

Sudan

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But a part of him still wondered about the land he left behind.

"I lived as a Lost Boy, but (your boyhood home) never goes away," he said. "No one takes the home out of you."

Atem held the burning desire to reunite with the family he hadn't seen since boyhood.

"Growing up as a child, I didn't know anything about my family. That part of my life was flushed out of me permanently, and that feeling won't go away," he said. "There's always that hole in you, that part of you, that wants some concrete understanding of what life was like, where you grew up and where your family still lives."

Through the assistance of a family member, Atem learned his mother, brother and three sisters were still alive. He reconnected with them, and they finally spoke by phone in 2002. He sent \$250 just so his family could be located and transported from their remote village — which had no phones — to the Sudanese capital of Khartoum for the call.

At first, Atem's family didn't be-

lieve it was their long-lost eldest son and brother.

"They had no clue where I was. They thought it was a prank, a trick," he said. "After all, I was a Lost Boy. How did they even know I was alive?"

RETURNING HOME

Atem decided to return to his homeland. He needed to save thousands of dollars to pay for the plane ticket and other expenses.

He finally arranged the trip last year. He made several flight connections in the United States, Europe and Africa — and that was just the beginning of reaching his family's village.

At the airport in the city of Wau, Atem would be greeted by a brother that he had last seen as an infant. Atem had sent photos of himself to his family, but he had no idea who awaited him on the other end.

"My brother was standing in the middle of this large crowd, over by a mango tree," Atem said. "When I finally saw him, he was this tall, skinny, dark man. I had last seen him as a baby, and now he was this mature man. I am six feet tall, and he towers over me. I couldn't believe it!"

The family village of Riang Mabior is so remote that no roads lead to it, Atem said. He and his brother arranged for a driver to take them as far as possible.

"It took us two days to find a car.

They conduct it like a business. You rent a car for one way, and the driver comes with it. It's a day's drive by car, but by foot it would take forever," Atem said.

"The road ends, and you walk the rest of the way. It's 87 miles, like walking from Yankton to Sioux Falls. When you're done, you're absolutely exhausted."

Because the village has no phone service, Atem's family couldn't be contacted to tell them that he was on his way or when he expected to arrive. They anxiously waited, watching the horizon.

"When they realized it was me, there was a jubilation, bigger than life," he said. "There was such an influx of people, there was no more room in the hut where my family lived. It was like you couldn't hug everybody or put your arms around them often enough. People were laughing, it was so emotional."

Family and friends remained at the hut late into the night to talk with him. The villagers even slaughtered a bull for a celebration to welcome him.

"It was like I was a celebrity, like President Obama, who came from the U.S. to meet his family," he said. "I wanted to spend more time alone with my mother, but she wanted to share me with everybody."

It was a surreal experience.

"You're jumpy, like it's all a dream, like it's not real," Atem said. "Am I back in the land where I grew up?"

LIFE AND DEATH EXISTENCE

At the same time, Atem realized how much he had missed in his lifetime. His mother, now in her 50s, had gray hair. He met his biological father, who had not been a part of his life. His siblings were now adults, and his family and friends were now much older.

He also realized the villagers were extremely thin because they were malnourished.

"They were nearly naked, and they earn zero income," he said. "They go out into the field for whatever they can get (for food). They may have cattle, or they will try to catch fish with a spear."

Meanwhile, the villagers asked questions about his American lifestyle, such as whether he was married or if he had a car, Atem said.

In contrast, Americans couldn't imagine the lives of Atem's family. "The villagers don't have anything, no clothes, shoes or a mirror," he said. "They don't have a toothbrush or toothpaste. When they want to brush their teeth, they just break off a branch or twig, use it as a toothbrush, and then throw it away."

For the villagers, daily existence is a matter of life and death, Atem said.

"Here (in the United States), we

argue about toys. There (in his village), they don't have enough to eat," he said. "I used to spend \$100 (a month) for a phone, and now I have cut it down so I can send \$50-100 to my family just so they can eat."

However, Atem wants to do more for his family and the entire village.

"I feel compelled to do something bigger. It's a dire situation, and these people are living in the 21st century," he said "Rome wasn't built in a day, but they don't have the basic necessities such as water (in the village). You see the priorities of what needs to be done, like a water pump. It would mean a lot."

He's already sending half of his paycheck home to his family. He would like to bring his mother to live in the United States. However, he doesn't think she would move without the rest of the family, and he can't afford to relocate all of his siblings and their families.

"I would love to have my mother come visit me here, to see the difference and why I'm happy here (in Yankton)," he said.

HELPING HIS LOVED ONES

His priority now is to return to Africa this year for three months, to do whatever possible to improve his family's daily lives. That means saving up an estimated \$6,000 for the round-trip plane ticket and other expenses.

It also means temporarily cutting back on the funds he sends to his family in the meantime. However, he believes it's necessary to make his return trip a reality.

"It's painful to say no (to my family's immediate needs)," he said. "But I have seen the reality, the urgency of going back. I have seen the village, I have seen the people. There are the images and my memories. I want to spend more time taking care of the situation."

In many ways, Atem sees himself as extremely blessed.

"The name 'Chol' stands for 'compensation'," he said. "Three children had been born before me in my family, and they all died. I lived, and someone said that I may have been 'compensation' for the other children who died."

Even as a Lost Boy, he realizes the pain of those early years brought good things.

"I wouldn't be an American if it wasn't for the Sudan civil war. If I was still living in Sudan, I would be sitting stuck, not in school, nothing driving me," he said. "The good things in my life came out of all the trouble and ordeal. Out of all the suffering, some changes have come."

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