

# Pawthiblayhtoo Kee's Story

**Pawthiblayhtoo Kee**, 33, is a refugee from the Karen region of Myanmar who, after 31 years living in a series of refugee camps, came to Canada in November, 2006 with her husband and two young daughters - eight-year-old Wahdepaw and three-year-old Palace, who was named after the infant formula on which she was fed when her malnourished mother could not produce breast milk. The family now lives in a one-bedroom basement suite in Surrey.

Since it is their first year in Canada, the family of four is receiving financial assistance from Citizenship and Immigration. Under the program, they are eligible to receive a monthly cheque for a maximum of \$690 to cover rent and utilities, and up to \$615 for food. Their actual rent is \$595, and Pawthiblayhtoo budgets \$140 for public transit, \$45 for hydro, \$90 for cable, and \$400 for food.

*“We are poor, she said.  
But we are happy.”*

After one year in the country, the couple will be required to begin making installments to the federal government to cover the \$11,000 transportation loan given to them in order to make the trip to Canada.

A teacher trainer in the NGO-run refugee camps, Pawthiblayhtoo is eager to pick up computer training and get a job. Her husband hopes to get work as an unskilled labourer. “Right now, I am very poor with education, I cannot do nothing. But, in the next two years (that) will come, I hope,” she said.

\*Story based on: “Mother of two eager to get job training”, Vancouver Sun, June 20, 2007

The City of Surrey passed a Resolution urging the Government of Canada to terminate the Transportation Loan Program for Refugees. The Resolution was endorsed by the Union of BC Municipalities and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities.



## Government Assisted Refugee Transportation and Medical Loan



### Stories of Hardship & Hope

Canada accepts refugees that are identified by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees as among the world's most desperate people in need of protection and resettlement. These Government Assisted Refugees are selected, and have their claims assessed, overseas. They arrive in Canada with the right to permanent residence.

Upon arrival in Canada, Government Assisted Refugees are asked to sign a government transportation loan document. The loan covers costs associated with transportation, pre-entry medical exams and a service fee. The maximum amount for an individual loan is \$10,000. Children over 18 are assessed their own loans.

The new residents are expected to begin repaying their loan within 12 months and interest begins accruing after 1 to 3 years. Canada is one of only a few nations to require repayment of transportation costs, and the only country in the world that makes resettled refugees pay for the medical exams and to charge interest on transportation loans.

**Canada is the only country in the world that makes resettled refugees pay for the medical exams and to charge interest on transportation loans.**

# Amel Madut's Story

Amel, who had escaped often horrific circumstances, could barely speak English, had no job prospects and three young children to support, now owed the Canadian government \$5,600.



**Amel Madut** was 14, living in her native Sudan, when government soldiers entered her town in 1984 and began shooting at anyone who crossed their paths. Amel was at school, and as the soldiers were blocking her way home, she initially hid in the woods. Eventually she and other students started to walk. For more than three months, they walked from South Sudan to a refugee camp in Ethiopia.

Amel survived to reach the refugee camp, only to be taken as a wife by a rebel soldier. She soon became a mother and found herself moving from one refugee camp to another, from Ethiopia to Sudan and eventually, to a United Nations refugee camp in Kenya.

Finally, in 2003, Canada accepted Amel and her three children aged eleven, eight, and three at the time, as refugees. They were flown to Vancouver where she learned she was already in debt in her new country. Amel, who had escaped often horrific circumstances, could barely speak English, had no job prospects and three young children to support, now owed the Canadian government \$5,600.

After being in Canada for one year, the federal government notified her she was now required to start repaying the loan. By then, she was on social assistance.

*“I told them I’m not working, they said, ‘you have to pay.’”*

So she started paying \$85 a month. A large sum considering she was receiving \$1,000 a month on assistance, plus a few hundred dollars in child tax benefits. Her rent alone was \$970. “It was difficult but I had no choice,” she recalled. “I had to do it. Sometimes I go to the food bank.”

