

The Des Moines Register



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LAST DECEMBER, KOANG TOANG OF DES MOINES DISAPPEARED IN SOUTH SUDAN. ON SATURDAY, HIS FAMILY WILL SAY GOODBYE.

A YEAR OF LETTING GO



CHARLIE LITCHFIELD/THE REGISTER

Dukan Diew holds a photo of her husband, Koang Toang, with three of their seven children. Toang had returned to South Sudan in 2010 for a position with the government but went missing when war broke out late last year.

By Ann Hinga Klein | Special to the Register

Dukan Diew breathed a prayer as she scrolled through the listings on her smartphone.

It was a gray Tuesday — Dec. 17, 2013 — and she'd been napping before her shift as an overnight supervisor at a Des Moines residential treatment center. Now she skimmed through 36 missed calls from relatives and friends in Iowa and South Sudan, seeking the name that mattered most: her husband's.

Nothing.

Their kids would be out of school soon, so she pulled on a coat and grabbed the keys to her minivan, returning a call from one of her husband's cousins in Des Moines. "Your brother made it to the U.N. Mission," he said, "but your husband is not there."

Both knew this meant that Koang Toang was, at best, running for his life. What Dukan didn't know that day was that the journey ahead would be her own — a year of seeking answers in her husband's disappearance and figuring out how to help her family let go of a father, brother and cousin whose fate might never be known.

See SUDAN, Page 6A

MEMORIAL SERVICE SATURDAY

A memorial service for Koang Toang, 43, will be conducted at 1 p.m. Saturday at Trinity Lutheran Church, 3223 University Ave., Des Moines.

WATCH VIDEO

Dukan Diew talks about the agony of losing her husband. Watch the emotional video with this story at DesMoinesRegister.com.

Farmer to bring field experience as Kemin sales leader

Jennie Smith, known for her tomatoes, will play a key role in the new crop tech division.

By Donnelle Eller
deller@dmreg.com

Life is changing for Jennie Smith. Smith is known for growing beautiful heirloom tomatoes on her three-acre farm near Carlisle, called Butcher Crick Farms, and selling them at the downtown farmers market and to local restaurants.

But a year spent getting a graduate diploma in New Zealand, thanks to a Rotary scholarship, prompted Smith to reassess her life plan.

About a month ago, she took a job as a sales manager at Kemin Industries in a new division called crop technologies, which the Des Moines-based company plans to launch next year.

Her passion for food and farming, and the drive that has taken her from running a small tomato farm to joining a life science company with a global footprint, makes her a person to watch.

During her year in New Zealand, "I did a lot of personal thinking," said Smith, 31, who took a critical look at where her strengths and passions aligned with her work. "I was great at that business ownership side, the marketing and the sales.

"But the production side wasn't enjoyable for me," she said. "I was spending most of my time by myself in a field, trying to study soil science and plant science." But "my passions have nothing to do with plant physiology or being by myself."

See SMITH, Page 10A

Firefighters feast with their 'family' on Christmas Day

There is an efficiency of movement with firefighters and paramedics regardless of their task, writes Metro Voice columnist Daniel P. Finney. Visit Des Moines Fire Station No. 1 as he pays a mealtime visit on Christmas Day, when the station enjoyed its own little "Christmas miracle" — a warm meal hurriedly eaten without the interruption of an emergency call. No public service is quite like being a firefighter, Finney writes. Read his column in Metro & Iowa, Page 4A.

High 41° Low 25°
Partly cloudy, chance of snow. **Page 5A**

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CHARLIE LITCHFIELD/THE REGISTER

Dukan Diew stands with her seven children Tuesday near their home on Des Moines' east side. Dukan's husband, Koang Toang, went missing in South Sudan in 2013, and now she struggles to provide for their children.

SUDAN

Continued from Page 1A

A dual citizen of Nuer descent, Koang, 43, had returned to South Sudan in 2010 to take a job with its newly independent government. But on Dec. 15, 2013, an ethnic-based dispute between the president and vice president erupted.

For two days, Nuer citizens flooded into the United Nations base in Juba, telling of family members shot down as they ran from Presidential Guard forces. For two days, Dukan had prayed.

Now she put the phone on speaker, listening to messages, returning calls. Some said Koang had been spotted at the U.N. base; others said he'd been last seen facedown at gunpoint on a Juba street.

Dukan, 36, had run from war as a child and knew how to function within its chaos. As she arrived at the school, she decided to tell her kids — ages 3 through 16 — the truth as she saw it: Their dad had been captured, but they would assume he was in jail. She resolved to stay strong.

But that day, a wound began to break open for her. If the kids lost their dad, they would grow up with an emptiness she and Koang had both known. Was it some kind of curse? She pushed down the thought.

In Dukan's earliest memories, she sees a beach where a tributary of the Nile River curved near her village, Jikou, on Sudan's eastern border with Ethiopia. In the heat of the day, she and her cousins played along its banks while aunts and uncles looked on. When the air cooled, they walked home together.

