

# The Bartered Shirt and the Shade Tree

*Quest for education carries one young man from civil war strife to new American life*

Joseph Nain's life did not actually start at age 10. But Nain says it sure feels that way to him. Not that he didn't have a childhood, a mother and father, sisters and brothers. It was, however, Nain's bad luck to be born in Sudan, in the southern Blue Nile village of Gindi, near the border of Ethiopia, in 1983—the first year of Sudan's 20-year civil war. Nain spent his first ten years as a war refugee and, from age 10 to 18, he lived on and off in a U.N. sponsored refugee camp in Ethiopia.



Photo credit: Kenneth Wilks

Today, Joseph Nain, 26, is a college student in New Orleans, studying at Loyola University. He ultimately hopes to pursue an industrial engineering degree at Louisiana State University. Along the way, he picked up an associate in occupational studies degree in instrumentation and control systems at ITI Technical College in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Nain is one of the improbable survivors of the Sudanese Diaspora. He almost did not survive. Two million people died in the conflict, another four million were displaced, and 600,000 wound up in neighboring countries, including Nain and his sisters.

Why the carnage? Sudan's civil war pitted an Arabic-speaking central government in the north, attempting

to impose Islamic law nationwide, against black African rebels in the south, representing numerous tribal peoples, including many of the Christian faith, who were seeking self-determination.

The struggle over religion and power is key: Sudan has known war since its very beginning as a sovereign nation. Similar north and south tensions produced the country's first civil war from 1955 to 1972. Towards the end of this period, Colonel Gaafar Muhammad Nimeiri came to power in a coup and proclaimed a socialist state. Nimeiri was able to negotiate a peace accord, shoring up his own hold on the country by granting the south a certain amount of autonomy. By 1983, however, Nimeiri had revoked these concessions and sought to impose Islamic law on the South. The fight was on again.

Over the course of the next few years, Gindi, Nain's tribal village near Kurmuk, roughly 800 kilometers south of Khartoum, would be right on the front line of the hostilities. Caught between insurgent and counterinsurgent forces, the local populace, including Nain's father Musa, a village chief, and older brothers, were forced to choose sides, and they went with the rebels, the Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA). In response to the burgeoning rebel activity, the central government made the area and its people a target of its operations to pacify the south. Seventeen thousand people from around Kurmuk, mostly women and children of the Sunj tribe, fled to Ethiopia.

Nain recalls the harsh period that followed, a period marked by hunger and privation. As bad as living conditions were, at least the camp had some U.N. support. That soon changed. Although initially accommodated in the new country, a change of government in Ethiopia brought a change in the government's attitude towards the refugees. They were pushed back into Sudan, and a life on the move followed, thousands of people staying one step ahead of hostilities in the desolate no-man's land at the edge of battle.

"I was always traveling around...running around," Nain

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says, “I might stay here for at least a few months and go to a different spot. There was always some problem.” More so because now Ethiopian troops were involved in the fighting too. “We were caught in the middle,” Nain says. “As soon as the soldiers attacked...you can’t cross into Ethiopia or the Ethiopian army is over there.” Nain was luckier than some of his young friends. He is alive to tell the tale, even if his legs show the shrapnel scars of a too close call with an aerial bombardment. Some of his friends were less lucky. These children, he says, “were cut to pieces” in the attacks.

## Contest for Survival

For the next several years, Nain’s own childhood became a contest for survival. His father and older brothers were fighting with the SPLA. By 1991, the Sudanese civilians had moved back to an area controlled by the rebels and relatively safe from government forces. But the refugees had no food. Drinking water came from ruts in the road. Many just walked off into adjacent fields to die.

Joseph Nain was eight years old. He knew how to handle an AK-47 assault rifle and to defend himself. He had witnessed death. He even understood the reasons for the war raging constantly around him a bit better. But he did not know where his next meal was coming from. At one point, he became separated from his family and wandered alone for two days (he and his mother, Rebecca, were reunited in Asosa, where she had gone

to train as a nurse). At another point, the young boy’s strength failed completely and his family paused their long march for two weeks, waiting for him to either die of starvation with a measure of dignity or to recover enough to continue the walk. A shirt bartered for a small amount of corn gave Nain the strength to go on.

“It was a bad, bad time,” Nain says, adding that only negative things come from that period in his life.

The young man’s prospects began to change in 1993. Nain was back in an Ethiopian refugee camp. By then, the UN had convinced the Ethiopian government to provide a safe harbor. Food and other aid began to flow to the refugees. And now, for the first time, there was a primary school for the camp’s children. At age 10, Nain began to learn his ABC’s.

