

Former 'Lost Boy' shares his story, hopes for Sudan's future with Black River students

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Holland, MI — Black River Public School social studies and English students listened to a first-hand account of history-in-the-making on Tuesday afternoon as Sudanese refugee Jacob Atem shared with them his dreams to see south Sudan established as a sovereign nation.

Atem — one of Sudan's child refugees dubbed the "Lost Boys" by media — told students he voted just days ago in the southern Sudanese independence referendum in a bid to allow the resource-rich south to secede from arid north Sudan.

"I was so excited," Atem said. "We say ballot, not bullet, this time."

South Sudan could declare its independence from the north by July, if, as Atem expects, residents voted for freedom.

Atem spoke about his flight after a raid on his home village by the Sudanese government during the second Sudanese Civil War.

"This is the same war that has killed my parents," he said. "I was young, I was about 6 or 7 when that attack happened. I was looking after the cattle with my cousin and they came and completely destroyed the village. My sister today is still in slavery."

Atem and his cousin survived in the wild, sometimes drinking their own urine for moisture, and stayed constantly on the move.

"We kept saying, 'God, how far should we walk? One mile, five miles?'" he said. "I kept asking my cousin, 'Are we coming back?'"

Atem also spoke about adjusting to American culture after coming to a foster home east of Lansing as a teenager and about his struggles in school.

"If I got my master's (degree), I don't know what your excuse is for not going to college," he said.

Black River Public School is in the final years of phasing in a policy requiring all students to be accepted into a four-year college in order to receive a high school diploma.

He made the students raise their right hand in a mock pledge ceremony, reciting, "I will go to college, because Jacob did."

Atem now runs a nonprofit agency, Southern Sudan Health Care, with the goal of setting up health clinics in Southern Sudan.

Kaylee Harmening, a sophomore, called the presentation "eye-opening."

"Living in America, we don't think about other societies," she said.

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