

# BECOMING FAMILY

LIZ MOSBO VERHAGE

Gene and Phyllis Pugnetti opened their hearts to a Sudanese teenager and found a calling to help the Sons of Sudan.

Phyllis and Gene Pugnetti of Creekside Covenant Church in Redmond, Washington, were expecting another addition to their family. What they received from their son John, a lanky Sudanese teenager with a quick smile and unbreakable spirit, was more than they could have dreamed.

In 2001, Phyllis learned that families were needed for several Sudanese young men through her job with the Refugee Resettlement project of Lutheran Community Services. From the first time she heard of the opportunity, she was convinced that her family should welcome John Deng Lual into their home.

"I was actually prepared for it to be very difficult," says Phyllis, "for monumental education challenges or difficult emotional-behavioral problems." But when their family discussed whether or not to welcome John to their family, their then sixteen-year-old daughter pointed out that ultimately it was an easy decision; the family could bring John to live with them and he would live, or they could leave him in a refugee camp and he would die.

John is one of the "Lost Boys," a group of Sudanese young men (and a few women) orphaned and forced to leave their homes as a result of a bloody

civil war that erupted in 1983.

John, who was four years old when he escaped from an attack on his village, joined an estimated 60,000 other boys who walked 600 miles from South Sudan to a refugee camp in Ethiopia. Less than half of the boys survived this dangerous three-month-long journey.

Four years later, after their refugee camp was also attacked, John and roughly 17,000 other boys were then forced to head another 600 miles south to Kenya to the Kakuma refugee camp. Since 2000, 3,800 Lost Boys from Kakuma have been resettled in the United States, scattered in twenty-five communities. (For more information on the Lost Boys see the January 2002 *Companion* article, "Days of Grace.")

"We refuse to believe that God would save these young men from what they have been through only to bring them to the USA and be left marginalized here," explains Gene. "We are trying to fill the gap in their lives and meet the needs that we can."

As part of John coming to live with them, the Pugnettis had to agree not to legally adopt him because there is no way of knowing if his Sudanese parents are living or dead.

The Pugnettis describe their relationship with John this way: "We are simply his parents, or his American parents. We adopted him in our hearts, not legally."

After John became part of their family, the Pugnettis learned that many of the 300 other Lost Boys in the Puget Sound area were floundering without support networks in this strange new society they were living in. Many of

these Sudanese young men were older than eighteen and so were cut off from public assistance ninety days after immigrating.

The Pugnettis responded by forming the Sons of Sudan Foundation (SSF), a nonprofit organized formally last February with other concerned parents, teachers, community leaders, and pastors. SSF focuses on finding jobs, getting education, assisting with medical and dental coverage, and providing one-on-one mentoring for the Sudanese. Projects so far include helping one young man pay for his seizure medicine during the school break when his insurance did not cover the cost, introducing a Sudanese young woman to girls her age in the area and improving her English, and supporting one young man on his trip back to the refugee camp in Kenya so that he could relay messages from other Lost Boys to family and friends left there.

"When you form relationships it becomes personal and the solution becomes much more manageable," explains Phyllis. "You can identify the needs for this one particular person and you can do what is needed for this one young man."

Phyllis and Gene are the volunteer directors of SSF and have involved Creekside Covenant Church in their ministry. In July Creekside received a grant from the North Pacific Conference through the Churches Planting Ministries initiative to be the first church involved in SSF's new project, "25:40" (named for the verse in Matthew referring to "the least of these").



John Deng Lual and the Pugnettis visit with Governor Gary Locke of Washington State on the day he received a Governor's scholarship. (From left to right) Gene, Dania, Governor Locke, John, Tyler, and Phyllis

Churches involved in the 25:40 project agree to sponsor a group of three to four Lost Boys, ages twenty to twenty-four, who are without any family or support network. The church becomes a family to these Sudanese young men, relocating them to housing near the church, helping them adapt to life in America, including how to secure employment, enroll in college or adult literacy programs, and inviting them to be involved in the congregation.

"[25:40] is really an opportunity for members of the Christian Church to step outside their comfort zones and to meet other Christians—in this case persecuted Christians—who need their help," says Gene.

Not only do the Lost Boys benefit from the program, the volunteers do as well. "It strengthens our faith in the fact that God is working in our lives and around the world, in our neighborhoods," Gene says.

Randy Phillips, pastor of Creekside Covenant, sees outreach ministry like 25:40 as part of Creekside's role as a bridge between God and the community.

"We at Creekside think we can be best at generosity—which we see as invitation and investment," says Phillips. "The Pugnettis invited a [young man] into their home and then invested in him—and this led them to a higher call."

SSF has already received support from several Covenant churches in the Puget Sound area after a presentation

they made at the conference annual meeting last spring.

"We know a lot of people that want to give money, which is definitely needed," says Gene, "but we also want to get people who are more hands-on and will invest in a relationship as well."

SSF has had contact with roughly half of the 300 Lost Boys living in an area stretching from Olympia to Everett. Krisann Jarvis Foss, director of conference ministries for the North Pacific Conference, points out that there are thirty-five Covenant churches in the area, where the 25:40 project might be replicated.

She says that 25:40 fits the goals of the Covenant's Churches Planting Ministries initiative.

"It's not about charity," she says, "it's about friendship and empowerment."

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Creekside's seed grant is the ninth given by the Churches Planting Ministries program since its inception in spring 2002.

The Pugnettis are adamant in saying that they have also benefited from receiving John into their family. "We believe it was a God thing," Phyllis says. "Now it is really hard to remember our family without John. He has definitely blessed us more than we have blessed him!"

"John is one of the most gifted young men I have met in a long time," says North Pacific Conference superintendent Mark Novak, a neighbor and friend of the Pugnettis. "His successes are due in large part to [their]

support and love. In turn what he has taught all of us about faith and perseverance will never be forgotten."

John was born the son of a chief of the Christian Dinka tribe. He credits his faith in God for getting him through losing his family and the suffering that he experienced as a Lost Boy. "Every day I just asked God to let me live," he says.

John graduated from high school in June 2003 with high grades and re-



A group of Lost Boys who live south of the SEATAC airport in Seattle

ceived the outstanding business student award as the student body gave him a standing ovation. John was also awarded four scholarships to begin college this fall to study international business. He has a part-time job and regularly attends Creekside Covenant and a Sudanese church service with his Lost Boy brothers.

"John firmly believes that God creates opportunity—all he has to do is be ready when that door opens," says Phyllis. "He really lives his life that way. I am very moved by people who have that kind of faith—many of us are not put to the test like he was." □

*For more information about 25:40, contact the Pugnettis at [director@sonsofsudan.org](mailto:director@sonsofsudan.org). For more information about Churches Planting Ministries, visit [www.covchurch.org](http://www.covchurch.org) or contact Liz Mosbo VerHage at [liz.verhage@covchurch.org](mailto:liz.verhage@covchurch.org).*

**Liz Mosbo VerHage is associate director of churches planting ministries for the Evangelical Covenant Church.**