

Who tells your story?

My name is Abok Ajong and my birthday is December 24th, 1970. I grew up in Sudan. My childhood was good over there. We lived together with my family, friends, cousins, and niece. In my family, we had 15 people. My dad had 6 wives, so we stayed in this area with all the families. 5 families were bringing 5 different foods, so we shared our meals, ate, and drank tea together. I was good at school and I enjoyed going. Outside of school, the community was good because you couldn't raise your kids like here in the United States, where it's just me and my husband. Everybody could raise you in Sudan. The neighbors and the family were around you. When you do something bad, the people in the community ask you "Why did you do this?" They know your mom and your family and everyone can take care of you and help you grow up.

Growing up I played volleyball. I was good at it, and I liked playing, but I didn't play on a team, only at school. The weather in Sudan was always like spring. It was raining all the time, and in the winter it was 100 degrees. Every day in the morning when you were a teenager you would help your family when you came home from school. If you didn't have school you would clean the house, wash the clothes, wash dishes, make the house clean and cook food for the family.

Typical things you would see in Sudan were frogs and snakes. We saw frogs all the time. Moments in Sudan that made me smile were when we had someplace to cook the food. We cooked the food outside and the rain would come, then we cooked

the food in the rain. We didn't have a stove, so we cooked with wood. Then the wood would die and we would all laugh. Then the food wasn't ready. That is what made me smile all the time.



In my family, we had 15 people because my dad had 6 wives out of everyone. My favorite person to play with was my nephew. His name is Alew. Something we did together was racing because I took care of him. My dad's name is Akol Unguec Ajong and my mom's name is Akor Achian Yor. Something I learned from my parents was you have to love your sister and brother and respect the people older than you and younger than you. I also learned you need to be patient, work hard and love everybody like yourself. My Mom was very nice. She loved everybody and everybody

loved her. She stayed with a lot of families in Khartoum. Our house was very big. There were a lot of people who stayed with us. Our uncle's kids, my sister's kids, and my auntie's kids. Something I liked about them was that I could do a lot of things with them, and I could stay with them to support them. I can still support my family now. I have my auntie and my mom's sister. I talk to her and I send money to her. I support her and my uncle too.

I was with both my mom and my dad at the hospital when they passed. When my mom died, she told me, "Abok, I love you, and hopefully you can get married." At that time she blessed me. When my parents died I was sad. I cried, I cried and I cried. I beat myself on the floor.

A couple of years before moving to America, I met my husband because we were neighbors. In Africa, you can't just marry anybody. They have to be a good person and they need a good family. The process of getting married is when you want to get married you can love the guy and you can talk about when you want to get married. You need to tell your parents that you want to marry this person, then the families meet each other and they talk about payment. In Sudan you pay with a cow, you can't get married for free. My husband paid 150 cows because I was tall. From the wedding, I remember people dancing. We had a big hall with people sitting down and people eating, then afterward we celebrated at the church. After we celebrated again we ate chicken, rice and a lot of food.

The country we were in was Syria when we got married. At the time I had my first child, Ashok. When Ashok was born no one was there, just me and my husband and my friend. I struggled a lot

because at the time I didn't know how to hold a baby. I was happy and sad at the same time because she was born early, and the doctor told me to not be close to the baby because she hadn't finished growing. I was scared when people would visit me. I was scared of the people coming near the baby.

I knew it was the right thing to come to America because we were refugees due to the war in Sudan that was going on for 20 years. The people are still fighting right now. Moving to America was tough because I could not see my family, but I still talked to them on FaceTime. It is easier than before because back then there weren't phones. Now we have phones so it is easier. We didn't struggle financially coming to America because we had people to provide for us. When we came we were refugees. We had an interview with the U.S. government. Our reason to come was that people were fighting for 20-30 years. We grew up with the people fighting.

For our departure, it wasn't normal. We came to America around April 2003. We came from Sudan to Syria to Los Angeles to New York for the United Nations. We had 3 days on the airplane. When you are a refugee you talk to them about your case and the reason why you want to come to America. The hardest part about all of this was when you come to America you have a case that you have to write down. They say, "Don't be a liar, you need to tell the truth." Every time they call you they ask you what happened to you. Why did you come? What happened? They knew what happened in Sudan. The people had been fighting for 25 years. We were struggling with no education and no hope. Even the kids die in Sudan; no food, no nothing. They knew that, and when we showed

them our case, they accepted it because the people from the North and South were fighting.

We didn't choose America, they chose for us. When we got the interview the lady told us to come to America because we had three people: my husband, my daughter, and Abok. America doesn't like taking a lot of people like big families, they like taking small families. Australia and Canada take big families, and the lady told us we could go to America because we were a small family.

When we came to America I was excited that it was safe. You live a better life, you have an education, and there are a lot of good things about America. America is not easy, not anyone can just come, but we came and that is good. When you come as a refugee you have been interviewed already, and the people connect with you and tell you to go to this place where refugees go. They take you to the airport, and you already have your own house. The people wait for you at the airport in the car and they bring you to your house. We were at Colfax and Josephine, that is the place we lived. We lived in a one-bedroom: Me, my husband, and Ashok. A lady was responsible for taking care of us. She made the food for us and gave us money.

At the time we came to America I had my daughter Ashok. She was 1 and a half. You would think it would be stressful having a child while moving to another country, but my daughter was good. She didn't cry. She was shy.

My hopes and dreams were that hopefully I would become a citizen and that I could support my family. I became a citizen in September 2017. When I first got my citizenship, I felt good

because I was truly American. My hopes and dreams now are for my kids to grow up in America and to learn and study to get a good education. I want to go back of course because all my family is back home. That's why in 2017 I went back to South Sudan to visit my family. I hadn't seen them in 25 years. It had been a long time. The kids who were born when I was living in Sudan are all grown up.

But I need to be with my family, and I don't have a choice. My kids are here. They need to learn and get a good education and get a better life. Of course, I dream of taking my kids back to Sudan when I get a chance. I will take all of my kids to see my family in Sudan. My family asks how my kids look and my auntie asks every day about them.

I think coming to America was a good thing. Something I've liked about America is it is safe and there are a lot of opportunities, and it is a good place to raise kids. I think we succeeded because we got a good job and because we did a lot of brave things. We got a better life and we got to go back to visit Sudan.

Something I learned is that life is not easy. You need to focus and you need to learn and you need to have patience. At first, I did not have any of those things. It took time, especially coming to America. This America is far away from our country. Life is different. We are struggling a little bit. We need to learn. But I am most proud of our kids because they do a good job and I love their behavior. I love the way they do well at school. The thing I'm proud of is my kids go to school and learn and they follow the rules.

story told by: Deng Edwang