**Spartans Make the News: Three Profiles**

**Students’ journey takes them from Sudan to Bay Area**

By Teresa Hou Spartan Daily Staff Writer

From the outside, Bol Bol, Mach Gong and Peter Thon may seem like any other San Jose State University students. They attend classes, have jobs and complain about campus parking. However, that is where the similarities end.

When they were about 8 or 9 years old, Bol, Gong, and Thon were forced to leave their families and the other members of their Dinka tribe behind when civil war broke out in their native country of Sudan.

“We left in 1997 and moved to Ethiopia for four years,” said Thon, a finance major.

“After that, war broke out in Ethiopia and we had to come back to Sudan where it wasn’t safe because the war was still going on (and) so we crossed the border to Kenya. We stayed in Kenya for nine years in a refugee camp where we went to school until 2000 when the United States government began to send the ‘lost boys’ to (America).”

According to the Red Cross Web site, “The Lost Boys of Sudan” is a name given by aid organizations to a group of 26,000 Sudanese boys like Bol, Gong and Thon who fled their southern Sudan villages as a civil war broke out between the predominantly Muslim north and the Christian south.

The lost boys walked hundreds of miles in search of peace and finally found it in the Kenyan refugee camp where they stayed for nine years until the U.S. government brought 3,600 of them to the United States, according to the Red Cross.

In 2001, Bol, Gong and Thon came from Kenya to the United States through sponsorships from the United States government and the Catholic Charity of Santa Clara. The United States, however, was nothing like what they expected.

“When I left Kenya, I thought (the United States) would be real cool,” said Bol, a marketing major. “But when I came here, I was worried about where to sleep (so) I went out to look for a job so that I (could have a) place to live. It (was) real hard.”

Gong, an international business major, agreed.

“Coming here, our No.1 goal was school,” Gong said. “But when we got here, school became second because we had to find a job and support one another. You have to work a lot of hours to make some money and then send some money to your family and basically start a whole new life.”

However, with the people they befriended in San Jose, especially American families, said Gong, life in the U.S. has become easier for Bol, Gong and Thon, who fondly says his new friends are a part of his “big African family.”

“I think our life would have been hard if we didn’t have many friends,” said Thon, “Now that we are established here, everything’s fine except that we have people back home in Africa.”

Bol said that he works 30 to 32 hours a week to help support other lost boys who don’t have a chance to come to America. Bol, Gong and Thon said that even though they are in America, they still have to help provide for the people back home.

“We work hard for (the) people in (Sudan), said Bol. “We work and we go to school to help any way we can.”

In the future, Bol, Gong and Thon all agree that once they get their degrees from SJSU they plan to go back to southern Sudan to help restore their country.

“We appreciate … the United States government and (our) American friends who helped us when we first came to this country,” said Gong.“ We have been helped and therefore we should help too. The only way that we can help is for us to get some skills here (and) to go back and rebuild the country.”

Although America has treated them well, Bol, Gong and Thon said they have no desire to stay any longer than necessary.

“America is a good place to be, but there is nothing like home,” Gong said.

<http://files.thespartandaily.com/PDFarchive/022306.pdf>

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**[Student faces her 'worst case scenario'](http://spartandaily.com/108019/student-faces-worst-case-scenario)**

by [Leeta-Rose Ballester](http://spartandaily.com/author/leeta-rose-ballester) Sep 15, 2013 11:43 am

Hitting the gym early in the morning and then heading to work or class is nothing out of the ordinary for college students, but for sophomore advertising major LooLoo Amante, she worried about what she would do once night fell these first weeks of school.

“I had mentally prepared myself to sleep in my car,” Amante said. “I was trying to accept the fact that this was what I was going to have to do.”

Amante said she lived in Campus Village Building C her freshman year, but she had taken out a loan to pay for it. Since she moved out of campus housing this May, Amante said that a series of events led to her “worst case scenario.”

Toward the end of Spring semester, Amante said she had applied for ajobwith University Housing Services thinking that her housing situation would be settled for fall. When she didn't get the job she said she wasn't too worried because she had more than one backup plan. Amante said that she considered getting another loan for housing but “uncertainty” held her back.

“When we grow up with financial barriers, we don’t just second guess, we third guess," she said.

**Plan of Action** She said she wasdetermined to find a way to graduate without more debt and decided to try any alternative solutions. Amante said she looked into an opportunity to be hosted by a family for the semester, but at the last minute they were not able to accommodate her. She said that when she checked out the Student Union bulletin board for a room to rent, “things had changed" from the last time she had looked.

“It was all other people looking for rooms, too,” Amante said.

She said that her budget is limited**,** though she works on campus through the work-study program. “To even pay $300 would be hard,” Amante said.

