



FINDING[daniel]

Daniel Akech James comes from a world where death knocks on everyone's door.

by Krystn Shrieve photography by Tim Mantoani

Daniel Akech James

sits at a desk. He is twelve million, nine hundred, four thousand, nine hundred, sixty-eight feet from home. The year is 2005.

He writes in black ballpoint ink on a yellow legal pad, the top page filled with his careful handwriting. He wears razor-creased brown slacks and a button-down light blue Oxford shirt. His sleek skin is so black it's almost blue. His lips move slightly as he reads the words that both tell the story of his past and determine the course of his future.

Daniel is a senior at the University of San Diego. He's writing a personal statement, the first of many official documents he must complete to enter graduate school. It's the story of how he came from Sudan, the largest country in Africa, and was one of thousands of children, mostly boys, who survived its civil war and walked for years before reaching neighboring Kenya and eventually coming to America. They are known to the world as the Lost Boys of Sudan.

Daniel is lost in more ways than one. He has no birthday. Akech, the name he was given at birth, means one who came into the world without a parent. As a boy, he lived without the protection of parents for nearly a decade as he wandered the desert and took refuge in a foreign land.

He can't remember some things. Other things he wishes he could forget.

Daniel lays down his pen and glances out the window. He hears children playing at the pre-school only steps outside his east campus dorm room. Their gleeful noise reminds him that despite the horrors he survived, he has one happy memory. That memory, still vivid, offers insight into his passion for learning. The passion kept him going when he thought he could go no farther.



It's 1987. At an age when the typical American kid is choosing a kindergarten lunchbox, Daniel sits outside his hut. He picks at blades of grass and scans the countryside. His job is to tend to the goats. Although he never says it out loud, in his heart he wishes he were older so he could go to school like his brother, Gak.

He's starting to get bored when he sees Gak returning from school, books tucked under his arm. A huge smile spreads across Daniel's face. He scrambles up and runs to his brother. He begs Gak to let him look at the schoolbooks. Flipping through them, he's fascinated by the colorful pictures and strange words. In a singsong voice, he recites phrases he memorized after hearing his brother say them — A is for apple. One plus one is two. His tribe speaks a language called Dinka, but he's thrilled to hear the funny English words come out of his mouth.

Sudan, which borders the Red Sea between Egypt and Eritrea, is in the middle of a civil war. The mostly Christian southern half of the country, where Daniel lives in a village called Maar, is pitted against the Arabs from the north.

Daniel's best guess is that he's about 5 years old. All he knows about the war is that his mother says he was born at the time the war first broke out.

One day, the war reaches his village. Daniel hears screaming. Billowing smoke blackens the sky over nearby villages. People run past him, their faces filled with fear. They say only one thing: The enemy is coming.

The boy doesn't know what to do. Oldest brother Diing grabs his arm and runs, half dragging him, toward the bush, a nearby forest of acacia trees. Daniel and his brother spend the night there. He hears gunshots and screaming. He sees flames. He prays. The enemy doesn't venture into the bush. Daniel and his brother survive.

When all is quiet, the boys creep out and make their way back to the village. Daniel sees his mother and runs to her, arms outstretched. She holds him. She rocks him. His sobs subside.

Daniel's entire family survives. His mother, Aluel, is a Christian, active in her church. When he turned 4, she had him baptized and gave him the name Daniel. His father is Thiong. A career soldier, Thiong fights in the Sudanese People's Liberation Army — because he has no choice and because he believes that the lives of innocent people must be protected. Daniel is the fourth of his mother's six children. She is the first of his father's three wives.

Together again, the family sifts through the debris of what had been their home. Daniel, digging with bare hands, finds his wooden cross. As he pulls it from the ashes, he remembers the day the 3-foot-long cross, with hand-carved points and a single nail in the center, saved his life.

