

# MCC Refugee Response

## The Call



*“As a child in a time of war, when you hear your name you do not resist the call, you just go.”*

**N**ine year old Rudi Okot awakened to the call of his name and sounds of gunshots ringing through the midnight air in what is now South Sudan. Under the cover of darkness his family fled the first of many flights to temporary shelter. Morning light revealed their flattened home, death of their neighbours, and the realization that they needed to leave... Their lives were forever changed from that one fateful night. Rudi began a journey with women and other children piled into a convoy of trucks that guided those who were strong enough to walk. He moved forward without his father, who had previously disappeared one night and was considered missing or dead. The seven-day trip that would have only taken seven hours by car did not escape altogether the throes of war - there was danger from all angles. Every hint of a plane overhead brought the threat of bombs that could end their flight. A landmine took down the front vehicle of the convoy and the lives inside it. The rest of the group had no choice but to keep moving...

Fleeing and finding food was a way of being for far too long. The convoy approached Kaya, a town recently captured by the rebels who took them in. The convoy stayed with the rebels for months until food scarcity forced them to flee yet again on foot to refugee camps in Congo, Uganda, and Kenya. While money was lying on the ground worthless in the wake of war back in Sudan, Rudi picked up grains of rice that fell from the ration bags handed out by relief organizations. The rice was worth enough to sell so that he could afford to go to school. Rudi spent years in several refugee camps, with varying experiences of security and simple living. He finished high school and began to teach, until one day he received an unexpected call from what seemed another world, Canada...

*“I didn’t believe it – even when I spoke to him over the phone I didn’t believe it.”*



Mennonite  
Central  
Committee

Rudi had assumed his father dead for most of the 11 years they were separated. Yet his father was not only alive but had managed to land in Kakuma camp in Kenya, and later resettled in Canada. Rudi's Aunt was sponsored by Westheights Community Church to come to Canada through MCC's Private Sponsorship of Refugees Program. The Okot family reunited in Canada through the help of Chester from the church, and Barbara from Reception House (a temporary housing unit for refugees). The church was supportive in helping the family resettle and integrate into Canadian community. Members such as Jean were significant in the support of Rudi's family. "Losing Jean was like losing a family member," Rudi recalled her passing away a few years ago to cancer.

After landing on Canadian soil, passion drove Rudi to the Katimavik program and university for his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Peace and Conflict Studies. In partnership with MCC Ontario, MSCU, and the Centre for Peace Advancement Centre at Conrad Grebel and the University of Waterloo, Rudi is the secretary general for KW South Sudanese Community Peacebuilding Task Force that formed when conflict broke out in South Sudan to mitigate, manage, and transform the impact of the conflict. In August 2015 he moves to Jordan with MCC to work with refugees who have also fled for their lives and seek refuge. Rudi circles back: he was a refugee whose family received MCC support in finding a new home, and is now working with MCC and supporting refugees.

Rudi was called again, but this time not as a child running for his life nor in response to a lost and found father. He has been called not to flee but to go from a conviction to help those who have also lost home and are searching for it. Rudi is responding full circle to yet another call and encourages us to listen to whatever is calling us. "Sponsoring somebody to Canada, that's the best gift you can give... It is my conviction; the best we can do is give the gift of life – not the way God can, but to give someone the chance to live a fairly good life – to put a smile on their face and not have to pick up grains of rice from the ground."

The sponsorship program is a vital partnership that helps refugees who have gone through more than many of us could imagine transition into relationships, resources, and rebuilding of a new life here in Canada. The growing number of those fleeing conflict worldwide exceeds 50 million people. Though Canada is no replacement for home, no antidote for trauma, no resurrection of death, it is a place where there is opportunity for those of us with the privilege of security and a few extra dollars to respond to the call to look and act beyond our own spheres. Westheights Community Church offers us a beautiful example of how a church family can welcome the stranger. The relationships cultivated through this process often grow deep, as sponsorship is not merely about finding food and furniture, but friendship and even family. Relationships honed through the Private Sponsorship of Refugee program fueled Rudi along his journey full circle from refugee status to assisting those with refugee status.

