

STUPID

WEEKLY

A Sudanese
Lost Boy
is helping
refugees from
his war-torn
country by
selling some
of the finest
coffee in the
world.

Coffee for a Cause

by Brandon Shulleeta





Beans of Hope

After attending the University of Richmond, a Sudanese Lost Boy is becoming a fledgling coffee entrepreneur in Virginia. Now he's giving back to refugees in Ethiopia, the same place where he wondered as a child if he would ever have a life of his own.

by Brandon Shulleeta

Manyang Reath Kher was 3 years old when he was awakened in a small Sudanese town by gunshots and screaming from his mother: “Manyang! Manyang! Go with your uncle!”

Kher's father was fatally shot during the outbreak of Sudan's brutally violent civil war, in which there were mass casualties and young boys trained to flee ran toward safety. Kher's uncle hoisted the young Kher on his shoulders as the two fled, Kher recalls. His uncle was shot at some point while fleeing but survived long enough to cross the Gilo River with Kher and hand him over to allies who ultimately got him to a refugee camp in Ethiopia, where he stayed for 13 years. The trek to the camp lasted several weeks and thousands of others died along the way.

Now, 27 years later, Kher has a political science degree from the University of Richmond and is on a mission to help Sudanese refugees by selling coffee harvested in Northeast Africa.

“I think about it every day,” Kher says of the Ethiopian refugee camp where he spent his youth. “The mis-

sion [of the coffee company] ... is to help refugees help themselves.”

It started as a small operation a few years ago — packages of beans were initially sold to the likes of small coffee shops — but his company now brings in about \$900,000 per year, a number Kher projects to skyrocket in coming years.

Manyang Kher, 30, of Henrico County, is a Sudanese Lost Boy refugee and founder of 734 Coffee, launched in 2016 as a small operation. It's now slated to become a multimillion dollar operation supporting Sudanese refugees. Here he stands in his warehouse in Springfield.

Kher's company, 734 Coffee, has brought work to an estimated 1,000 people from Sudan and Ethiopia, and profits provide scholarships to refugees. He estimates that about 60 percent of the workers are refugees or former refugees. The coffee business is part of his umbrella nonprofit, Humanity Helping Sudan Project, which has also provided funds for Sudanese to raise chickens, create fishing nets and grow crops.

An 8-ounce bag of coffee sells for about \$12 to \$14 on the 734 Coffee website, with 80% of the profits going to scholarships for Sudanese refugees. It's less per ounce for larger quantities. The coffee is also available through Amazon.

“We're more than just great coffee. It's spreading awareness and the story,” says Akandu Nwosu, the marketing manager for 734 Coffee. “When you see someone

like Manyang that was from that (refugee) camp and is able to accomplish this, it also gives other people hope.”

Kher was one of the more than 20,000 Sudanese Lost Boys who fled during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Kher, who is Catholic, was among a group of refugees accepted into the U.S. and helped by Catholic Charities USA, when he arrived in Richmond at 17.

The Henrico County resident earned a diploma from J.R. Tucker High School and graduated from the University of Richmond, where he had a full scholarship, with a bachelor's degree in political science.

He launched 734 Coffee in 2016 with the goal of helping Sudanese refugees and other workers in the region become more self-reliant. While coffee in Northeast Africa, including an area near the border of Sudan and Ethiopia, is often considered among the best in the world, it's a resource that's greatly underutilized, Kher says.

He set out to provide a growing number of people in the region the opportunity to work, with a belief that people in that region want opportunities to work and fulfill their own destinies far more than receiving what he refers to as United Nations handouts.

Kher emphasizes that he appreciates the U.N. support that he received, but adds that opportunities for self-reliance are far more valuable.

734 Coffee can change lives

The oft-smiling Kher sits in a small cafe on a recent Tuesday afternoon near his coffee bean-filled warehouse in Springfield, Virginia, and begins scribbling ideas on a napkin.

Splitting his time between Richmond and the Washington area, Kher manages to sprinkle jokes into most topics of conversation and ends nearly all his statements on a positive note, even when talking about the harshest of realities, such as the death of family members.

His father was shot the day Kher fled Sudan and died the next day, Kher says, based on family members' accounts. However, he didn't know that his father had died until sometime after he got to the U.S. and the Red Cross helped him connect with his mother and sister, both of whom are living in Sudan. He talks with them by phone nowadays.

Throughout his time in the refugee camp, he didn't know whether his immediate family members were alive. Others in the refugee camp often tried to help him find family members, but never to any avail.

All of the memories he has of his father are fond ones, such as his father grabbing his leg and splashing it in a bucket of water while Kher bathed as a young boy. The death of his father and uncle to protect him are now motivations for making his life meaningful.

"Everything is a challenge," Kher says before pivoting the conversation. "But our coffee is good. Our mission is good. We send kids to school. We give people opportunities," he adds with a smile as he



SCOTT ELMQUIST

University of Richmond graduate Manyang Kher shows off 734 Coffee beans. The profits help pay for scholarships for Sudanese refugees in Ethiopia.

lifts up his shoulders and puts his palms toward the ceiling.

Marketing is a big focus for Kher, and he has a knack for it. As *Style Weekly* photographer Scott Elmquist tours Kher's

modest coffee warehouse and turns his attention toward setting up photographs of his subject, the 6-foot Kher initiates a leap and flops into a seated position atop a tall stack of coffee bean bags. Kher smiles and spreads his arms out wide with coffee bags in the backdrop — already having a sense of what might make for a good photograph.

Among the biggest challenges Kher sees with his company is getting people to try his coffee. Sudanese coffee is foreign to many people, he says, but he believes that all he has to do is get people to try it and that the coffee will speak for itself.