It happened when Daniel was about 3 or 4. Sunday service had just ended. He and the parish priest, Simon Bul, were walking through the thick grasses surrounding the church. Suddenly a red cobra raised its head and flared its hood. Daniel froze. The snake struck. Thwack! The priest bashed the snake over the head with the cross. The cross snapped. The bottom half landed next to the lifeless serpent. Father Simon gave the broken cross, now only 12 inches long, to Daniel.

Thankful that he found his cross in the rubble, Daniel vows not to let it go. He brings

the cross with him when he moves with his family, away from the scarred land, to start fresh.

Three years later, the war erupts again. The enemy gives chase and the family divides once more. Carrying some of the children, his mother and father run one way. Daniel and his older sister, Angeth, run another way.

When the sun rises, Daniel and Angeth hide in the bush. When the moon rises, they walk. Every day, with cross in hand, Daniel prays for protection from the enemy, for the safety of his family and for food. Daniel eats leaves and grass until eventually, there is no food. The only water is the dew that collects on the grass at night. He swipes at the grass with his palm and licks at what trickles down. It barely moistens his parched lips.

At one point, Daniel goes three days without food. The pain, which on the first and second days stabs at his belly, dulls on the third day, a dangerous sign. He's dying. His sister knows it. The sun is up and Daniel sleeps. His sister, who knows it's not wise to build a fire, rubs two sticks together and fans a tiny flame. She must feed her brother. On a rock she pounds the handful of grains she finds. The enemy hears the sound of rock against rock.

Daniel wakes to the sounds of gunshots and screams. He knows even before the others tell him. The enemy has stolen his sister.

It's 1992, five years since Daniel first fled his village. He's probably about 10, he doesn't know for sure. He and the thousands of children he sees along the way have walked countless miles. Sand storms feel like pins in their eyes. The desert sun sizzles at 120 degrees during the day. Temperatures plummet to 45 degrees at night. Daniel wears short pants and a thin shirt. His only other possession is the wooden cross he carries in his hand. His feet are bare. The desert floor grates at the calluses on Daniel's feet. Calluses turn into blisters. Blisters give way to open sores. Eventually the flesh falls off altogether. Still he walks.

Just when he thinks he can't take another step, Daniel sees help. It's a Red Cross camp. Red Cross workers tend to his feet. They give him porridge. For a while, at least, he doesn't worry about where to find food and water.



But Daniel and the other children can't stay. They must make room for the throngs of others. Their feet are bandaged, their bellies are filled and they move on. Daniel stops briefly at four of these makeshift camps in Southern Sudan between 1992 and 1999.

In March of 1999, exhausted and dragging, Daniel finally limps toward the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. He and the others are herded into the camp. It's then that the world starts counting the lost boys — 5,000, 10,000, 20,000. Soon after Daniel arrives, an older boy approaches him, asking him questions about his family. Daniel doesn't recognize him at first. It's his older brother, Diing.

Daniel is 17, and his longing for school is reignited. Diing has a plan.

He tells Daniel to go into second grade. Daniel will do well, progress quickly, earn the coveted eighth-grade scholarship and go on to Kenyan high school.

Eager, Daniel enters second grade. The other children, young and innocent, laugh when they see this tall boy, almost a man, sitting dutifully at his small desk. At the end of the day, Daniel asks the teacher to give him a test so he can move to third grade. In a matter of weeks, he takes tests to get through third and fourth grade.

The semester is over, and when classes start up again Daniel goes to another school in a different part of the camp. He tells teachers he's already been in fifth grade. So Daniel finds himself in sixth grade. Everything is fine until one day in math class the teacher mentions fractions. Daniel only knows about whole numbers. He should've learned about fractions in the fourth grade. Maybe he would have if he'd been there

for more than a few days. The jig is up. The principal calls him into the office and cautions Daniel to slow down.

As the '90s draw to a close, Daniel becomes fluent in English while hopscotching from classroom to classroom. The United States government starts taking photos of the boys. It's the first step in a two-year process to bring many of them to America.

