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Basketball Floor Offers a Life Beyond War

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It's been almost 17 years since he's seen his mother, John Toor, 23, says. He's sitting in the stands at Charles R. Rugg Arena on the Belhaven College campus during a break in basketball practice. But his mind is in Sudan, Africa's largest country, where what's left of his family - those who have not been killed in a genocidal civil war - remains.

He talked to her on the telephone.

"Mama," he said, "I want to come home."

"No," she said. "You finish school first."

"But Mama, I need to see you."

"No. Not now. Stay in school."

When he speaks of his mother, of his father who was killed, of two brothers who died in 1996 in separate skirmishes, a faraway veil slips over his face. He's a little boy again, running from war, living in refugee camps, taking cover in Ethiopia, returning home for two months, then racing for his life again, this time to Kenya.

For the young in Africa, sometimes the best that can be hoped for is a narrow escape, through desert and jungle, across rivers teeming with crocodiles, away from civil wars and genocide and hunger and AIDS and malaria. You can't think about tomorrow when it's so hard to hang on to today.

When you're running for your life, there's no room for school and basketball to squeeze their way into a boy's dreams.

Exodus

Tom Kelsey, beginning his second season as Belhaven's basketball coach, looks down to the court and sees No. 55 warming up, getting loose, and he smiles.

"He's a gift from God," Kelsey says, without the first hint of hyperbole in his voice.

It was spring 2005. He gets a call from an assistant coach at Mississippi State. You need a player? There's this guy down there ...

"We're all set, full," Kelsey told him. Still ...

"Then a week later Julie Mabus called about him. He was a refugee from Sudan. She'd seen him at church at St. Andrew's. I watched him work out at the YMCA on Fortification Street."

He was 6-feet-6 and as raw as a stalk of celery.

For the Lost Boys of the Sudan, who swam for their lives across the Gila River, working on their low post moves was not a priority.

There were, Mabus says, a former Mississippi first lady, 5,000 of them. In 2000, 67 of them came to Jackson.

They'd been caught in a war of attrition, racism, religious intolerance and economics - the Arabs of the North against the blacks, many of them Christian, in the oil-rich South.

"The war created an exodus of 20,000 young boys in 1987, as bombs were going off and the Arabs were annihilating villages," Mabus says. The idea was both comforting and chilling: To preserve the boys until they could mature into the South's army of the future. "Many died along the way" to Ethiopia, she says. "They traveled at night - the North was hunting them in the daytime - in a straight line, and you could hear the lions picking them off at the end of the line. For four years they trained and were educated at a military refugee camp."

Then the regime in Ethiopia fell "and the new government came down one night after them.

"They've been through so much," Mabus says. "All they want to do is go home and see family."

They didn't know who was alive back in the Sudan and who had evaporated into the mists of war.

They swam across a swollen river, some surviving the crocs, some not.

"They lived in the desert for a month and half," Mabus says. "They had nothing to eat. Finally, the Red Cross found them and took them to Kakuma, on the border of Sudan and Kenya."

For nine years they lived in the refugee camp. An English school was set up. The United Nations High Command for Refugees went about the business of finding the Lost Boys home countries, places without genocide, without crocs and lions, places with hope, where boys could be human beings again, where they could have futures.

Where, here, they could go to Bailey Magnet School in Jackson.

And where one, John Toor, could find a spot on Belhaven's basketball roster, where he could be No. 55, not a target for madmen half a world away.

A New World

"When the boys came in, in the custody of the state, our program provided the services," says Barbara Pigott, director of social services with Catholic Charities in Jackson. "Most all the boys see education as their priority and they worked to support themselves and live in the community."

"Despite the language barriers, they've all excelled. It's just remarkable. They are so appreciative of everything because of where they came from."

And because of what they've been through.

"Miss Julie helped us find tutors," Toor says. "Catholic Charities have been a big help. I like my classes. We have to study hard. I have good professors. I thank God I got to come to this school. The teachers and coaches have been good to me. Here, you can learn all you can. You can learn about God."

As a freshman at Belhaven last season, Toor saw spot duty in 21 games as the Blazers went 16-13 and enjoyed their most success in years.

"I've never seen a kid improve as much from one year to the next," Kelsey says. "He's so likeable, but he was so raw. He's as good a kid as you'll find."

"He's polite, hard working, the favorite of a lot of the guys," Kelsey says. "He works at St. Dominic (hospital, in radiology) on the weekends to make money to send back to his mom. For him to have success would do wonders for his confidence. It's heartwarming."

Mabus, seeing their courage, their steadfastness, their humbleness and their lack of bitterness, says, "These boys have changed my life. And Tom thinks John is magic." But many battles remain.

Blood still runs in the streets of Darfur as the U.N. and western powers struggle with the notion of sending troops into the genocidal maelstrom. John Garanga, the father of the southern independence movement, died in a helicopter accident, putting 2005's peace agreement at risk.

In the meantime, for John Toor, life is school and work, with basketball in the afternoons and deep dreams of home at night.

After graduation 21/2 years from now, "I try to go back and help people back there," he says, and to see the mother he aches for who he's not laid eyes on since he was 6.

"I pray to God," he says. "I pray for the people back there."

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