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The Teacher: Gatluak Ter Thach

The People Issue 2012

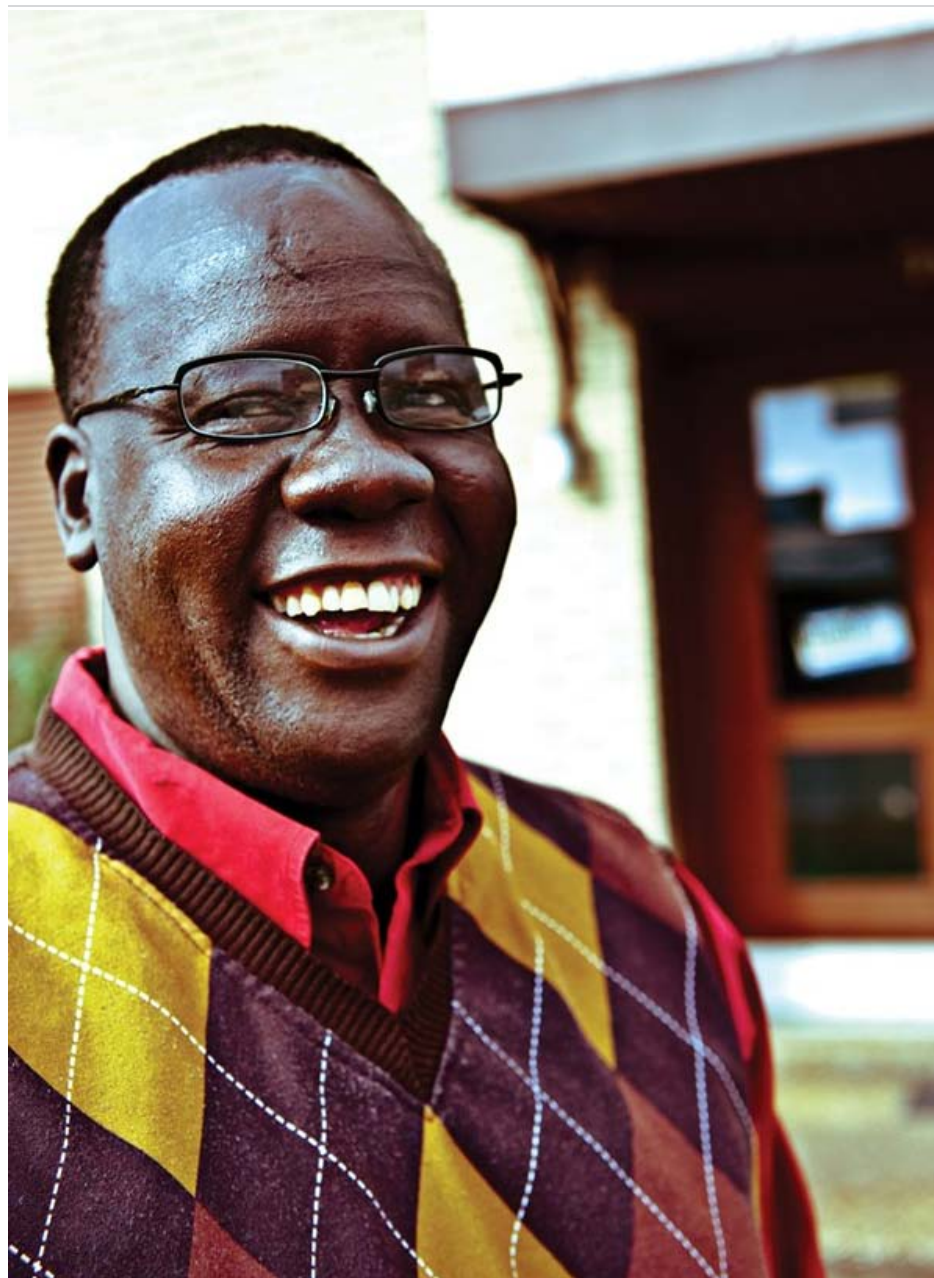
by STEVEN HALE

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ERIC ENGLAND

Photographed at Nashville International Center for Empowerment

Nearly 16 years ago, as a teenager who had long been living in a brutal, adult world, Gatluak Ter Thach made a promise.

After being conscripted as a child soldier, forced to fight in a civil war — and as he puts it, "successfully making it to life" — he had left his native Sudan and spent several years moving between refugee camps in neighboring African countries. At one camp, when he was about 16, he met a girl several years younger than he named Nakuma, who made a habit of sharing with him the water she would fetch from the river. Proving the universal nature of adolescence, his friends took notice and began calling her "Gat's wife." Thach didn't mind the suggestion — in fact, he says, his heart was already set on it.

About two years later, given the chance to move to America, Thach offered her a proposal of sorts.

"I told her, 'I'm going somewhere. If you hear I died, then it's fine. You can marry someone else. But if you do not hear anything about me, just wait. I'll be coming back, and I'll marry you.' "

In 2004, seven years after coming to the United States, he returned to the camp, found Nakuma, and brought her to America to do just that.

Thach says he taught his new wife how to speak English using a whiteboard in their apartment. As the lessons went on, word spread to other Sudanese immigrants in the Nashville community, and that, he says, is how the Nashville International Center for Empowerment began. (It was originally called the Sudanese Community and Women's Services Center.)

While initially focused on teaching English, Thach, who serves as the center's CEO and president, says the group's mission has grown — and its name changed — to reflect the increasingly diverse community they serve. Among other things, the center now offers employment services as well as health education. Speaking to the *Scene* at the center's faded-brick South Nashville offices, Thach's devotion to his community — Sudanese or otherwise — is readily apparent in his explanation for the center's expanding role.

"There's no way you can turn people down when they're coming for services," he says. "So that's it."

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