



How Paul Chol survived war, nights in the jungle, refugee camps and then found the strength to build a new life in Erie.

c o v e r s t o r y

Out of Africa a n d Into Erie

"We want to connect." The powerful words are spoken with a thick, Kenyan accent. The "t" on the end of the word "connect" lingers in the air. There is a deep pleading for understanding in his words and behind his eyes. Those haunting eyes. Paul Chol is speaking of the longing he knows as a refugee. The longing to be welcomed into people's lives, the longing to find his way in a new culture and, most important, the longing he feels for the people he left behind in his native Sudan. "There are hundreds of references in the Bible to the stranger, the alien, the person who's run away, the refugee," says Fr. John Santor, coordinator of pastoral outreach to refugees for the Diocese of Erie. He points to the message of Pope John Paul II, who challenged Catholics to be in tune with the cry of the refugee in his 1999 apostolic exhortation, *The Church in America*. In it, the pope called for conversion, communion and solidarity. A year later, the American bishops underscored his plea with their own pastoral statement, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us – Unity in Diversity*. "The bishops encourage the faithful to see refugees not simply as people with problems," observes Fr. Santor, "but as brothers and sisters in Christ – no matter what their religious preference – who bring gifts to share with us." ►►

By Anne-Marie Welsh

Photography by Mark Fainstein



"I want my daughter's life to be better than my life, no matter what," Paul says of his daughter, Amour.

Paul Chol's story is not an easy one. He does not remember the actual moment of separation from his family, but at the age of seven he ran for his life, into the night, into the jungle. "They know if I don't leave, I'm going to lose my life," he says of his parents. "There is no choice."

Caught in the war between a fanatical sect of Muslims in northern Sudan and his southern, Christian homeland, Paul was one of the estimated 20,000 young men who became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. For the next thirteen years, he would live in chaos and fear. The boys—less than three percent of the children who left—were girls—began heading north. After a three-month walk covering 1,000 miles, they settled into a Red Cross refugee camp in Ethiopia. Their numbers dwindled during the three-year stay; malnutrition and disease were rampant.

The experience ended in unimaginable catastrophe. War in Ethiopia led to government troops literally chasing the children to the banks of the Gilo River. There, half of the young refugees lost their lives. Those who were not shot either drowned or vanished in the crocodile-infested waters. Those who escaped still live with the images from that horrific day. Paul survived the crossing, but it is one of the few experiences he prefers not to discuss.

The boys began another seemingly endless

journey, this time spending six months walking to Kenya. Once again, danger lurked everywhere. "We have nothing," Paul remembers, "no food, no shoes, no blanket, no clothes." Naked children baking in the sun. Always, their numbers dwindling. Dehydration. Malaria. Snake bites. The weakest falling prey to wild animals in the night. The children learned how to form circles around a deer, a buffalo or even a hyena, cornering it until someone could strangle it. Scrounging for firewood, they would try to cook it. "We don't have knives," Paul says. "We use our bare hands." And when the meat was ready, everyone took only one piece. "We try to share," he says, shrugging his shoulders.

Approximately 10,000 of the Lost Boys arrived at the Kakuma Refugee Camp in 1992. Paul was still just 11 years old. The United Nations oversaw the camp, which included schools and structure, but the needs of the growing boys were far from met. There were months on end during which Paul received just 15 hardened grains of corn a day. "We soaked them in water until they were soft enough to eat," he explains. At the end of the decade, the United States finally moved the Lost Boys to the top of its refugee priority list and began admitting them into the country.

Paul flew to New York City in August 2001, a month before the flow of refugees into America was severely curtailed by the terrorist attacks. He was one of 3,642 Lost Boys who eventually settled in America, 17 of whom now live in Erie. But the chance for a new life in a new land was no guarantee of happiness. As is the case for many refugees torn from their native lands, it was the beginning of a different kind of struggle.

