

ARM THE CHILDREN WITH BOOKS, NOT GUNS

Deng Thiak Adut needs little in the way of introduction – child soldier, man of hope, Dinka-Bor survivor, advocate, 2016 NSW Australian of the Year, brother, son, and now, soon to be father. And despite all that has been written about this remarkable young man who has overcome unthinkable adversity, he doesn't feel his story is an exceptional one.

*"I had been marched for a month as a child, but everyone had. I had been trained in a military camp, but everyone had. I fought as everyone had, I was injured as everyone was and I had suffered, as everyone had. I survived, but not everyone had... Why me? I asked myself. I realised that I was asking the wrong question. It didn't matter why it was me who was garnering all that interest, I should be asking what could I do with it."*¹



Claire E. Bibby

As Senior Vice President & General Counsel for Brookfield Properties, Claire's strengths rest in overseeing a busy, multi-award winning, in-house legal team. Claire is a director of Luna Park, a non-executive director of Marist 180, an Entrepreneur Ambassador for Opportunity International, and a committee member of MS Angels, the Australian National Committee for UN Women and Soroptimist International. Claire is a passionate philanthropist, mentor and public speaker on issues of diversity and inclusion, psychological wellness and women's leadership.

Claire is a member of the ACC Australia NSW Divisional Committee and the ACC Australia Mentoring Committee.



Photography by Joel Pratley

One must step back in time to try to get some semblance of an understanding of what today drives the man who is Deng Adut. He credits his life to his late brother, John Mac, who courageously risked his own life to smuggle the 14 year old Deng from his existence of several years as a Sudanese child soldier. With the help of the United Nations, the boys became the third Sudanese refugee family resettled in Australia. John himself was the first Sudanese refugee to earn a university degree (taking in fact a double degree). And despite carrying the scars of war, the teenage Deng taught himself English and went on to pursue his own academic studies. Higher education was the key that opened the door to a life that might otherwise have been lost. Deng graduated with an LLB from Western Sydney University in 2011 and then went on to complete a Masters degree

John in the meantime, despite his own exceptional academic record, was unable to gain employment in Australia. He was drawn to return to his homeland of Sudan and became the owner of a number of thriving local businesses. That was, until his murder in 2014.

Armed with a law degree and a growing private practice, a deeply entrenched sense of social justice and a drive to ensure his brother's life and death would not be one that was lived and taken in vain, Deng made a promise to himself to make John's sacrifices worthwhile. In 2016 this took the form of the "John Mac Foundation", a registered charity seeking to further education and justice in both Australia and South Sudan. In Deng's own mind, he will be close to having paid back his brother when he has had an equivalent twenty fold impact: namely



Deng and his partner Tammy Beveridge, Deng Adut (personal photograph)

when he himself has changed the lives of at least twenty people from disadvantaged backgrounds – a target he is aiming to reach by 2025. Deng firmly believes the target can be achieved through access to education, but he emphasises that education is not a want – it is a necessity; a necessity that is not always available to the most vulnerable in our community.

In Australia, the John Mac Foundation is working to provide university scholarships to disadvantaged students, principally from refugee backgrounds, to help with tertiary expenses. In order to qualify, the students must be Australian citizens or permanent residents. Alongside an education, scholarship recipients receive mentoring to equip them to be ready for the practice of law. Whilst still in its infancy, the Foundation received over two hundred applications for the inaugural scholarship. To date they have been able to support three students with fully funded scholarships, at a cost of approximately \$7,500 each student each year over the course of three years. Armed with the first royalty cheque from the sale of his book, *Songs of a War Boy*, these initial scholarships were funded entirely by Deng. And his goal is to fund another two scholarships by the end of 2017.

In South Sudan, the Foundation is aiming to support the pursuit of criminal and environmental justice, by making resources available to students, lawyers, judges and educators in the form of books, scholarships and new skills. At the time of writing, the first shipping container of second hand legal texts, donated by law firms, law libraries, members of the Bar and the Judiciary, is soon to be en route to Mombasa in Kenya and then on to Juba in South Sudan. All of this has

been facilitated for the Foundation by corporate and individual volunteers. The first shipping container is currently being filled at Port Botany with the support of Patrick Container Terminals (a Brookfield & Qube jointly owned company).

The board of the Foundation consists of Deng, Hugh Riminton (Network 10 News broadcaster and journalist) as Chair, Judith Preston (Doctor of Philosophy candidate, Macquarie University Lecturer) and Professor Michael Adams (Professor and Dean of Law at WSU). In the short to medium term, the Foundation's goal is to secure increased financial backing, most likely from individual philanthropists and corporate supporters. Deng's personal donations can obviously only go so far – and whilst to him, it is his duty to support the next generation of his adopted country and not leave anyone behind, it is a journey he needs the support of others to achieve.

Hand in hand with his desire to expand educational opportunities, Deng has his eye on the 'system' and the red tape that goes with it. A passionate supporter for the building blocks of the educational equation, Deng has now begun to advocate for the rights of educators. Improved conditions and access to funding, better remuneration and increased opportunities to develop the teachers of tomorrow are to him 'no brainers'. Deng speaks of his desire to "spread the good news about education" – and how an "educated community is a healthy community." The gap between the educational 'haves' and the 'have nots' can, in Deng's vision, be best reduced through a broadening of educational opportunities. It is Deng's fervent belief that students' time should be dedicated to reading books and studying. He does not advocate

for young adults diverting their study time to menial jobs so as to eke out an existence – a view he recognises calls for a greater financial burden to be placed on the community. But in response he says, is that not short term pain for a long term gain? Is not giving someone else a 'fair go' part of our DNA?

Deng and his partner Tammy are expecting their first baby later this year. He who was a child soldier and a refugee, remains a man of hope as he looks toward the next chapters of his life.

The term "paying it forward" arguably now has one of its greatest poster children. The gift of a new life that John gave to Deng is now being tangibly replicated for others. But more help is needed. This village that is the John Mac Foundation is manned by a small group of dedicated, highly driven individuals. To learn more or become involved, visit www.johnmacfoundation.org or contact the Foundation's CEO, Nick Willetts (nick@johnmacfoundation.org). Opportunities abound to provide financial or fundraising assistance, donate legal text or other books, act as a mentor, help as a volunteer or facilitate introductions to enable the Foundation to grow. It can even be as simple as organising a book drive at your school or place of employment so as to help arm the children of Sudan with books, not guns.

The Association of Corporate Counsel (ACC) Australia Mentoring Program is this year launching its "Conquering Adversity Mentoring Scholarship", with the inaugural scholarship being awarded to the John Mac Foundation. The scholarship is aimed to support those overcoming adversity, to encourage diversity and to ensure in-house careers are promoted to promising entry level lawyers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Recipients must have completed at least one full year of under or post graduate law education (or an international equivalent) and the winner will receive one year of monthly mentoring sessions with an ACC Australia member, access to the ACC Australia Mentoring Program Resource Library, invitations to mentoring program events, public speaking/presentation support and other benefits. The first recipient will be announced at the ACC Australia National Conference to be held this year in Alice Springs over 15-17 November 2017. ¹

For more information on the John Mac Foundation, please visit: johnmacfoundation.org/

Footnote

¹ *Songs of a War Boy/Deng Think Adut with Ben McKelvey*