

Celebrating Immigrants: From Child Soldier to College Graduate



Boulder library program helped Joseph Ayani learn English and earn GED

In 1987, eight-year-old Joseph Ayani faced a deadly attack on his village in war-torn Sudan. Separated from his family, Joseph ran away to Ethiopia.

"It was tough. We didn't have food and water," said Ayani of his escape. "People died because of hunger and thirst. Sometimes wild animals attacked children on the way."

His journey would be even more difficult once he arrived in Ethiopia, where he was forced into becoming a child soldier.

"It was very hard. There were a lot of challenges," said Ayani. "You can get sick, and we don't have doctors or parents. We were the ones to support ourselves. It was a very hard life."

Ayani was a child soldier for four years before escaping the war zone to a refugee camp in Kenya, where he could focus more on his education. Though he escaped the rebel leaders, Joseph still faced plenty of hardship -- such as going a week or so without food.



Joseph moved to Colorado in 2001 after a long and complicated legal process. Moving to the U.S. gave him the opportunity to reconnect with his family.

"We were separated. After I ran away, they went to North Sudan. We never had communication," said Ayani. "They thought I was dead."

Once in the U.S., Ayani called around Sudan to try and locate his mother. A stepbrother of Ayani's mother helped him find her. With Ayani's help, his mother and brother were finally able to move to Australia after years of attempting to leave Sudan. Ayani has since visited them three times.

In 2002, Ayani moved to Boulder. He learned English and earned his GED through BoulderReads, a free Boulder Public Library program where volunteers help with literacy and language skills.

"BoulderReads was my family," he said. "It was the first step to getting an education here in America."

Just last month, Joseph graduated American Public University with a degree in counterintelligence, which he pursued because of his childhood experience.

"I need to be able to protect people," he said. Ayani now works as a security officer in Denver while studying online for his master's degree, with the goal of becoming a special agent with the FBI.

In addition to his work and education pursuits, Joseph helps run The World of Educational, Libraries and Schools (TWOELS), a charity dedicated to providing education, school supplies and more for children in both Colorado and South Sudan.

"I've been there. I know what they need," he said. "People want to get an education, but they don't have the resources."

He plans to build a school in South Sudan and is working to raise donations.

"There is a lot of people who need help, but we cannot give up," said Ayani. "We need to do our best. Even a little bit can help."

Boulder City Council has designated June as Immigrant Heritage Month. The city is sharing the stories of community members this summer to highlight some of the countless ways immigrants contribute to our community and make Boulder a special place.