would do talking to such a large group. But he was awesome. All of us that were in that CPA that day remember the profound impact his words and his story had. Especially on this class of 2007 who were mere 7th graders at the time. When they learned that John had only one year to pay back the U.S. government for his plane fare and his immunizations, they had a bake sale. They ultimately earned \$700.00 which they presented to him at a special assembly. That they remembered John six years later, that they have asked him to return tonight to be their graduation speaker, is a testimony to the humanity and the great heart of this group of young people, the amazing class of 2007.

John's odyssey since that first visit to Green Fields has been inspiring to all who have witnessed it. He has a long list of awards and honors, but the highlights: He was the Valedictorian of the Pima Community College Class of 2003 and a Congressional intern for Rep. Jim Kolbe in Washington D.C. I was the proudest mom in the world while I watched him receive the Outstanding Senior Award from the Eller College of Business and Public Administration & Policy in McKale Center on May 13th, 2005.

After graduating with such distinction – and by the way working 30 hours a week all through college - John postponed his plans for law school to go to Washington D.C. to work as a program associate at the Academy for Educational Development. For the last year has been helping to manage a program that is enabling educated Sudanese to return home to assist in the reconstruction and development of Southern Sudan. Two months ago, For the first time in six years John was able to return to Kenya – to visit his mother, sister, and new niece and to get married to beautiful Yom Thon Majok

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He has been traveling for the last three days - from Nairobi to Washington D.C. to Tucson late last night. He was determined to be here tonight to honor this class of 2007 who did so much to help him and who believed in him during his first months in the United States.

It is my great honor to present to you – John Thon Majok.