



A Lost Boy Finds His Calling

BY MELANIE JONES
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, WINROCK INTERNATIONAL

BORN IN THE SOUTHERN SUDANESE VILLAGE OF Gualla, Panther Alier was four years old when he lost both of his parents to disease, and was raised by his aunt until the civil war in Sudan separated them in 1987. Fleeing a massive attack staged on his village by the northern Sudanese army, Panther and hundreds of other children from his village traveled thousands of miles to Ethiopia, where they spent four years as refugees, caring for each other until war broke out in that country as well. He fled again, and, walking thousands more miles, reached northern Kenya in 1992. There, Panther became one of the first to be admitted to Kakuma, a United Nations refugee camp, where he would spend nine years under extremely harsh conditions.

In 2001, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, together with the United States government, made the decision to resettle 3,800 young Sudanese in the U.S., a group who would become known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. Panther arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, on March 8, where he enrolled in the University of Massachusetts, graduating *magna cum laude* with a bachelor's degree in political science. Now pursuing his master's in sustainable international development at Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management in Boston, Panther has joined Winrock International as an intern with the Enterprise and Agriculture group, where he is receiving practical experience in sustainable international development programs, particu-

"I think there is a collective responsibility in delivering change in the lives of people back home."

larly how they relate to Southern Sudan. "I believe in empowerment of small businesses as they are the backbones of any nation's economy," he says. "In my view, small business enterprise development is the most sustainable way of combating extreme poverty and, in a way, creates avenues for peace and stability in these impoverished areas."

This past September, Panther was finally able to return home to South Sudan, both to be reunited with the family he had not seen in decades, and to conduct an assessment of the diaspora situation in Juba. "When I landed at the airport in Juba, I kept reminding myself that I was now home. I was now standing on the land that brought me to light just over 30 years ago," he says. From there, Panther traveled to the



Panther is reunited with his brother, Mach Alier.

town of Bor, where he met up with his brother and cousin. "It was so emotional meeting the two," he says. "But not as emotional as meeting the whole family the next day." When he arrived, he found numerous relatives waiting along the roadside, and as Panther exited the car, sisters, brothers, cousins and others rushed toward him, praying and crying tears of joy as they welcomed home this long-lost son. "As such, I broke down in tears," says Panther. "I always thought I knew them through my memory, but everyone's look has changed. My sister and one brother look so sick."

Following the emotional reunion with his family, Panther returned for a week to Juba, where he met with a number of government officials. "I think there is a collective responsibility in delivering change in the lives of people back home," says Panther. "Most diaspora members have acquired useful skills that can contribute to that change. The real challenges facing many institutions in Southern Sudan are a result of lack of human capital." He contends that because so many in the diaspora are equipped with the skills necessary to help change South Sudan, and because they are also exposed to modern economies and political institutions, "the diaspora can be instrumental in fighting elements of tribalism that has consumed the region for so long." **MD**