

Puok Pelpel Puok

South Sudan



Puok: My name is Puok Puok and I come from South Sudan.

Interviewer: What's your country of origin and what does it mean to you?

Puok: My country of origin is South Sudan. It was Sudan, in 2011 my country was divided into two countries. So now my country is South Sudan. It's meant a lot to me because this is where my grand-grand-fathers were born. So the United States is my second country. I love both of them. They're very meaningful to me.

Interviewer: When did you end up coming to the United States?

Puok: I come United States in 1994. So yesterday, it was my 30 year anniversary, September 22. I've been living in this country for 30 years, three decades.

Interviewer: Why did you come to the United States?

Puok: Because we had a civil war in my country. I fled my country, that's why I come to America. I find it is a beautiful country with a lot of opportunities. So I love America.

Interviewer: What objects tell the story of your life?

Puok: I love to help people. So I'm the community leader [and President of the South Sudanese Community of Utah]. I help my people. I find it very helpful to help people.

Interviewer: Do you have any possessions that your family treasures?

Puok: No, I don't. I wish I had something. I work but I don't have a lot of assets but, I have a little bit to help my family.

Interviewer: Do you have anything from South Sudan that you like or that means a lot to you?

Puok: I like the weather. My country they have good weather. Fresh air, much sunnier. No snow where I come from.

Interviewer: How are you and your parents alike and different?

Puok: Sometimes, you can fight with your family. But always family is family. Sometimes you can have a difference with your family, but the bottom line is you're still one family. I love my family. I don't know if a lot of different.

Interviewer: What was your life like before you immigrated?

Puok: It was difficult. There was no opportunities. There was a lot of killing was going on. A lot of fighting and food shortage. Yeah, it was horrible.

Interviewer: How old were you when you came over?

Puok: 22 years old.

Interviewer: Did you come over alone, or were you with your family?

Puok: With friends. I left my family back home and I came with friend.

Interviewer: What's your favorite holiday food memory?

Puok: Christmas time. Christmas time is a big holiday in my country. So we'll celebrate it for one week. You march around the village. We will kill cow- It is a huge holiday. Yeah, is huge. People get together, kill cows, goats. It's a big holiday. Yeah, I love Christmastime. It is a big holiday because it's a part of my religion.

Interviewer: What are you thankful for about America?

Puok: I am very thankful for opportunities. I have a job here, a good job, very stable. I love my job. I went back to my country got married, brought my wife over, started our family. So, I'm very thankful for that.

Interviewer: What's the meaning of 'being welcoming' to you?

Puok: It's good. Once you get welcome this good. I come in and so I love you guys. I met you today - I'm being welcomed and lucky. It's good. It means being part of friendship.

Interviewer: I wanted to ask you about the friend you came over with. Do you still talk to them?

Puok: Oh, yeah. They live in Fort Worth, Texas. Yeah, I still have contact with them.

Interviewer: Do you talk a lot?

Puok: Yeah, not a lot. Yeah. Sometime.

Interviewer: Do you ever see each other in person?

Puok: Oh, yeah. Two years ago.

Interviewer: Was it during COVID?

Puok: Before COVID.

Interviewer: What are your hopes for your community?

Puok: We teach young children. We want them to be successful in their school, in their education. So we don't want them to be doing drugs. We've been encouraged the girls not to get pregnant before they pursue their education. We give them encouragement in our community. We teach them about our cultural values. So we've been doing that in our community.

Interviewer: When in life have you felt most alone and most connected?

Puok: Life is up and down. Before I came here life was hard. Yeah, it was hard because the war separated me from my family. It was difficult. I was alone and was living with friends, not relatives. It was hard before I came here. When I came here alone, before I get married, I was living alone. When I got a partner the life changed, it became beautiful because you have

somebody to live to live with and share ideas with. When you have a bad day, your partner can give you encouragement, 'Don't do that, you'll be okay.' You feel better. But when you're alone, before I was married, it was hard. Now life's better. I even got kids with my partner.

Interviewer: How many kids do you have?

Puok: Six- Five boys and one girl.

Interviewer: How old are they?

Puok: Sometimes I forget. I do remember, but I forget. The oldest is 16, she turned 16 last month, August 18th. The youngest one is six years.

Interviewer: What did you feel when you first entered the U.S.?

Puok: It was different. I couldn't speak the language. The culture was different and everything was different and was so hard. When you enter a different country you don't know the people, you don't know their language, you don't know their culture. It wasn't very easy for me, it took time for me to adjust. Yeah, it was not easy.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about how you ended up learning English?

Puok: I took some ESL classes and learned from friends at work. This is how I learned. I'm still learning. I'm still learning.

Interviewer: How did you meet your wife?

Puok: Before I went back to where I come from I didn't know her. It was an arranged marriage. I went back and she was walking around the village and I was looking around and said, 'Wow, I like that girl.' And I talked to my family and told my family, 'Can you get together with her family so we can negotiate? I really like that girl. I want her to be my wife.' So we negotiated and then I paid 10 cows. Then I came back to U.S. and do the process of immigration. After one year and two months, she came over to the United States.

