

Did You Know? It Happens Here?

Sudanese Refugee Children Come to East Grand Rapids

Shared by Catherine Frerichs

In 2000, I became the foster mother to three children from Sudan. They came to the US as part of the 4000 Lost Boys the US agreed to re-settle. I was lucky enough to also have a girl, Debora, who was 16, along with her brothers, Mach (14) and Deng (12). They fled their village in 1992 without either parent, wandered for a year with other villagers, then spent eight years in a refugee camp in northwest Kenya. When the children came, I lived in East Grand Rapids, a well-to-do, primarily white Grand Rapids suburb. I wondered how these three very black children would be treated, especially given the severe limitations of their schooling in the refugee camp.

As the youngest of the children, Deng struggled here with behavior we take for granted: going to school every day, being graded on your work. Mach used his outgoing personality to make friends. As he says, "I never thought about other people thinking about the color of my skin." Debora remembers her academic struggles: "In camp, I never had to speak in class or write a paper. Here, I had no idea of how to even begin a paper. The teachers gave me hope. They knew I could do the work and were patient." Debora says there were only a few questions from fellow students of the "Did you wear clothes in Africa?" variety. The challenges the children had because they were black came from the police, people who didn't know them and looked only at the color of their skin. When the children began driving, they all had the experience of being followed at night and questioned: "Where are you going?" "Are you sure you live here?"

All three children appreciate the opportunities they had in East Grand Rapids, as do I. I only wish it could have been a more equally welcoming experience.