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This volunteer has done 13 missions with Operation Smile.
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Conor Mckenzie is the new Mr. Teen Dance America. **Page 4**



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Sudanese refugee works to build school



PHOTOS BY JEFF SINER - jsiner@charlotteobserver.com

James Lubo Mijak fills bowls with cooked pinto beans prior to a lunch with guests at Bragg Financial Advisors Inc. Mijak was one of the Lost Boys of Sudan, thousands of kids orphaned in fighting there.

James Lubo Mijak fled Sudan's civil war; he hopes to help those left behind.

BY GREG LACOUR
Special Correspondent

James Lubo Mijak wants more than anything to collect what he's gathered and take it home.

It's not just money or materials.

It's what Mijak has learned from his college degree; the support of friends; a fresh understanding of the forces that ejected him from his home in Sudan as a boy; and the titanic challenge he and others like him face to rebuild what's been demolished over decades.

Mijak is one of the famed Lost Boys of Sudan, about 30,000 young refugees from the northeast African country who fled their villages and cattle farms during the 21-year Second Sudanese Civil War, which left nearly 2 million dead before a peace agreement ended it in 2005.

Of the 30,000 Lost Boys, about 3,800 settled in North America, about 100 in the Carolinas. Mijak, who ran for his life from his home in southern Sudan in 1987, ended up in Charlotte, where he earned



Phillips Bragg serves the bowls of cooked pinto beans and traditional bread, called dabo, to guests lunching with James Lubo Mijak.

an international studies degree from UNC Charlotte in 2008. He's now working two part-time jobs and living in an apartment off Central Avenue.

But he wants to go back.

At 31, he has a plan: Raise enough money to build a primary school in his home village of Nyarweng. He's working with a fellow Lost Boy in Atlanta who wants to

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build a school for his village and with Charlotte-based nonprofit Mothering Across Continents. They call the project "Raising Sudan."

"Everyone there has the hope of going to school," Mijak said recently during a lunch hosted by Phillips Bragg, a Charlotte financial adviser and mentor to Mijak through St. John's Baptist Church; Bragg is one of Mijak's employers.

The school seems a modest goal at a reasonable price, about \$150,000. It would pay for a spare but solidly constructed building for 300 students, with four classrooms, eight latrines, a water source, office space and teacher training. Mijak and Mothering Across Continents have raised about \$38,000.

But it would be by far the most expensive and developed institution in the village. Years

of war have stripped southern Sudan of nearly all of its supporting infrastructure, things as basic as crops, farms, sources of clean water, roads, basic communication. The literacy rate is roughly 10 percent. When Mijak returned home for a visit in 2007, he taught children under trees.

All of this presages the region's potential independence next year. As part of the peace agreement, the Sudanese national government – dominated by the Muslims of Arabic descent who populate the north – agreed to treat the south as an autonomous region for six years. In January, southern Sudanese will vote whether the region should secede.

Many expect the southern Sudanese will choose secession. But that would leave a destitute nation with little ability to sustain itself.

"If southern Sudan became a country tomorrow, it'd be the poorest country on earth," said

Patricia Shafer, Mothering Across Continents' director, or "chief catalyst." "But in that environment, one or two or three schools can make a tremendous difference."

They can serve as anchors to attract small businesses and health clinics, and perhaps inspire other Lost Boys and young people in southern Sudan to undertake similar projects, Shafer said. That's another reason Mijak and the organization want to have the school built next year, not just for southern Sudanese independence but to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Lost Boys' journey to North America.

So the organization and Mijak are beginning a series of presentations to receptive churches and organizations around town. Their lunch at Bragg's office July 15 was a kind of formal presentation: the food they served is what Mijak came to call "Rations of Hope," the daily allotment at the Unit-

ed Nations' Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, where Mijak and other Lost Boys stayed for years before they left for America. It was a ladleful of beans and dabo, a kind of fried bread.

In the Kakuma camp, "the one thing we asked the U.N. for was to give us education," Mijak said. "That kept our hope alive in the camp."

It does still.

"I believe if we can educate these young children in southern Sudan, they will learn how to settle the dispute," he said. And by telling people in Charlotte about "Raising Sudan," "when they leave, they can tell their friends and their churches, and they can invite us there to tell our story."

Questions?

For more information about the "Raising Sudan" project, go online to www.motheringacrosscontinents.org.