Interviewer: What was immigrating to the U.S. like?

Puok: It was scary because I'm going somewhere I don't know. It was a very scary system. But now I find that it's now become normal because I'm part of it now. I've met a different peoples from all over the world- people from Asia, from Africa, from Middle East, from South America. We have become one family here. I'm really lucky.

Interviewer: What caused you to come to America?

Puok: Because of civil war my country. We're fighting the same people in one country. We started fighting in 1955 until 2005. We couldn't get along and the world decided to divide the country into two, to be better that way.

Interviewer: What things do you miss the most about your country?

Puok: Friend, family, uncle, fish- we have a lot of fish- and, food. Yeah, I miss that.

Interviewer: Do you have a favorite food?

Puok: Yeah, my country will call it, 'Kop.' It is a corn meal. I don't know how to explain it. Something you mix with fish and it's very delicious. We really like that.

Interviewer: Are you still able to eat here?

Puok: Yeah. I already know how to cook it.

Interviewer: Do you have a restaurant, or do you only make it at home?

Puok: At home. We don't have a restaurant- I wish we do.

Interviewer: I also want to ask you about the pins you are wearing on the lapel of your suit.

Puok: This one just bought it with it- It is a part of the suit. And the other one is the U.S. flag because I am part of this country.

Interviewer: When did you become a U.S. citizen?

Puok: I become a U.S. citizen in '03.

Interviewer: Did you get naturalized here or were you somewhere else in the country?

Puok: In Utah in '03. Over 20 years now.

Interviewer: Can you tell me about your religious or spiritual beliefs?

Puok: I'm Christian. I'm the kind of person who loves everybody, doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, or what do you believe in. We are all human. We are all the same. Just believe whatever you want makes you happy- It doesn't matter if you are Muslim, you're a Christian, or you are Buddhist. I cannot say that my religion is not better than yours because I'm not a God. Only God would judge us on who's right and who's wrong- This isn't my job. But, I'm Christian. I'm not going to tell my Muslim sister or my Muslim brother, 'Hey, because you're Muslim your religion is not better. Mine is better than yours.' I wouldn't say that. But, I'm a Christian, this is what I believe in. I love everyone, it doesn't matter who you are. If you're Muslim or if you're Buddhist I get along with you. I'm not gonna hate you because you didn't believe in what I believe in. I'm not gonna. I'm not gonna do that. So my dad and mom were not religious people. They believe in our tradition belief. Some people, they believe in cows, and crocodiles before colonization came to Africa. Back in the 1700s or 1600s, we don't know none about Christianity, until colonization come to Africa. They said, 'Hey, this is Jesus. This is something you can believe in.' People then said, 'What? We don't know about this.' It took our family, our ancestors 30 years to accept it. 30 years because they didn't want it, they didn't want to believe it. They said, 'No, this is not our religion. We have our own religion. We believe in cows. We believe in a sky god.' If somebody is sick or the child is sick, they sacrifice the goat or cow. They talk to God and say, 'God, here's this young person, or old person, so forgive us.' We

don't have a hospital or medicine, so now we're going to kill this goat and hope God listens to us and that this person feels better. But when the colonization come over, we became a Christian. It took our ancestors 30 years to accept it. So my mom and dad were not Christian. They passed away in 1992. But, the young generation come over and they accepted Christianity. So that's why I became a Christian. So I'm Christian, that's my religion.

Interviewer: I understand you enjoy taking pictures and speaking with government officials, why is that?

Puok: I'm a political science major. That's why I love to talk to them because they're connected with my major.

Interviewer: Do you work in politics?

Puok: Oh, no, no, no. But my degree is in political science. It is my interest.

Interviewer: What area of politics do you like talking to government officials about?

Puok: I love politics because I want to be the voice for the voiceless people, people who cannot do anything for themselves. I want to learn from those government officials. That's why I love to be connected with them.

Interviewer: What was your first job?

Puok: When I first came to the U.S., I worked as a dishwasher in Fort Worth, Texas in 1994.

Interviewer: What was that like?

Puok: Was not a good job, but lots of money, so that part was good. And then I moved from there and came to Des Moines, Iowa. I worked making tires for cars and then moved to Salt Lake City, Utah in 1999.

Interviewer: What did you do in Utah?

Puok: I worked for UPS.

Interviewer: What is the 'American Dream' for you?

Puok: Yeah, I'm looking at...education. I'm looking at getting an education. So, I will go back to school to get my Master's Degree. That is my 'American Dream.'

Interviewer: Did you go to the University of Utah?

Puok: Yeah. I got my degree from the University of Utah in 2019.

Interviewer: What have you been doing since then?

Puok: Just working. I'm on break. One day, I will go back to get my Master's.