



Reita Hutson: Meet the Smile Maker

This 2008 Good Neighbor Award Winner says of her Sudanese "sons": These boys were so innocent. They knew how to run from lions but not cross a busy street or turn on an electric light."

By [Barbara Ballinger](#) | November 2008

A supermarket isn't the usual venue for magic to occur. Yet, that's exactly what occurred when Reita Hutson, then a 65-year-old grandmother, introduced herself to Gabriel Kuany, a tall young man from Sudan, Africa, as he carried a mop six years ago. "He glided by me like a gazelle and had the look of an angel," recalls Hutson, real estate salesperson with John Hall and Associates in Scottsdale, Ariz. "I thought to myself, 'That's one of the Lost Boys I saw on TV.'"

And that's how Gabriel's Dream was born. The nonprofit secures medical care and educational funds for young men known as the Lost Boys, who fled Sudan during civil war in the 1980s. Some were as young as four.

Before long, Hutson and Kuany e-mailed and met regularly. "I saw the hell these young men went through. Many saw family murdered, shot at in a river where the water turned red [from blood], or eaten by lions. Yet, they had the joy of the Lord on their faces and were excited about their new lives," Hutson said.

Kuany recounted his long journey: "We ran from our village when we heard the sound of guns and people dying and saw smoke. We met in the jungle and walked 1,000 miles, often without water, food, or shelter." Kuany spent four years in an Ethiopian refugee camp, then 10 more in Kenya, before he was resettled in the United States in 2001.

When Hutson asked Kuany what he needed, he replied succinctly: an education and teeth. "If I have no education, I cannot have a successful life. If I don't have teeth, I won't smile good," Kuany, now 29, recalls. A tribal ritual required the boys to have six lower teeth pulled for initiation into manhood.

Hutson found a dentist to provide free dental implants. When other former Lost Boys saw Kuany's teeth, they begged him to ask Hutson for their own. "Ask your mother to help us. We don't have a mom."

Hutson relished the opportunity to help her new "sons," convincing more than 100 dentists since 2002 to volunteer. One recipient wrote his loving thanks: "No one is ever happy to smile widely if they don't have teeth, but you are bringing back the lost smiles. How incredible!"

As executive director of Gabriel's Dream, Hutson handles most administrative work, fundraising, and publicity from her home office. Since 2007 she has donated \$12,500 and volunteered 2,500 hours.

Through Gabriel's Dream, Hutson has provided more than \$1 million in dental and medical services and awarded \$70,000 in college scholarships. She has also provided thousands of "emergency" dollars to help about 400 Arizona men on the edge of poverty find apartments, jobs, and the security of family, community, and purpose.

"Many suffer from loneliness," Hutson says. "The African culture revolves around family and community. I listen and provide advice and comfort, " she says.

Hutson, now 71, plays down her role in their success, noting that the boys deeply affect nearly everyone they meet. Even at a time of hiring cutbacks, area employers seek them out. One Wal-Mart manager, who had hired 12 former Lost Boys, asked Hutson to send more, she says. "He wrote, 'These associates' integrity level is second to none. They are role models for the rest of our employees.'"

Despite his long journey, the organization's namesake remains euphoric about his good fortune: Kuany is studying for a college degree and working as a mental health specialist. Last year, he became an American citizen. Now, he and some other former Lost Boys are working with Hutson to raise funds to build a school in Sudan.

He says none of these achievements would have been possible without the woman he considers his American mother. "I did not know I could meet a mom who could give up time to help me and other Lost Boys," he says.

Hutson believes she's the lucky one. "God chose me to help a beautiful young man bearing the name of an angel. Not a day goes by that I don't feel blessed. They are my sons, and I am their mom. I will help and love them for the rest of my days, " she says.

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