

From Sudan to Omaha: One Man's Journey Out of Hunger

BY ALIYA KARIM

September 19, 2017

Author's note: I first spoke with Gat on Facebook after he sent a message to World Food Program USA's page this summer to say thank you. I read his message and immediately knew I had to share his story.

Every day an average of [more than 1,000 children](#) are fleeing war in South Sudan, many arriving at the borders of Uganda, Ethiopia and Kenya on foot with nothing but the clothes on their backs.

For Gatluak Ramdiet, the ongoing crisis in [South Sudan](#) brings painful — and powerful — memories of his own childhood there 17 years ago, a decade before the world's youngest nation would even gain its independence.

The youngest of three boys, Gat lost his parents when he was just 8 or 9 years old after they left home one day to find food for the family — and never returned. Shortly thereafter, an attack on his village sent the entire community running in all directions. Gat fled with his two older brothers, walking on foot for almost a week, not knowing their final destination.

They followed their family friends and began walking toward Ethiopia.

“We found dead bodies on the ground,” he recalled when I reached him over the phone. “Somebody would just collapse from dehydration or hunger and get left behind.”

Gat and his brothers were among the fortunate ones who managed to survive. After days of walking, they reached Ethiopia's Dimma refugee camp, where for the first time in his life he says he experienced a sense of calm and safety.

"I wasn't constantly looking out for planes to bomb our village. I started becoming a kid again," Gat says. "That's where, for the first time in my life, I actually attended school without having to worry about working or trying to care for family."

When he arrived at the camp school, Gat was tested on his educational background — of which he had none — and then placed in first grade. He sat alongside other children and even adults who had never attended school, learning math, science, social science, history, language, art and more.

This is also when Gat first learned about the World Food Programme (WFP). While he and his brothers nourished their minds in the classroom, they relied on monthly rations from WFP — fortified cooking oil, corn or sorghum, salt, sometimes sugar and other essentials like soap — to nourish their bodies.

The three-person family took turns cooking rations, and once his brother got married, Gat's sister-in-law — "a much better cook than we were" — took over.

WFP also provided children like him with school meals of soup or porridge between morning and late afternoon classes to encourage attendance and enable students to focus in the classroom.

"Probably every kid's favorite meal was the meal they provided at school," Gat says now when asked about the food he ate in the camp.

Three years after arriving at the Dimma camp, Gat and his brothers began a long process of U.S. resettlement as part of the 20,000 [“Lost Boys of Sudan.”](#)

“Me and my brothers are probably the luckiest people in the world,” he says. “When we were told that we were coming here, it was the best news that we’d ever heard.”

Gat was resettled in Omaha, Nebraska in 2006. The transition was rough, especially since he didn’t know English very well. But other already resettled Sudanese and many Americans helped in whatever way they could – neighbors, teachers, a guidance counselor who wrote his recommendation letter to college and worried about him “like a mom.”

Gat tells me about Jacob Borgelt, the first American he and his brothers befriended. Since his senior year of high school, Jacob had felt passionate about helping newly resettled refugees adjust. He helped with their English, wrote letters on their behalf and served as a tour guide to quintessential American stops – the movie theater and the ice skating rink.

“We didn’t really understand each other, but he was determined to help us get into the community and know the community,” Gat explains. “He’s the best human being that I’ve ever met... and he would do this out of the goodness of his heart.”

Jacob, currently a missionary for Africa Inland Mission in South Sudan, saw the challenges faced by young people like Gat and simply wanted to give a helping hand.

“I care very deeply about Gat, his family, as well as many others,” he explains. “Because Jesus loves me, by God’s strength, I want to show his

love to others. I certainly don't do it perfectly all the time, but it is a joy to serve others."

In 2014, Gat returned to Africa... to meet his parents for the first time in 14 years. It turned out that they hadn't been very far — only in nearby villages to find food and work — when violence forced their three sons to run. They didn't know where their children were or if they were even alive.

"I remember my mom would never take her eyes off of me as if I was going to disappear a second time," he recalls. "Feeling parental love again was a strange feeling that we had long forgotten."

The reunion was filled with tears of joy. Today, his mama is in Ethiopia with his younger siblings — who are being supported and put through school by their big brothers — while his baba is back in their village, where the current climate and situation is very tense.

Gat is also celebrating the completion of his first year of law school — an experience he says was one of the most difficult things he's faced yet. He tells me that entering a classroom for the first time at the Dimma camp was the first stepping stone to get to this point. He decided to study law to make a difference.

"He is very bright and hardworking, and I have always had confidence that Gat would do well with whatever he put his mind to," Jacob says.

Especially now, with the current South Sudanese conflict, Gat wants to contribute and influence how decisions are made so others don't experience the horrors he did as a child.

"It gave me hope and showed me that I could do so much more with my life," he says about his education. "And for the first time, I knew that I had what it takes to be somebody."

What Gat shared with me over the phone resonated with me on so many levels – as a believer in justice, as a supporter of the work of WFP, as the daughter of immigrants from Bangladesh, as an American, as a person of faith, as a human.

In just one conversation, he put the world into perspective for me, articulating a universal human longing for community and connection that we can all relate to, especially in this age of social media. Because when we share our lives and experiences with one another, we see that we're not so different after all:

“Although people are thousands of miles away from each other, we are still connected and compelled by our moral obligations to one another, by all the things that bring tears to our eyes, our compassion for each other.

That’s why Americans care to donate to feed a child on the other side of the globe. It’s not because they can spend or they have so much money. It’s because of their humanity. Their humanity compels them to give that child a shot at life. Their humanity tells them to want that child to have a full belly when they go to bed.

We don’t turn people away when they’re suffering or when their kids are dying for whatever reason. If I wasn’t allowed to come to America, I would’ve never realized that I want to better the world somehow... I’m always going to be grateful to America because of the person I’ve become.

I know a lot of people contribute to the World Food Programme. I’m a product of that generosity.”