



# A long time coming

*One partner family's story, from Sudan to Nebraska*

By Phillip Jordan

**Omaha, Nebraska**—When Omjuma Dut decided to leave Sudan in 1999, she did so with her family's safety and future in mind.

"I just wanted a better life for me and my children," Dut said simply.

Dut dreamed of moving to the United States, but that wasn't possible from Sudan then. Egypt was an option, however. Between 1994 and 2005, more than 58,000 Sudanese refugees sought asylum in Egypt, registering with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to escape the violent military conflicts festering in Sudan. In 1999, the Dut family joined those numbers traveling north to Egypt.

For three years, Dut worked toward gaining passage to the United States while also looking after four of her children. Her fifth and oldest child, Margaret Akol, was 12 years old when the family moved to Cairo. It fell to Akol to support the family. While her mother looked after the other siblings, Akol worked the next three years as a housekeeper for a wealthy family.

"When you are a housekeeper, you have to stay with the people you work with," Akol said. "So I did that, which meant I could only visit my family for

a day or two each week. I was happy to support my family, but it was very tough not being with them."

In 2002, Dut secured entry to the United States for herself and her children. Three more years of uncertainty followed before the family finally settled in Omaha, Nebraska, where a new Sudanese-American community is growing. A decade ago, just over 1,000 Sudanese immigrants had moved to the Midwestern city. Estimates vary, but at least 10,000 Sudanese-Americans live in Omaha today, making it one of the largest Sudanese populations in the United States.

Omaha offered the Dut family a supportive community, jobs and a feeling of stability. However, even with both Dut and Akol working, the family didn't make enough money to live together.

Akol, now 22 with a young daughter of her own, once again lives separately, in a small apartment. Her mother lives in another apartment, crowded with her five other children, who range in age from 6 to 18.

Soon, the family will be reunited once again.

Late in 2008, on the advice of a friend at work, Dut applied to partner with Habitat for Humanity of Omaha. For the past year, she has been attending financial classes and putting in

sweat-equity hours working on other Habitat houses.

On Friday, May 7, work began on Dut's own home. Her family's house will be the 13th Women Build home constructed by Habitat of Omaha. Saturday's kickoff took place during National Women Build Week 2010, which included more than 225 Women Builds across the United States.

Amelia O'Donnell is an AmeriCorps member serving with Habitat of Omaha. She will help at this house throughout the summer and is excited to have the chance to get to know Dut better.

"She's a single mom with six kids, and she's had her struggles, coming from Sudan and living as a refugee," O'Donnell said. "But it's really inspiring, all she's done for her family and that she chose to work with Habitat to do even more. She'll soon have a nice, new home that lots of other women will help her build. I think that's pretty cool."

This will be the first home that Dut has ever built. As she watched the frames of her house rise Saturday, she said she was surprised that so many volunteers—about 30—had come to help on a cold, damp and blustery morning.

"I was surprised about the Women Build, too," Dut said. "I had never seen something like that, especially where I came from. But it is good to see. I am very excited and I'm glad to be with so many women."

For her part, Akol said she is most excited about the prospect of moving back in with her mother and the rest of her siblings in a home that is big enough for them all. She is also happy that—with newfound stability—she can again look toward dreams deferred.

"I have a lot of dreams that I want to accomplish," Akol said. "First, I want to go back to school and get my nursing degree. I want to support my daughter and do the best I can."

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