Kher says that his Grade A, U.S. regulated coffee is always sold fresh and comes from a high altitude region that's ideal for growing coffee beans.

"If you try it, you're going to be like 'Ohhhhh,'" Kher says with a laugh while looking around the room as if acting out a coffee drinker who's overcome with a welcomed surprise.

"If you drink coffee, you're going to like it, just because it's the top of the coffee."

Kher's company has provided 10 full scholarships for former refugees, and he hopes to increase that number to about 50 students within the next two years or so. From there, he hopes to provide about 150

scholarships several years down the road.

He's also working on plans to team with hospitals, noting that nurses and other medical professionals are major coffee drinkers. Among other plans in the works, he hopes to create a partnership with historically black colleges and universities in which students can learn about business operations through 734 Coffee, and ultimately operate 734 Coffee cafes.

While 734 Coffee is a nonprofit and has received about \$80,000 worth of donations, Kher notes that he's focused on growing the operation enough that donations become less necessary. While he's still happy to take donations and use that money to help the Sudanese, he's focusing on convincing people to try the coffee, because he believes it will increasingly sell in huge quantities.

A manager of a market in New York backs this up. Sean John, the manager of Le Song restaurant at Chelsea's Market in New York, says 734 Coffee is popular among his patrons, with its "very rich, robust flavor."

He adds that selling something that serves a good cause is an added benefit.

"They're doing something positive for a region that gets a lot of negative attention," John says.



SCOTT ELMQUIST

Bags of coffee beans are transported at the 734 Coffee warehouse in Springfield. The coffee is known for its smooth, robust flavor and comes from a region of Northeast Africa that produces some of the world's best coffee beans.



Akandu Nwosu, the marketing manager for 734 Coffee, boasts that people who try the coffee will come back for more. He calls Kher an inspiration for anyone who needs hope.

SCOTT ELMQUIST

'What is my life ever going to be?'

At 30, Kher is one of more than 20,000 Sudanese Lost Boys, driven from their families during the civil war upheaval in Sudan in the 1980s and 1990s.

Though Kher is 14 years and 6,600 miles removed from the refugee camp where he spent most of his childhood and teen years, many of his thoughts revolve around helping other refugees avoid feeling the way he felt.

"Your life's nothing," he says of the way he felt in the refugee camp.

For him, it was just a matter of surviving. Food was scarce and he lived in a tent with others, struggling through harsh weather. He used a stick as a toothbrush but had no such luxuries as toothpaste. He was about 15 years old when he reached a dark conclusion.

"I was like: 'What is my life ever going to be? What? What?'" Kher remembers thinking. "I mean, you feel like you want to kill yourself."

"I'm probably going to just die on a refugee camp and just be in the dirt and nothing will ever happen," he remembers thinking. "I'm doing all of these things just to survive. For what?"

However, life was not completely void of joy in those days, Kher recalls.

One of his happiest moments in the refugee camp was receiving a pair of black shoes from a man who was leaving. He guesses he was about 10 to 12 years old when he received what became the one item that he really valued. They were too big for him in his youth, but he just tied them tightly, wearing them mostly on special occasions, to make sure he didn't wear them down too much; he stayed barefoot most other times.

Today Kher keeps those old shoes in his home. About a year ago, he put them

on and walked around his neighborhood. The sides are torn enough that they flapped like wings when he walked, but wearing them helped him put his life into perspective.

Among the things he reflected on was how much it would have meant for him to have a job when he was a refugee in Ethiopia. Working would have given his life more meaning and allowed him to buy things like a toothbrush, shoes and more food.

Though his coffee business is bringing in about \$900,000 per year, he expects that number to sharply rise in coming years, meaning he can help supply more work, educational programs and scholarships for refugees.

He also hopes to serve as a model for other companies.

Scholarship recipient says college will let him help Sudan

Duany Thabach Duany, 44, of South Sudan, is a recipient of a scholarship provided by 734 Coffee. He explains in a phone interview that being able to get a college degree was a life-changing opportunity for him and potentially for others.

Duany has been in and out of Ethiopian refugee camps throughout his life and is now studying psychology at International Leadership University in Kenya with a full scholarship from 734 Coffee. Duany had previously enrolled in college but had to drop out because he couldn't afford tuition.

"I'm so happy," Duany says. "This guy made my wildest dreams come true."

Duany says he was a soldier as a child, fighting against oppressors. Duany explains that the people in his region of Sudan are treated like "second-class citizens" by northern oppressors. Duany, a Presbyterian, says he wants his people to have freedom of religion and expression, so he fought for liberation.

At one point, he was attacked and his wrist was badly cut by men he referred to as "criminals." The wound was so severe that he had to have his hand amputated, he says.

Missing a hand caused him to go into a deep depression. However, one of his cousins paid for him to see a counselor. That counselor gave him a new outlook on life and helped him battle his depression. Because of that, he's studying psychology with plans of becoming a counselor for depressed Sudanese.

"I want to help my people back home in South Sudan, because it helped me," Duany says.

Kher chooses scholarship recipients based on financial needs and recommendations from the community. The scholarships are only awarded to Sudanese refugees in Gambela who first earn high school degrees and then get accepted into college.

The coffee company is named after the geographical coordinates — 7 degrees north, 34 degrees east — for Gambela, the region of Ethiopia where Kher was a refugee. There are 200,000 displaced South Sudanese citizens now living in that region after fleeing war and other atrocities.

Kher hopes that getting the word out about their struggles will inspire others to think about ways to help refugees — hopefully while sipping coffee. **S**



734 Coffee is named after the geographical coordinates (7 degrees north, 34 degrees east) for Gambela in Ethiopia, where Kher was a refugee for 13 years. The image of a young Sudanese boy on the package aims to bring attention to refugees.