

Honor the displaced on World Refugee Day



BARB GUY

The other night I went to a dinner party where there were four guests of honor, and, oddly, they all shared the same birthday. What are the chances?

The guests of honor - Augustino, Abraham, Aluel and Nyandeng - are all refugees from Sudan. Lynne McCue-Hamilton and Tom Hamilton hosted the back-yard dinner party, catered by Aluel, to give the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan, as they're called, an opportunity to tell their stories.

If you came from Sudan as these people did and settled in the United States as a refugee of the vicious fighting, the U.S. government assigned you the birth date of Jan. 1. There wasn't a wheel to spin, no chance to pick a number from 1 to 31, no imagination or poetry to it; just Jan. 1.

I sit writing this about two miles from the hospital where I was born. I have never had to go anywhere I did not want to go. These young people have faced things that most of us cannot imagine.

Augustino Mayai, one of the dinner-party guests, told how he became a wartime refugee. Homes were destroyed, men were murdered, women and girls were raped and abducted. Young boys were forced into the wilderness.

"There were many displaced people," Augustino said. They were on foot with no supplies. He said, "Your choice was be killed by animals or die of hunger." Somehow, Augustino survived. He ate tree roots, he drank stagnant water when he could find it.

After three months of walking with other lost boys, Augustino spent nine years in Kakuma, a Kenyan refugee camp. Many people would have lost faith. Augustino simply says, "I was given an opportunity by God."

Abraham Gai lost track of his family when he was 7. The war scattered them. His next conversation with his mother didn't come for 18 years. By then he was 25 and living in Utah. Abraham says, "I thought I

would never speak with her again. Being in the United States is a blessing. We have opportunities we never dreamed we would have." In January 2005 a peace agreement was signed in Sudan ending 22 years of bitter civil war. In February, Abraham went home to visit. He's there again right now, delivering donations and school supplies to his village.

"We want to be the last lost boys in the world," he says. "Maybe we can learn to avoid war."

Nyandeng Aleu was a teenager when the fighting uprooted her. For safety, she walked across her country with big groups of women and children. Of the women's ordeal she says, "We were only raped and abducted; our situation was not serious like the boys."

She tells of women giving birth on the ground and immediately taking up running again, "If the baby is alive you bring it; if not, you throw it and you run." They were running from vehicles, men with guns or knives, hungry wild animals and airplanes that dropped bombs.

Aluel Majok was a young married woman when the war swept in to change her life. Her husband was murdered and her house taken from her. She

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walked a thousand miles with her two sons and 3-month-old daughter. When she got to the refugee camp, she signed on to cook. Now, Aluel caters parties, cooks African meals at Salt Lake City's farmers' market, and is a single mother with a full-time job.

By chance, James Andersen was at the dinner. He's the principal of Horizonte, where many refugees attend school. When Abraham was introduced to James, Abraham, said, "Oh, yes, I know who you are - look at this." He held out his cell phone and on its small screen was a photograph. To James' amazement, the picture showed James conferring a high school diploma on a beaming Abraham.

June 20 is World Refugee Day. It's a day to think of those who were forced to flee their homes in terror. It's a day for us to honor people whose circumstances were so desperate we can't even comprehend them. Most of us have no frame of reference for what a refugee has seen.

Most of us have not had armed thugs come to the door, push us into the front yard, kill and rape family members and send a sole surviving boy of 7 screaming into the wilderness to be confronted by crocodiles and lions, but it's a story that binds Augustino, Aluel, Abraham and Nyandeng together, much more than their shared artificial

birthday.

Sudan is a huge country, about the size of Western Europe. The war that changed everything for my four new friends began in 1983. The Muslim North attacked the Christian and Animist South. More than 2 million people were killed. Sudan's new war, in the Darfur region to the west, began in 2003. This war pits Arabs against black Africans. Somewhere between 180,000 and 400,000 people have died and 2 million more are displaced. So far.

Utah has about 120 lost boys of Sudan and a couple of lost girls, as well as refugees from dozens of other horrible conflicts, up to 50,000 people in all. Some of them had never seen an electrical outlet or telephone in their lives. Now they fend for themselves in a mystifying place.

Maybe we can contribute an old table or a jacket or a check to one of the many agencies that help those who come here with nothing. The least we can do is observe World Refugee Day. We can welcome them here and stand in awe at their plight.

Barb Guy is a frequent contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.