Fr. Santor was among those who greeted the Lost Boys when they arrived in Erie three years ago. "When I first meet refugees, I usually embrace them," he says, mindful of the enormous sense of welcome he experienced when greeted by relatives upon his arrival in Poland. He recognized the deep bewilderment these striking young men—many of them now considerably over 6 feet tall—wore on their faces. Their first days in Erie were a harbinger of things to come: a jumble of new experiences. Most had never seen indoor plumbing. They had never shopped in a grocery store, purchased clothing, driven a car or used a key to open an apartment door.

"It was very tough for me to learn everything, even the language," says Paul, who grew up speaking Arabic and the language of his Dinka tribe. "We fight to learn everything." Over time, Fr. Santor, who gets by with help from Deacon John Brophy and several volunteers, has been instrumental in helping the Lost Boys find entry-level jobs and in some cases, prepare to enter college.

Approaching his priesthood in a roll-up-your-sleeves manner, Fr. Santor finds himself pulled in many directions. He is always on the lookout

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for volunteers interested in sharing in his ministry. People are extremely generous when it comes to providing furniture, food, clothing and even money for refugees, he says. But it is the volunteer willing to answer Pope John Paul's three-pronged call to conversion, communion and solidarity he has more difficulty unearthing. "Conversion means we are called to a change of heart," he explains. "It's hard for us to change the way we've always done things or thought about things." He says that living in communion means we must learn to share life together, which leads naturally to solidarity, or standing with those who are suffering oppression.

"Refugees need people who will befriend them, who will get to know them," says Fr. Santor. "They need companionship. They need someone who will show them how to ride the bus, someone who will accompany them to the doctor for the first time, someone who will take the time to build trust and then invite them into their homes and lives." Fr. Santor also points out that they need people who will help them connect to churches or parishes, religious education and sacramental preparation programs. While these things require time, he welcomes those who can offer as little as an hour or two of such volunteer service. "Refugees don't need handouts," Fr. Santor is fond of saying. "They need a hand up. They need people who can help them build their own skills to make their lives more manageable." Language need not be a deterrent. "Most refugees have at least a working knowledge of English," says Fr. Santor. "But body language is universal. Think about how much can be said with a smile."

Unless they have even a distant connection with someone, most people who arrive in Erie as refugees have had no say in choosing their destination. Paul continues to adjust to American culture. A single father at 23, he says many of the Lost Boys have had trouble establishing healthy relationships with women. His adolescence was

spent surviving, not learning the intricacies of social etiquette. Yet like generations of immigrants before him, he is pinning his hopes on his daughter's future. "I want my daughter's life to be better than my life, no matter what," he says, speaking with determination. "We're going to make the best life in America, me and my daughter." This weekend he will gather, as he

does every Sunday, with the other Lost Boys in Erie. There will likely be two main topics of conversation. First, they will discuss how they can help those who are left back home.

"We try many ways," he says. "Through government, through church. It's very tough. We feel ready to help our people but there is no way out. We come very far, but the children are still suffering." Eventually the conversation will turn to how they can repay the many people in north-west Pennsylvania who are helping them to create their new lives. "In our culture, it is not enough to say thank you," he says. "We know we need help and even though we sometimes hide our tears, if people are patient, they will see we want to accept help. But we ask all the time, what are we going to do? How can we repay?"

Sharing his story is a brave and generous step in the right direction. ☺

making a difference

When Dr. Richard Rahner of Erie was getting ready to retire, his wife, Willie, was just discovering the tremendous needs of the many refugees moving into the region. Now the garage of their comfortable suburban home serves as a veritable warehouse for everything from washing machines and sofas to computers and clothing. Their retirement vehicle of choice? A gray pickup truck used to deliver gently-used items to people building a new life in Erie.

"When immigrants come here, there is a complete emptiness," says Dr. Rahner. "They've left everything they know—friends, family, jobs and even their status in the community. Many don't speak English."

The Rahners have found great satisfaction in devoting their time and energy to helping refugees.

"It's really fun when you have a truck full of treasures for a family that has nothing," says Dr. Rahner. "Even if they can't speak English, they just gesture their gratitude by putting their hand over their heart. It's just a great feeling."

For a more in-depth interview with the Rahners, log onto www.FAITHerie.com, then click on Contributors.