Born in the late 1970s, Dukan started life during a rare decade of peace in a place that has known little of it since 1956, when the Sudan was released from British and Egyptian rule.

While the conflicts' causes are complex, historians note that in their exit, Sudan's colonial-era rulers placed agro-pastoral southern states under the jurisdiction of northern leaders with a history of brutality.

Historians also cite a powder keg of regional exploitation sparked in the 1970s after foreign companies, including U.S. firms, discovered oil beneath land families had farmed for generations.

The Second Sudanese Civil War began in 1983. For Dukan, it began the day soldiers opened fire at the beach. She doesn't know whether they were with the government or the Sudan People's Liberation Movement. What she remembers is that little kids and grandparents cried out as the river's current swept them under. She was 5.

She fled into the grasslands with her family, running for days while gunfire rattled nearby. When they returned, they found ashes. All day, kids cried for food. It was hard to find heroes, but Dukan's was her dad, who left daily at sunup to fish so his children could eat. Her father, the village chief, was killed

REPORT FROM JUBA OFFERS ANSWERS

Human Rights Watch, an independent research organization, in August released a report of the incidents that began in Juba on Dec. 15, 2013. The report states that Koang Toang was detained that day by pro-Kiir Dinka National Security forces at a checkpoint in the Gudele neighborhood. It also describes a massacre of 200 to 400 Nuer men in the Gudele police compound on Dec. 16, 2013, stating that Toang was likely killed then. A Dinka resident living nearby reported that on Dec. 17, security forces moved "huge" numbers of bodies into trucks. Read more: <http://www.hrw.org/node/126087/section/7>

HOW TO DONATE

Good Shepherd Orphanage in Jikou, South Sudan, is accepting donations in Koang Toang's name. To donate, go to <http://www.gsorphanage.org>.

in 1986, reportedly during a meeting with government leaders from the north.

Dukan stepped off a plane in Des Moines in 1994 with her mother, sister and three brothers. After 11 years of surviving war, they had accepted a U.N. resettlement grant.

Among the first people they met was a young man from Jikou who worked for a local agency, helping new arrivals navigate Des Moines life. Koang Toang had been here since 1992. To Dukan, he was breathtaking. The two married in 1995 and started a family a few years later.

Like many in the diaspora, Koang felt driven to catch up with the Western world. He studied economics, agronomy and public administration at Des Moines Area Community College, Iowa State and Drake University and worked his way up at Pioneer Hi-Bred and Wells Fargo.

Koang had endured many of the hardships that would later become known through publicity about the so-called Lost Boys of Sudan: guerrilla warfare, wild animals, near-starvation. When he spoke of it, Dukan would stop him. It was too sad, too hard to hear. She wanted to think about what they had: food, sleep without fear, healthy children.

In 2005, Sudan's Comprehensive Peace Agreement began a six-year process of granting South Sudan independence, and the couple began to nurture a dream. Neither had been able to forget Jikou. They talked of moving their children back to help rebuild, starting with an orphanage.

As the war wound down, southern Sudanese leaders traveled to central Iowa, where the Sudanese community had grown to an estimated 5,000, and Omaha, Neb., where as many as 9,000 had relocated. Koang's friend Joseph Malual recently recalled what he heard in addresses by Salva Kiir and Riek Machar, the war generals who later became South Sudan's president and vice president.

"They said that we had a lost generation because of the war," Malual said. "That's why you are needed so badly. You came here because of war, so now it's not only about your family."

Koang was moved. In 2010, he was offered a position financing business startups and orphanages in South Sudan's Ministry of Social Welfare. To Dukan, the timing seemed bad. She was pregnant with their

seventh child, and the older boys were approaching their teens.

Still, it was a step toward getting everyone home.

On a Sunday after church, they drove to Old Country Buffet on Des Moines' south side. The kids loaded their plates. Koang quieted them for his news: "I've decided to take a job in Africa."

Silence. "What?" "Yeah," he replied. "I've taken a job where your mom and I are from. Eventually, we want to move all of you there, so you can know the culture."

The kids were incredulous. "We're not going! We were born in this country! Why are you leaving us?" Grumbling, they went to get ice cream.

"It didn't seem real to them," Dukan would later recall.

On a hot August night in 2010, she dropped Koang off at Des Moines International Airport, and for the next three years, the kids knew their dad mostly through Sunday night phone calls.

Dukan was able to see him once, in 2013. Together, they traveled to Jikou to discuss a nonprofit they had established to raise funds for an orphanage, school and clinic. Excited, community leaders donated 25 acres of land. They said they would cut timber by hand and construct the buildings themselves.

On a rainy night this past July, Dukan walked down a jetway at Ethiopia's Addis Ababa Bole International Airport. She faced three flights and 24 hours before she would pick up life where she'd left it in Des Moines.

