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Jeremiah Atak, left, and Valentino Deng, right, laugh about the difference in height with Shannon Albert, center. Despite the fact that they tower over her, “they are like the little brothers I never had,” she says. Courtesy photos

Friendship and faith connect Guymon, South Sudan

Every journey begins with a single step, the saying goes.

Shannon Albert’s travels halfway across the world began with a smile.

“I was shopping at Walmart,” the Guymon real estate agent recalled, “when I saw this man — I could tell he was African —and I smiled at him, and he smiled back. So I asked, ‘Are you a Lost Boy?’”

He was, he told Albert, a little startled that this woman even knew the term, which referred to an entire generation of Sudanese men who, as children, had been orphaned by war, forced to

travel 1,000 miles on foot and survived in refugee camps.

Yet Albert knew all about the Lost Boys; she'd seen the news reports and documentaries. She was thrilled to meet one in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

"I told him, 'Welcome to Guymon. We're glad you're here,'" she said. Then, as she walked away, "I felt like the Lord was saying, 'Go back.'" Albert did, all the while thinking, "This man is going to think I'm crazy."

His name was Emmanuel Akol, and he didn't think she was crazy; he thought she was kind. She invited him and his household to celebrate Christmas at her house. It was the beginning of an unlikely and enduring friendship that has changed the lives of everyone it touched — most of all, Albert.

A surprising sense of place

Shannon Albert didn't grow up planning to travel to Africa. The Maine native, part of a close-knit community of French-speaking Acadians, wanted to be a cowgirl. Her love of horses and all things western brought her to Oklahoma Panhandle State University in Goodwell. Though Albert did not become a professional rodeo rider, she did fall in love with the wide-open spaces of the High Plains and the scrappy, can-do character of its Dust Bowl survivors.



After graduation, Albert stayed in the area, moved to Guymon, Okla., earned her real estate license and appraiser's credentials, and went into business. A committed Christian believer, she also found a church family at Emmanuel Southern Baptist Church in Liberal.

At the time Albert and Akol became friends, she'd completed two mission trips, one to Australia and one to Syria. No matter what the locale or the people group — in Australia, she worked with youth, in Syria, with adults in a residential neighborhood — Albert's focus was the same:

“Just to share the gospel,” she said. “That's what it's ultimately about.”

Albert also had a taste for cross-cultural experiences: “I knew I wanted to travel to other parts of the world, and having been in a primarily Muslim country, and in a western culture, I really wanted to visit Africa,” she said.

Through her friendship with Akol, Albert found a destination with personal meaning.

As a Lost Boy, Akol had arrived in the United States through the United Nations program after years in refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. Separated from his family, he arrived in the U.S. not knowing if his parents or siblings had survived the political upheaval. Once he'd obtained his U.S. citizenship, Akol saved money and planned a trip back to Sudan to learn the answer.

Albert wanted to go, too — and she found a way, through the mission agency International Aid Services. When the two set foot on Sudanese soil, Albert worked on projects overseen by IAS. South Sudan, unlike its neighbor to the north, ruled by Muslim extremists, is perceived as a Christianized area. It's true that many South Sudanese people self-identify as Christian because of contact with Catholic and Episcopal missionaries, Albert said, “but that's often in name only. There's still a lot of tribal religious practices, witch doctors, polygamy. It's not evangelical Christianity, though it's growing.” Albert said she counts 325 Pentecostal churches in Northern Bahr el Ghazal, South Sudan. Even so, in 2013, only three Christian weddings took place.

“People still prefer the tribal ways. They give the dowry and they take the girl. Girls are getting married when they're 13, and by the time they're 18, they have five children and the man has

more wives,” she said.

These are realities Albert didn't see or understand on that first visit to South Sudan; during that trip, she marveled at the ease with which a person could present the message of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ, the possibility of a transformed life through a personal relationship with the one true God.

“The open-air preaching is amazing,” she said. “You can go into a market, find a tree, stand under it and begin teaching. It's very easy. People want to hear. They come and they listen and they believe.”

Albert found denominational labels mattered less than a hunger and thirst for the Bible. So, the conservative, Baptist-church-attending woman from the Oklahoma Panhandle began to establish relationships with members of the predominant Christian denomination in South Sudan — the pentecostal church, as the Baptists have not yet established churches in Northern Barh el Ghazal, South Sudan.

Meanwhile, Akol headed out to find his family. Back in the States, he'd worried it might be an impossible task. It turned out to be fairly simple.

“Emmanuel hadn't seen his family for more than 24 years,” Albert said. “They thought he was dead. They'd had a funeral for him.” The reunion felt miraculous, even weeks after the initial amazement wore off, a response Albert witnessed when Akol took her to meet his family in the town of Ariath.

“So I got to experience really living in the bush with them,” she said.

Sudan is hot, spare, desertlike in places — not that different from Southwest Kansas and the Oklahoma Panhandle. Like the people who offer hospitality to strangers in this corner of the world, the Sudanese offered Albert a sense of family.

“They were so warm, so welcoming, very trusting, very friendly,” she said. After years of transplant and travel,

“I just knew I’d found my place in the world.”

Dinka hospitality, High Plains welcome

That trip — the first of four Albert has made to South Sudan — began a new chapter in Albert’s life. It also marked a point of change for the community of Guymon, and for the Sudanese refugees who’d begun to move there.

