

WORLD-HERALD BUREAU

WASHINGTON - War, poverty and disease chased Buey Ruei and his family from their home in Sudan when he was about 11 years old.

Ten years later, Ruei is looking for ways he can help his troubled country. For starters, he's working on an initiative to provide clean water and spur development in the region where he was raised.

Ruei, a University of Nebraska at Omaha student, still has a long way to go, but he has been making some high-level connections.

He recently wrapped up a two-month internship in the Washington office of U.S. Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb.

During his time there, Ruei met with other lawmakers and got some firsthand government experience.

He even sat in on a discussion between U.S. Sen. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and Sudanese Vice President Salva Kiir when the two talked about sanctions against Sudan.

High-powered meetings on Capitol Hill are a long way from the environment in which Ruei grew up.

There wasn't always much to eat or drink. The children played soccer with a ball made up of old shirts. Boys as young as 9 were expected to pick up guns and defend their villages.

Ruei shies away from discussing details of his childhood in southern . He said that he doesn't want anyone feeling sorry for him and that he would rather not dwell on those memories.

It's instability and limited educational opportunities prompted Ruei's father to bring his family members to as refugees. They made their way to Omaha , attracted by the work available for unskilled laborers.

Crossing the ocean didn't mean they had completely escaped violence, however.

When the family was living in Omaha 's crime-plagued Wintergreen Apartments, Ruei's father found himself literally ducking bullets.

Ruei said one man who was chasing another pulled out a gun and started firing, the shots zinging past his father's head and striking the van beside him.

"Things like that happened over there all the time - it was just sick," he said, talking about Wintergreen - not his war-torn homeland.

Ruei said he and his brothers were harassed because they didn't fit in with the hip-hop culture. The smell of herbs from his mother's African cooking settled into his clothes and prompted teasing from classmates.

During one dispute, Ruei said, he was threatened with a gun.

The family eventually moved into their own house. Ruei said he struggled for some time to adjust to his new country.

He got involved with the Boy Scouts and credits his scoutmaster, Lyn Graves, for pointing him in the right direction. It was Graves who helped put Ruei in touch with Terry's Omaha office.

Ruei, 20, is studying political science and economics at UNO. He has teamed up with Jacob Khol, with whom he grew up with in , for a water well initiative they're calling Aqua-Africa. Ruei said the plan calls for hiring local workers to install the wells.

Ruei is set to accompany a water well expedition to next year. Experts also will survey soil conditions to gain more information about what resources are necessary, he said.

It is unclear where financing for the operation will come from. Ruei said he hopes to tap aid groups, faith-based organizations and others.

Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., who has been involved with Sudanese issues and talked with Ruei several times over the summer, speculated that Ruei could one day become president of Sudan .

Terry said Ruei was different from other interns who come to Washington and simply soak in what's around them.

"He ended up, in essence, teaching some of my colleagues," Terry said.

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