Being a university athlete, Amante said she tried getting into shared housing with other athletes, but that didn't work out either. She said that one after another, her plans fell through and she was down to the last choice.

“Like a report card, plan F is the worst you can get,” she said. “That plan went into action.”

Amante said she took all the money she had been saving and bought a low-profile car that would work well as a home.“I had to strategize,” she said. “I bought a car with tinted windows.”

**Stigma** On nights that Amante couldn't stay with friends, she said she would cover herself up completely with a blanket and avoid parking near campus where people she knew might see her. “I was conflicted about what people might think of me,” Amante said. “There’s always going to be judgment.”

Amante said she didn't feel like she could tell anyone she was sleeping in her car, not even most of her friends or classmates. “If they asked where I lived, the immediate reaction was, ‘That’s so dangerous,’ so I changed my answer," she said. "I would just tell them that I live off campus."

Amante said she was lucky not to have had any scary incidents, but she has accumulated "a lot of parking tickets" for parking too long in one spot.

She said her biggest concerns were not about safety, but where to brush her teeth or if she should skip breakfast and save money by just having a big lunch.

Amante said that she still has not told most of her family, in part, because she grew up having to be very self-reliant. “I feel like it would be a burden on them,” she said. “They would be so frustrated with me.” She said she questioned if she had “did this” to herself and came to a breaking point where she knew she had to get help.

**Seeking Help** “I have finally come to terms and told an adult,” she said. “I didn't want to tell anybody … I thought I could figure it out myself.”

Amante said she told her Educational Opportunity Program counselor and they immediately helped her, and not just with resources, such as where to call for help with food and shelter. “The counselor was telling me I shouldn't blame myself,” she said. “It made me feel so relieved.”

Tova Feldmanstern, licensed clinical social worker at SJSU, said she has worked with about half a dozen students who were either sleeping in cars or shelters, or in danger of becoming homeless since she began working at the university one year ago.

“I’m guessing that it’s a much larger problem,” she said, “but a lot of people don’t find their way to Counseling Services.”

Feldmanstern said that the best thing students could do if they have nowhere to live is to start at a shelter like the Emergency Housing Consortium, Bill Wilson Center or InnVision to see what resources are available. “The more persistent you are, the more wait lists you can get on,” she said.

According to Feldmanstern, “the county is strapped” and most shelters are full each night, but Counseling Services is there to help guide students through the process of getting into one.“Sometimes students are stuck and I try to be there as a support person,” she said, adding that she has helped students fill out applications for transitional housing programs. Feldmanstern said that people often don't realize what other students on campus may be going through.

**Homeless Youth** The 2013 San Jose Homeless Census and Survey reports that 25 percent of the homeless population surveyed were between the ages of 18 and 24, nearly doubling from 13 percent in 2011.

According to Lynn Morison, policy director for ending youth and family homelessness at the Bill Wilson Center, her organization helped collect data for the 2013 Homeless Census and she was “struck” by the increase of young adults. Morison works specifically with 18 to 24-year-olds at the Bill Wilson Center. She said she worries because youth are “much more vulnerable” to violence and street crime. She said that most of her clients come from a “troubled background” but there are new patterns emerging.

“Another trend we have seen more is youth leaving home so they are not a burden to their family,” Morison said. “It’s been an issue where it is so expensive to live in (Santa Clara Valley and) that has been exacerbated by the recession.”

She said that she understands how college students facing homelessness might feel out of place among their peers.“For those youth that find themselves homeless, who are surrounded by those who aren't, it can carry a stigma,” she explained.

Morison said that young people often don’t identify with the description of homeless and would rather call it something else. “Many of the youth often don’t relate to the term homeless because of the stereotypes,” she said. “They often have the same stereotypes we have.”

**Hope** Amante said she is on a waiting list for transitional housing now and staying with a friend until she is placed. She said she knows the lists can be long, but she is remaining patient because she wants to focus on her college experience. Amante said she wants to be able to go to work, get her homework done and hang out with friends without worrying about housing.

“Since I was very young, I've done things on my own,” she said. “There’s a lot of mixed emotions and it’s overwhelming.” She said she can’t worry anymore about what people think and that she has to take care of herself. “There’s always going to be that person who doesn't understand and asks, ‘Why didn't you just go get a loan?’” Amante said. “I've learned to accept my situation.”

<http://spartandaily.com/108019/student-faces-worst-case-scenario#sthash.stSsAA2q.dpuf>

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**San Jose Mercury News: Business Major Launches Socially Conscious Startup:**

By Bruce Newman Posted by the [San Jose Mercury News](http://www.mercurynews.com/bay-area-news/ci_20108519/passage-through-asia-leads-san-jose-state-student?source=rss&cid=dlvr.it#.T1aTBnQNKzE.email) March 5, 2012.