Back from her travels, Albert found the Sudanese people, part of the same Dinka tribe she’d met when she visited Ariath, were increasingly a part of the town she called home. Having seen where their journey began gave her a deeper sense of appreciation for the challenges they’d weathered. Albert wanted to share what she’d learned with other Guymon residents.

It was 2009, and the U.S. economy had taken a turn for the worse. Sudanese refugees, who’d arrived in the U.S. as part of the United Nations program for displaced people often settled in populous areas like Atlanta, Minneapolis and San Diego. They took jobs in factories and other entry-level work. As the job market tightened, they often found themselves unemployed. A move to the Midwest meant a lower cost of living, more breathing room, safe neighborhoods. Packing houses were always hiring.

Sudanese refugees liked working at Seaboard, Albert learned. More and more former refugees began to move to Guymon until there were about 200. A married couple, with husband and wife working full time, could earn around \$70,000 a year.

“It’s the most money they’ve ever made. In Guymon, you can live well on that. That’s enough to buy a car, or a house,” Albert said. “Or to bring your family over.”

In at least two cases, husbands were able to sponsor the immigration of their Sudanese wives, and start families.

“Now there are even 10 or 15 women who’ve arrived, which is a huge step forward,” she said, “and many have been able to start families.”

As the Sudanese community in this Panhandle community grew, Albert’s friendship translated into practical help. She often accompanied her African friends on apartment searches.

“I’ve helped them with their immigration forms, for their own status and assisting them in bringing their wives over,” she said. Sometimes she assisted in sorting out traffic tickets or other minor violations.

Initially, she recalled, people in Guymon weren’t sure about these new neighbors. They were so tall. So dark-skinned. So foreign.

“You know, it took a while for people to really understand where they came from,” Albert said. “Explaining it — the story of the Lost Boys — has softened people’s hearts. Once people figured out that they weren’t gang members, they were working hard like everyone else and just wanted to live in a safe place, it was all right.”

Change takes time, though, and it doesn’t hurt to have an advocate.

“It sounds kind of strange, I’m not even sure how to say it,” Albert said, “but there are times where it takes a person with the white face to explain the situation. I guess you could say I’ve been an ambassador.” However, Albert said it’s a priority to show respect to her friends.

“I don’t want to act like I know better than them. They’re survivors. They’ve lived through things I can’t imagine,” she said. “I make it a point to only speak up or to help when they ask me. I’m just there if they need me.”

Albert said her role as a supportive friend has opened her eyes to the difficulties Sudanese refugees face.

“They work so hard, and sometimes they have to work twice as hard to prove themselves,” she said. “It’s not something I was aware of before. I grew up in a town of 4,500, and there was one black man who lived there.”

Albert still finds herself surprised when she catches a glimpse of how skin color affects social interactions.

“A friend of mine was buying a car, and they’d agreed on a price, so I told him ‘You don’t need me, just go,’ when it was time to finalize the purchase. He said, ‘Please come, Shannon, it’s easier when you’re there.’”

A few weeks later, Albert took a friend to a Greyhound bus depot in Texas.

“I was waiting with him till the bus came, and the agent asked me, ‘What are you doing here?’” Albert said. “I told him, ‘I’m here to make sure my friend is treated fairly.’”

Yet things are different in Guymon, which hosted its first-ever African festival last year.

“It was a huge success,” Albert said with a wide smile. “We did it as an educating opportunity, and a way to bring people into African culture, rather than leaving them out. People were so receptive, they want to do it every year.” She sighed, adding, “I don’t know — it’s a lot of work.”

Meanwhile, Guymon has seen the opening of a restaurant that serves Ethiopian and Eritrean food. Albert looks forward to the day that a store offering hard-to-find African food ingredients opens.

“It could happen,” she said. “It probably will.”

Changing a culture from the ground up

Even as Guymon and Liberal are transformed by the influx of new people groups, Albert has worked to effect changes in South Sudan. After completing three mission trips under the sponsorship of IAS, she succeeded in setting up a nonprofit agency, Nhomlaau. That means a simpler, more direct visa application process and more opportunities to teach and minister in South Sudan.

Nhomlaau’s board of directors — made up of Christian believers in Liberal, Amarillo, Guymon, Florida and Tennessee — envisions a vibrant ministry that will support local churches in South Sudan, provide literacy programs for women, care for orphans through foster-care programs and transform the culture one family at a time.

For now, Albert and her network of South Sudanese pastors have focussed on Bible teaching and encouragement for Christians who already believe.

During the Christmas holiday, Albert traveled throughout the region to present Bible teaching “on the Old and New Testament, social issues like marriage, labor, the sabbath, tithing,” she said. “Right now, it’s all through translation. I am learning some Dinka language, though, little by little.”

A highlight of the trip was a Christmas celebration like no other she’d experienced.

“The church there observes Christmas Eve, all day, and it goes into the night, nearly all night,” she said. “They don’t want to leave the church. They take a short break to go home and sleep, and then they come back all day for Christmas.”

Midway through Albert's visit, military conflict broke out in South Sudan. The U.S. State Department issued warnings for Americans to leave the country. Though Albert modified her itinerary, avoiding areas where fighting had been reported, she stayed through as long as she had planned.

"You couldn't tell the difference, where I was," she said. "I was very safe."

In part, this confidence came from Albert's faith, which motivated her travel in the first place.

And in part, the confidence came from the fact that, in a way, Albert was at home, where she belonged.

- To learn more about Nhomlaau, visit the fledgling organization's website, www.nhomlaau.org, or contact local board member Shannon Albert at 806.683.2325 or email at shanash23@hotmail.com.

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