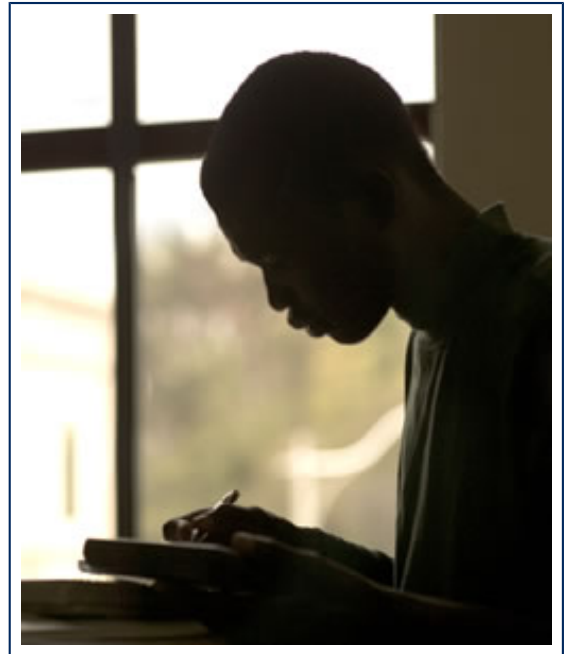
Daniel knows that education is his ticket to a better life. All the lost boys know it. It becomes their motto: Education is my mother and my father. In 2000, Daniel takes his time and spends the whole year in seventh grade. In 2001 he finishes eighth grade and passes the grueling exams.

But Daniel still has another test to pass, the one given by the United States Immigration and Naturalization Service. Daniel sits in a room across from a man with a neatly groomed beard. The man asks him questions involving times and dates — complicated, since the Sudanese don't measure time the way the Western world does. After all, Daniel doesn't even know his birthday. He knows only what his mother had told him: that he was born when the war broke out. The way his villagers see it, that could have been any time between 1980 and 1984.

The United States assigns all the lost boys a universal birthday: Jan. 1. The year depends on each child's size. Daniel's running tally over the years puts him at 17. He must be tall for his age. The government assigns him the birth year 1980, which instantly makes him 21. Classified as an adult, he undergoes a more rigorous INS interview process.

So Daniel looks the bearded man in the eye and answers all his questions. When the interview is over the man, and the boy who with a stroke of a pen became a man, shake hands. Weeks later, Daniel receives the coveted envelope decorated with the United States seal. He's going to America.

It's May 27, 2001. A plane circles over the refugee camp. Daniel thinks it looks like an angel from God. It will take him to America, where he hears there's no war. He can't imagine a place without war. Tears stream down his cheeks as he waves goodbye to Diing and the others who gather to say their final farewells. Four days later, Daniel looks out the window and sees the lights below. It is New York. It is America. In the airport, people wave signs that say, "Welcome Lost Boys!" The boys are whisked off to a restaurant and then a hotel. Daniel and his roommates, Santino, Duom and Majok, marvel at the wonder of electricity. They flip the light switch on and off. They jump on the beds. They laugh about the taste of airplane food and wonder why Americans complain about being so fat when their food is so terrible.



Eventually, Daniel, Santino, Duom and Majok arrive in San Diego, one of several U.S. cities with organizations dedicated to hosting lost boys. They're greeted by Joseph Jok of the International Rescue Committee. Jok, also from Sudan, came to the United States in 1998 from Kongor, a village not far from Daniel's. Jok takes them to their two-bedroom apartment on Kansas Street in San Diego's Normal Heights neighborhood, then to the bank where he gives them each \$100. The highlight is a trip to K-mart, where they gawk with wonder. Daniel picks out two shirts and two pairs of pants. At the grocery store, they buy beef, rice, beans, milk and Apple Jacks.

