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Refugee shares experience of teen on run for his life

*By Charles Menchaca
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Nearly 1,700 students on Wednesday had a glimpse into the life of a man who risked life and limb as a boy when he fled his war-torn country.

Sudanese refugee John Dau stood close to the edge of the stage at the Wausau East High School auditorium as he recounted how he and thousands of other boys traveled 1,000 miles on foot through Sudan, Ethiopia and Kenya during a five-year journey to freedom.

A group of educators helped to raise \$13,750 so that Dau, 36, could tell his story in central Wisconsin. Dau spoke to two groups of students Wednesday.

As the audience looked up at Dau's 6-foot-8-inch frame, he urged them to be grateful for the opportunities they have in America. Dau told the students about how the government ordered the death of all Southern Sudanese men in 1987, so he had to flee his village at night without his family at age 13.

Dau's presentation served as a way to give students a face-to-face perspective of another culture and crisis outside the United States, said Linda Ellenbecker, a social studies teacher at Athens Middle School.

The East African country of Sudan was the site of a civil war that broke out in the 1980s between the Arab-influenced government and the southern African rebels, she said. Boys at the time left their villages so they would not be killed by the government or forced into rebel groups.

Leslie Cormack used the conflict to show how it's important to respect everybody, regardless of their background. Cormack, a seventh-grade English teacher at D.C. Everest Middle School, said Dau and other "Lost Boys of Sudan" risked prejudice by holding on to their customs when they moved to America.

Cormack and other teachers prepared their students for Dau's visit by reading short stories on the Lost Boys and watching "God Grew Tired of Us," a documentary that chronicles Dau's escape and subsequent trip to the United States in 2001.

Nick Heinz began to read more about Dau this month on his own. The seventh-grader from D.C. Everest Middle School said being grateful was the most important message Dau shared.

Despite his struggles, Dau said he is proud of the journey, because it taught him not to take life for granted.

"It was just really touching," said Nick, 13. "He is a living testimony."