

Jesuit Refugee Service Winter Solstice Ball

Speech by Guest of Honour

Kir Deng

“The Importance Of Holding Onto Hope”

Saturday June 27th

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentleman,

With profound gratitude let me say how much of an honour it is to be standing before you as Guest Speaker of the JRS Ball.

This honour is felt all the more forcibly because I have a friend called Yar, who is a fellow refugee and comes from Kenya.

Yar is in fact a recipient of a JRS educational scholarship.

Last year money raised from this JRS Ball funded educational scholarships for Kenyan refugees.

Quite simply Yar would not be in Australia and I would not be friends with her, were it not for the support of the Jesuit Refugee Service.

To all of you – on Yar’s behalf – as well as my own – thank you.

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The journey that has led me to being here tonight is improbable.

This is indeed a special moment in my life.

Nine years ago I could never have imagined I would be standing before you all - in a room – and in Australia – with hundreds of other young people – all bound by a genuine care and concern for refugees and asylum seekers.

This is a moment I could never have dreamt of – and when I share my story with you, you'll understand why.

I was born in Sudan in 1990 in the capital, Khartoum - a time when civil war racked the country.

Education, infrastructure, and the socioeconomic conditions were all but destroyed.

Replacing it was severe famine, drought, and the mass forced displacement of refugees.

At the age of six I was diagnosed with malaria – a disease that kills more than a million African children every year – that's more than 3 thousand every day.

So my chances of survival were not good.

I tried not to think about coming face-to-face with God so early on in my life.

But deep down – as the grip of malaria tightened its hold over me – I knew my death was a very real and daunting prospect.

But thanks to a bit of luck, prayer and much support from my mum and dad, my 3 older sisters and younger brother, I survived.

Soon after though, I did experience death – with the loss of my father, Deng.

Dad was very sick at the time when he died.

Unfortunately – because of the hospital system in Sudan and because we had no money – we could not afford to keep dad alive.

I can not tell you enough how devastated and upset I was – I was truly lost in my own grief – the pain, almost unbearable.

It wasn't only an agonising period for me, but also my family.

It taught me the lesson though – very early on – that human life is so fragile that we can't take it for granted.

I think about my dad everyday. I carry a picture of him in my wallet.

I know dad is in heaven watching over me – and is tonight watching on proud.

The death my dad, Deng, was not only very emotional, it also made life more challenging.

My mother, Atong, had to work twice as hard just to keep the food on the table.

Since mum couldn't handle the responsibility of looking after all of us, my uncle Wik stepped in and took on the role of being a father figure.

Uncle Wik owned a video store where he generated most of his income from.

But as his small business began to thrive, the local government decided to intervene for no reason but because of pure greed and corruption.

They took all his belongings including his television and videos.

As a result, Uncle Wik – and other extended family members who were working in the video store at the time – were arrested and taken to a prison in Khartoum.

Behind bars Uncle Wik was severely tortured, whipped and starved.

I didn't think Uncle Wik was ever going to get out of prison. But his courage, strength and resilience proved everyone wrong.

Uncle Wik was released six months later in 1998.

Soon after, though, he was issued with a warning to leave the country and never come back or else he would be locked up in jail again – and for good.

We straightaway made arrangements to leave the country and head towards Egypt, forced to abandon our friends and relatives in search of a new life.

That was a very hard time for me.

We arrived in Egypt in 1999 on a new beginning – starting a new life – one that granted us protection and freedom.

But as we started to make ourselves feel more at home, things began to go in a different way to what we had expected.

Egyptian citizens became unsettled by the amount of Sudanese refugees entering their homeland.

Streets turned violent.

Fighting broke out often as racism and hatred took hold.

I recall days when my sister and I would walk to school, only to be met by racist comments and have people laughing at us and throwing food from their balcony at us.

This was because we were refugees and the colour of our skin made us inferior in their eyes.

Meanwhile, my mum Atong worked around the clock as a cleaner - from early hours to late into the night - cleaning houses for little money.

Uncle Wik worked as a welder in atrocious conditions - all so that we could eat, have shelter and pay for our education.

But as each day passed, our lives became more grim and uncomfortable.

Tension between the large Sudanese and Egyptian community worsened.

It became no longer safe for me - for my family or anyone who was Sudanese - to walk down the street without the threat of being attacked.

Packing up our few worldly belongings and returning to Sudan seemed the only option.

However, we learnt the UN embassy in Cairo was holding interviews for Sudanese refugees who had been displaced and needed urgent settlement overseas.

Successful applicants were granted a visa to either the US, Canada or Australia.

Uncle Wik immediately wrote an application to the UN explaining our case.

Unfortunately, our application was not successful.

We were rejected because the UN thought that our case didn't present enough hardships compared to other families.

That day was very depressing and upsetting day for me, and my family, as we had nowhere else to go.

From there on, my life looked bleak, but I still clung to hope.

And sure enough - as my family and I were making arrangements for our return to Sudan, we received incredible news from Uncle Wik.

A friend of his from Australia had sent a visa and several applications and said that if we filled out them out, we might just to Australia.

Uncle Wik carefully filled out the forms and sent them to the Australian Embassy in Cairo.

There they arranged an interview for us.

When the interviewing day came, we made sure that we were as positive as possible and showed appreciation.

Thankfully, the female interviewing us agreed to accept us to come out here.

My family and I were so happy that day knowing we were going to be safe.

We abandoned our trip back to Sudan and focused our attention on getting medical checkups to move to Australia.

I came out here in 2001.

Since then my family and I have had the privilege to call Australia home.

However, there are still days when I think and reflect about my real home Sudan – a place where I have left behind many relatives and friends, whom I miss very much.

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I know my life journey so far has been different to most of you in this room tonight.

But being a refugee has also taught me a lot.

In the darkest hours of life, I've learnt to always keep the flame of hope burning and to never give up.

For me, hope is where the heart is and in life we must all hold onto hope.

It is in the inner sanctuary of my conscience where I have found God's voice echo within.

And through God I have entered and explored the chambers of my heart.

Deep inside I have found a faith.

It is one I hope that does justice - and will do so for the rest of my life – as I study to become a doctor and serve where the needs are greatest.

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In closing, tonight we are all helping to pay the poor a debt of justice.

We are bound by our compassion for refugees and asylum seekers inside and outside our borders.

It's clear each of us have a shared determination to wipe away the unnecessary suffering of those around the world.

And I think the JRS Ball shows we young people are committed to be part of building a better future.

So let us tonight renew this resolve - and use our ideals to light the world and make our own mark on it.

We live in a world plagued by unfinished business with millions of refugees and asylum seekers crying out for help – and many tragically do so in hunger.

I believe the practical face of being human is to respond to persons in need.

I believe the more we remain members and part of this great project called "humanity" - the more we'll contribute to a just world.

We're sustained in the belief that there is a Kingdom to come.

But we are also charged to live a life that does justice here on earth.

Together we have the enlarged task to be healers. And right now we have a whole planet to heal.

Thank you – and may the rest of this night be one of joy – sacred joy. Goodnight.