With Jok's help, Daniel finds a job working for \$6.25 an hour as a "dish catcher" at a restaurant at Sea World. He rides the bus two hours there and two hours back. While the bus starts and stops — University and 30th, University and Park, Pacific Highway and Washington — Daniel reads the books he's been given to pass the GED. He comes home, eats dinner, retires to bed and reads until his brain hurts. Jok rushes Daniel to the hospital for an MRI. Doctors warn him not to read all night. Sleep at least once in a while, they say. After only a week in the United States, Daniel passes the GED and becomes the first lost boy in San Diego to graduate from high school.

After time at a community college, Daniel meets Cynthia Villis, an IRC board member and an administrator in the USD provost's office. He tells Villis he wants to go to a university where he can talk to professors whenever he wants, and where he can learn to become a professor himself. Villis is waiting to hear about a grant to start a program called McNair Scholars for students like Daniel — first-generation, low-income students who want to teach college. In the meantime, she helps him navigate his way

through admissions and financial aid. In Fall 2003, Daniel is admitted to USD. In Spring 2004, Villis launches the McNair Scholars program.

Daniel majors in math and theology. He chose math because the man who speaks five languages — Dinka and Nuer, which are two tribal languages, Swahili, the most common language in Kenya, Arabic and now English — is fascinated by what he thinks of as a universal language. He chose theology to honor God, whom he believes walks with him every step of the way. Daniel moves into USD's newest residence hall, Manchester Village, in a sparsely decorated apartment where the wooden cross he's carried all these years sits on his desk. He lives with one roommate, but spends most of his free time at his old apartment in Normal Heights playing chess, Dominoes and Scrabble with Santino, Duom and Majok. They avoid talking about the past. Sometimes he's lonely. Often he misses his family, but he says they're happy knowing he's safe in America.

Daniel starts writing an English-Dinka dictionary. He checks in regularly with Christine Mullen, director of the McNair Scholars who, like the principal at the refugee camp, gently reminds him that he must take classes in the right order. It's like fourth-grade fractions all over again. Daniel works with math Professor Cameron Parker researching chaos and fractals, patterns that repeat themselves.

This year, Daniel will take driving lessons, continue his research, now on theories about algorithms, and graduate from USD. He hopes his family can come to America for the pomp and circumstance. His mother lives in their old village with sisters Akon and Alek. His father, with whom he spoke on the phone in December 2004, still fights for the SPLA. His brother, Gak, attends boarding school in Kenya. Diing, whom Daniel e-mails regularly, travels back and forth between Kenya and Sudan. Angeth's captors released her. She returned to the village in 1999 and is married with two children.

Though Daniel's status as a refugee in the United States means he's not allowed to ever again live in Sudan, he longs to visit. He aches to see his family. He hopes to return to the refugee camp in Kenya to teach other lost boys how to prepare for their INS interviews and life in the United States. Teaching is in his heart. So Daniel, who was a second-grader only six years ago, focuses on the next step in his education — graduate school. And he's aiming high. He plans to apply to the University of California, Berkeley. He wants to be a college professor. Education changed his life. He wants to change the lives of others.

Daniel stops writing. He thinks back to the little boy who tended goats and dreamed of going to school. His dream came true. Daniel reads the words he's been writing. He

Daniel Akech James was one of a group of lost boys who were brought to San Diego and sponsored by the International Rescue Committee. Founded in 1993, the International Rescue Committee — an organization that provides relief, rehabilitation, protection, post-conflict development, resettlement services and advocacy for those uprooted or affected by violent conflict and oppression— offers a lot of information about the Lost Boys of Sudan. For more information, go to lostboysofsudan.com.



scrutinizes the last paragraph.

"I am a child without a childhood, a child who grew up speaking many languages," he reads.

"I grew up without my mom and dad's supervision, yet I'm psychologically and morally OK.

Where I'm from, death is known as a mighty journey to some other places.

Where I'm from, death has knocked on everyone's door." 