For the first three months of the year, she had wept, it seemed, nonstop. Her children's aunts had made dinners; their uncles had ordered pizza. As winter turned to spring, she had gone through the motions, praying for a miracle.

Now, for five weeks, she had chased down every lead she could find in the refugee camps of her home state and Ethiopia's Gambella region, talking with friends, relatives — anyone who had escaped the incidents in Juba. They told their stories, always saying Koang might still be alive. But his relatives had searched the prisons. It was over.

She sank into her seat, leaned against the window and wept, letting go of everything — graduations with a dad in the stands, weddings with an escort down the aisle, newborn babies with a

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Des Moines-based journalist Ann Hinga Klein specializes in human rights topics. In reporting for this piece, she interviewed Dukan Diew and other South Sudanese Americans over a period of one year and reviewed reports of the ongoing unrest in South Sudan, including statements by independent research organizations, the U.N. Security Council and the U.S. Department of State.

grandpa to wonder over the miracle. She wept, too, for a nation that had come so close to something better.

Two months earlier, the U.N. had released a report on the violence that swept South Sudan, citing forces loyal to both Kiir and Machar for relentless violence and gross violations of human rights. Hospitals, churches and U.N. bases had been attacked. Civilians had been raped, tortured and murdered. More than a million people had fled their homes and farms; famine threatened millions more.

Dukan hadn't read the report, but she had seen the faces in Jikou. Her mind wandered back over her weeks of searching.

Everywhere she looked, there were tents, hungry children and mud in a scene more desperate than the one she had left during the war that had taken her dad, brother and more than 2 million others in their bid for freedom.

She wanted to pick up a gun and fight on their behalf. Instead, she mixed up some cornmeal and milk, warmed it over a fire, and gathered a group of old family friends. Many had lost children and parents. They ate together, talking and laughing — one bowl, many spoons. For the first time in seven months, Dukan felt at peace.

Next she sought the community leaders, telling them she hadn't raised any funds for the orphanage since Koang's disappearance but hoped to resume the effort soon. "Maybe next year," they said, "there will be peace."

Her final meeting was with former Vice President Machar, who had resumed command of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army from Ethiopia. Without proof of her husband's death, she told him, her kids would be unable to apply for aid in the U.S., including college scholarships and grants. Machar, who is Nuer, presumably had no way of confirming the death but followed up with a document.

Flight attendants came by with a rice dish, and Dukan ate a little as she thought through the next steps. Her family in Des Moines would need time to come to terms with the truth that seemed clear to her.

Meanwhile, she had other issues to manage. To make ends meet, she had taken a second job, assisting refugees with a Des Moines agency. Her oldest son's grades had slipped; he would need a solid GPA for college. And the two little girls would need clearer answers to their bedtime questions. She

imagined the conversation:

"When is Dad coming home?"

"Dad is not coming home. Dad is gone, so you don't have a dad."

"Why don't you go to the store and buy us another dad?"

"It doesn't work that way. You only have one dad, and that was your only dad."

She longed for a gravesite, where the loss might seem real to them. She let the grief wash over one more time before the plane touched down, then she gathered her things to find her next gate.

In September, Dukan Diew walked into a Des Moines Social Security office carrying the makeshift death certificate Machar had developed at her request. An official there looked it over and said he would get back to her.

She waited three weeks, then called U.S. Sen. Tom Harkin's Des Moines office and met with a staff assistant, who said he would inquire with the U.S. Embassy in Juba regarding a death certificate.

Now she saw another opportunity. In two months, the anniversary of her husband's disappearance would come and go. If she planned a service, friends and relatives would travel from across the Midwest. Everyone would have the chance to speak. For her kids, it would offer one last glimpse of their father, this time through the eyes of the people who loved him.

Dukan called her brother-in-law, who also lives in Des Moines.

"You know what?" she said. "I'm just going to take a stand. I'm going to set up a memorial service for Koang in December, and whoever wants to come, they can just come, because they are invited."

She knew what he would ask next: What if Koang was still alive? "If it happens," she said, "then we'll celebrate."

She got ready for bed, thinking through the next steps. Money was still tight, and 65-hour workweeks left her exhausted most of the time. But her oldest son's grades had rebounded, and he was talking about college. Like his dad, he had laser focus when it counted. In this country, she thought, a son of hers could become a doctor. A daughter could become a lawyer.

Now she pictured the basement at Trinity Lutheran Church, where she and Koang had sat through Nuer-language services with their squirming kids for more than a decade of Sundays. She pictured the room filled with people, a celebration of her husband's life.

She pictured tables in the gym, with bowls of steaming rice and soup with beef and onions, tomatoes and spicy red peppers.

She pictured herself in Jikou once a year, in the summertime. She had survived war; she could survive this — all of it. She pictured an orphanage, and cornmeal and milk, stirred over a fire. She pictured one bowl and many spoons.

She pictured a prayer and a goodbye.