

Refugees' big dreams come true at Lakehead University

BY KEVIN BROOKS

ON THE outskirts of the Kakuma Refugee Camp in northern Kenya, is the glamorously named but simple-as-can-be Angelina Jolie School for Girls. When I stood there in blistering heat and dirt-filled wind gusts in December of 2007, looking for signs of life and hope, I noticed a small tree had been planted, and a donor tag read, "WUSC."

"What's WUSC?" I asked one of the Lost Boys of Sudan I was travelling with.

I got a skeptical glance, and this: "Doesn't every Canadian know about WUSC? It sends refugees from Kakuma to university in Canada — it is the brightest light in our world."

The brightest light in Kakuma didn't, and still doesn't, register a flicker for most Canadians. Yet the World University Services of Canada (WUSC) continues to send highly qualified students from the refugee camps in Kenya, Malawi, and recently Jordan and Uganda, to Canadian universities through their Student Refugee Program.

Right from the start, the program has been a success at Lake-



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The Thunder Bay Anti-Racism and Respect Advisory Committee and Diversity Thunder Bay produce this monthly column to promote greater understanding of race relations in Northwestern Ontario

head University and throughout Canada.

The first WUSC student at Lakehead was Martin Rusanga, a refugee from Rwanda living in Uganda. He arrived in 1993 and earned his honours business administration degree in 1997. His wife Evelyne was able to join him and earn her business administration degree in 2003, and the couple were active in churches and organizations in Thunder Bay.

Today, Dr. Rusanga runs an optical dispensary in Kigali, the capital of Rwanda, and directs the Nu-

Vision High School.

Since 2008, Lakehead University has consistently supported one student, then two students per year starting in 2013. These students have often been young southern Sudanese men from the camp I visited in 2007. Kachuol Piok, who came in 2016, is the nephew of the Lost Boy of Sudan I was travelling with.

"WUSC is the big dream everyone chases," Kachuol told me. He said that when he found out he was coming to Canada, "That was the best day of my life."

Kachuol loves living in Thunder Bay. People have been exceptionally kind to him and he hopes to continue his studies at the Northern Ontario School of Medicine after graduation in June of 2020.

"I want to be in the medical field so I can help my people back home," he told me. When I told him about the first WUSC student at Lakehead, Dr. Rusanga, Kachuol's smile lit up the whole history of the program.

Rebecca Stephens, also southern Sudanese and from the Kakuma camp, was the first female student to be supported at Lakehead University in 2015. Since then, two

more female students have arrived.

Students from Iraq and Syria have joined those from East Africa; the WUSC presence on campus grows and diversifies. When I asked Rebecca what she would be doing if she hadn't been selected for the WUSC Student Refugee Program, she said "I don't even let myself think about that."

The students arrive as permanent residents, and are supported by Lakehead University and its students for one year. But after that, they are like every other Ontario student—applying for loans, working at Canadian Tire during the school year and gold mines in the summer.

Some of the students speak Arabic, so they help the Thunder Bay Multicultural Association with translating for refugee families from Syria or the Darfur region of Sudan.

WUSC guides the program but the real engine is the Canadian students who are willing to pay a small annual fee of \$7 to contribute to a life-changing experience.

At Lakehead University, one student-turned-WUSC Mom (or sister,

as she prefers), has kept the program running: Emily Lauzon. In the spring of 2012, Emily was elected vice-president of the Lakehead University Student Union and was handed the WUSC binder. Seven years later, no longer a student or Lakehead employee, Emily is still greeting new students at the airport and helping them buy winter coats.

"As our WUSC community grows in Thunder Bay, so does the need for support at all levels," Emily told me over email late one night. "From high level administrative support in the university, to the day-to-day friendships that grow from the unique peer-to-peer structure of the sponsorship program, everyone can play a part in making these students' first Canadian experience a meaningful one. I'm so glad I did."

Kevin Brooks works at Lakehead University and is a founding member of the non-profit African Soul, American Heart: A School for Orphaned Girls from South Sudan. The views and opinions expressed in this column are those of the author.