“We began under the shade tree, writing on a slate, sometimes on boards with charcoal,” Nain says. “At that primary school...that is where I consider my life starting, right there.”

Nain spent the next seven years as a student in the camp primary school. His formal education might have stopped there. The chance for resettlement came in 1999. Under a U.N. program, the Catholic Archdiocese of Baton Rouge was offering the young man the chance for a new start. By then, Nain, 18, had been reunited with his parents and the worst of

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Photo credit: Kenneth Wilks

civil war strife seemed to be behind them. Nain had no English language skills and the American culture seemed daunting, particularly for one who would be making the journey alone. Yet the elder Nains encouraged their son to take the bold step and to continue his education in the United States.

### When You Hear ‘America’

“Baton Rouge: I didn’t know where I was going. All I knew... I was going to America. When you hear ‘America,’ what you hear is hope,” Nain says.

Nain had his ticket out of the refugee camp, but at 18 he had no one to pay his expenses after being resettled. This need to earn a living ruled out high school in the United States. Instead, he began English as a Second Language classes. He also began working long hours on a landscaping crew. After two years, Nain found a job as a maintenance worker at the St. Alphonsus Liguori Catholic Church in Greenwell Springs, Louisiana; two jobs actually, one at the Church and a second part-time gig doing clean up for a school co-located in the church. Nain would start his work day at 4 a.m. , and after one eight hour shift came a second five hours. Even so, he says he

“loved” the jobs at the church. “I loved anything I could run my hand in as long as I get paid,” he says.

Single minded in his pursuit of an education, Nain still found time for study. And having beefed up his English language skills, Nain set a new goal for himself: passing the high school equivalency exam.

“The GED took me a long time. It was hard, hard, hard. It’s not that I can’t do it. It’s that the time that I was consuming on it just wasn’t enough.”

Nain says he failed the GED test four times.

“I kept going back. I would take a test and become so mad. I’d pull the chair up and say, ‘This will be the time...I struggled for so long but I said, ‘It is too late now to give up.’ So I just continued...”

Too late indeed. Showing the kind of fortitude that would humble many far more fortunate than he, Nain finally passed the high school equivalence exam (he says the poems on the test were his downfall in previous attempts). In the meantime, he had breezed past an Ability to Benefit test at ITI Technical

College and already enrolled in a certificate program. Passing the GED in 2007 made him eligible to enroll in the institution's associate degree program as well.

Nain graduated from ITI in 2008. Mark Hughes, who heads the Instrumentation Department at ITI, recalls Nain as a friendly, hardworking student but not one to call attention to himself. Hughes only learned of Nain's status as a refugee when another student brought it to his attention. Hughes says the quiet student underscored the virtues of perseverance and pursuit of a dream.

The young man's degree in instrument and control systems technology led to a job as an instrument technician with Industrial Specialty Contractors. Having achieved that level of academic success, Nain recalls himself as being a "very, very changed person." He says the ITI experience lifted his sense of self-worth, level of energy and, if possible, his determination.

### Technician's Job Becomes Anchor

The position at Industrial Specialty Contractors is the building block on which Nain is continuing to build his future. He has been with the company for almost two years and calls it his "anchor." "It helps me get the money to get a better car, and it can help me pay some part of school," he says.

Now Nain is off in pursuit of a new dream: a four-year college degree. He attends night school at Loyola University

in New Orleans, studying social science, while continuing to work his day job in Baton Rouge. The 90-minute drive between the two cities makes the schedule tight, and Nain is moving to New Orleans to try and cut down on the wear and tear. But doing so is all part of a larger plan...and a willingness to sacrifice short term to succeed down the road:

"My plan was...go to ITI, finish, and get a job. Now I can be in better financial stability...get a better car, and pursue my [higher education] goal...They say in America, 'you can do a lot if you stick to it.' Challenges come your way but the Lord blesses you and it helps. So that was my plan and it did work."

At 26, Nain remains unmarried. A family, he says, has to be put on hold while he pursues his career goals. He likes to be able to get up and "do my thing," and his schedule suggests he has many bases to cover on any given day. A group of other young Sudanese men in the Baton Rouge area forms a community support group and provides Nain with a sense of family that might otherwise be missing. He volunteers with children. He is active in his church. When Nain does pause to look around at his surroundings, he is surprised to find some American teenagers not working as hard as he did.

But Nain does that rarely. He has little time to lose. As he says, his life started at age 10, under a shade tree, on the edge of a war zone.



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