**[](http://blogs.sjsu.edu/today/files/2012/03/6962433979_62932d4003_m.jpg)**

"Lisu Voice," one of nearly two dozen pillows offered by business major Aimi Duong's startup (Oimeico image).

Aimi Duong is 24, so the fate of the world is naturally a matter of some concern to her. Not surprisingly, she believes there may still be some hope for it, although urgent action may be required. That’s where she comes in.

Duong was well into her studies as a business major at San Jose State when she realized that the primary objective taught by virtually every business class she took — maximize profits, destroy the competition — posed a conflict for someone determined to save the world.

So after returning to San Jose from Asia two months ago, she launched Oimei Co., a socially conscious startup where the only bottom line that matters is empowering marginalized workers in developing countries. “Oimei” is the Chinese version of Aimi; it means “love beauty,” which, as a matter of fact, she does.

Oimei operates under the banner “Pillows for Peace,” and through the company, Duong sells hand-woven textiles made in Thailand by women who are artisans, yet barely able to scratch out a living from the remarkable treasures they produce. When she met those women last year, Duong recognized something about their stories that touched her in a very familiar way.

Her mother and three siblings escaped from Vietnam as boat people in the early 1980s, then spent 11 months in a Malaysian refugee camp before making their way to San Jose. To keep the family together in a small apartment, Duong’s mom worked an assortment of odd jobs, always hoping her children would have a better life in this country. So when Duong first raised the possibility of an extended tour of Southeast Asia, her mother made no secret of her dismay.

“I’m the last child in my family, and my mom is quite dependent on me for her happiness,” Duong says. “So I never even thought of going to college far from San Jose because I always felt a really big sense of guilt. But I recognized that I can’t help anyone else if I can’t help myself.”

**Extended sojourn** Duong had no particular sense of direction in high school, a situation that improved only slightly after two years of junior college. But after a year as a business major at **SJSU**, she had grown disillusioned with the engine that drives most businesses: the emphasis on the bottom line. “I chose business because I thought it would be more practical,” says Duong, “but when I began taking classes, I didn’t like the idea of everything being so profit-driven.”

To set herself apart from thousands of other soon-to-graduate job candidates, she hit upon the idea of studying abroad for four months. “It was scary just to drop everything, not have an income anymore and go somewhere where I don’t speak the language,” she says. “But when I got there, I saw how easy it was to travel around to other countries. So I decided to stay for four more months, and then four more months.” Her Southeast Asian sojourn eventually stretched to 16 months.

During her last semester in Thailand, as she was applying for jobs back in the U.S., Duong dreaded the idea of heading for some entry-level position in the corporate world. “I felt I was kind of selling myself short,” she recalls. While interning for a nonprofit in Thailand, her fascination with the handmade textiles she loved to buy at local markets in Burma, Malaysia and Laos became the inspiration for the company she wanted to form.

**Great determination** But by that time, Duong had nearly depleted her savings. “My family was saying, ‘You just need to come home and come back to reality,’ ” she says.

Instead, she found a website called [StartSomeGood.com](http://startsomegood.com/), where she posted her idea and a short video asking for support, hoping to raise seed money. “I figured it doesn’t hurt to try,” she says. To her surprise, in 45 days she raised $5,600, some of which she used to go to Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and other parts of Thailand to meet the women — most of them from Chiang Mai, Thailand — who would become her pillow manufacturers. Most of the weavers subsist on less than $200 a month. Duong hopes to change that.

Chatchai Aphibanpoonpon, a recent MBA graduate from Thammasat University, was impressed by Duong’s determination. “Even though, from a business point of view, the textile market is highly competitive, she still strongly believes in her idea and keeps pushing it forward because she knows that many women that are now living under poverty depend on her,” Aphibanpoonpon says via email from Thailand. “She is an inspiration to me, and I hope to many young and talented people out there, to follow her path, to do something that really creates an impact to society and make this world a better place to live.”

As soon as Duong returned to classes in San Jose two months ago, she began assembling a team of like-minded young women as partners, and opened her website (<http://oimeico.com/shop/pillows>) for business. Everything is certified fair trade, and the weavers keep about 60 percent of what Duong pays for the pillows. The website originally claimed 50 percent of net profits would go to charity, and Duong’s plan for herself was to “live minimally.” But her partners informed her that the business would never survive if she gave away that much profit. “We need to grow in order to increase impact,” she says.

Her goal now is to begin working with women from a small village in northern Vietnam who are victims of human trafficking. Ramping up a distribution network from such a remote location is daunting. But with the fate of the world in the balance, her work won’t wait.

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