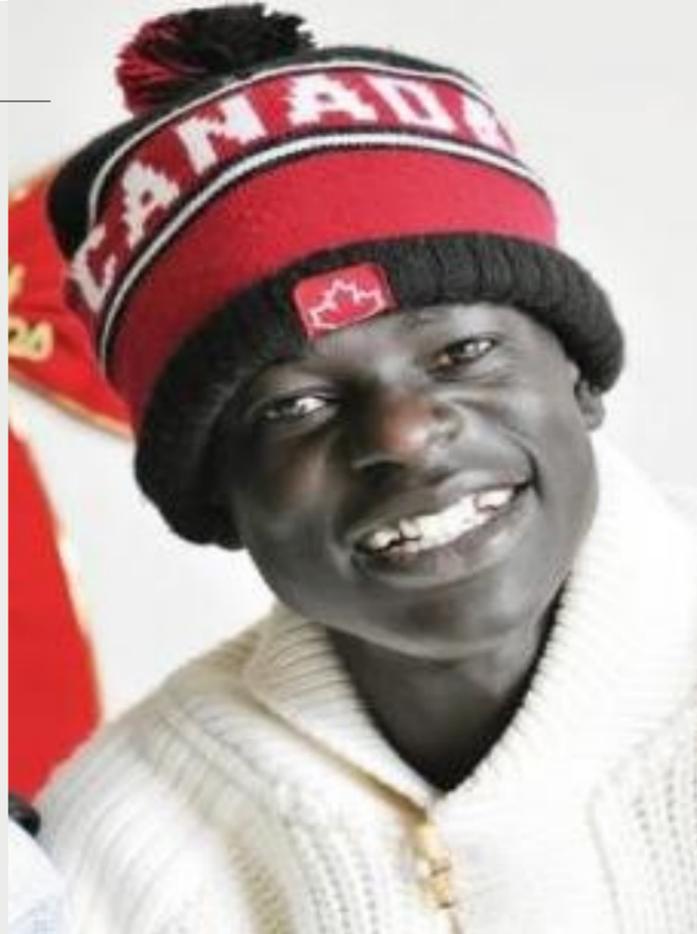
It took more than six years to repay the money. Amel said it was made more difficult by the regular statements she received, on which the amount owing never changed. “I’m paying, paying, paying and you still see the same amount ... I don’t feel good, like I’m doing nothing.”

Today, the loan is paid off. Still life is not easy, but at least the burden was lifted. And she’s grateful to Canada for getting her out of the refugee camp “...here is better. You can have shelter, medicine and so many good things.”

\*Story based on: "Is it fair to ask refugees to repay plane fare – with interest? Burnaby NewsLeader, December 8, 2011.

# Peter Yuot's Story

Peter was forced to drop out of upgrading courses at Douglas College when he was told he wasn't eligible to apply for a student loan until his federal bills were fully covered.



**Peter Yuot** was 13 in 1996 when a brutal government assault on his farming village added him to the ranks of the lost boys of Sudan – a term used to describe the young Sudanese men who fled their homes during the two-decade long conflict to escape death or forcible recruitment as child soldiers.

It would be another three years before Peter reached the relative safety of an international relief camp in neighbouring Kenya where he would spend four years. Peter had never been to school, but found his best – and often only – comfort in the occasional English-language lessons he could glean from passing United Nations workers whose convoys brought desperately needed food and clean water supplies into the camp.

It was during one of these visits he remembers being given a metal jerry can to drink from. It was marked with blocks of English letters and an eye-catching red-and-white decal. A friend told him the foreign words spelled *Courtesy of the Government of Canada*. “That is how I learned about Canada,” he says.

Peter came to Canada in November 2008 with his brothers Jacob, 16, and Paul, 14. Peter has been more father than brother to the boys since they were placed in his care a decade earlier.

A year later, Peter received notice to begin paying back \$4,300 in federal loans for himself and his two younger brothers. The loan payment was a heavy burden on Peter who was already finding it extremely difficult to stretch the little money he earned on rent, utilities and food.

Peter was forced to drop out of upgrading courses at Douglas College when he was told he wasn't eligible to apply for a student loan until his federal bills were fully covered. He has since worked in a temporary job as an attendant at an art gallery, as a security guard during the 2010 Olympics, and in his current job at a homeless shelter in Surrey. Earning \$10 per hour makes it difficult to repay the loans. However, unlike many Sudanese families he knows who are still struggling to repay their loans after many years in Canada, Peter has been able to repay his loan with the help of the First Lutheran Church and a good friend.

Peter's younger brothers are still both full-time highschool students. The boys arrived in Canada unable to speak English, and with the support of a volunteer tutor now both have plans to go to university. Peter himself has the long-term goal of becoming a lawyer.

\*Story based on: an article in BC's Resilient Refugees – The Challenges Don't End at the Border: Cultures West, AMSSA BC, Vol. 28, No. 2/Fall/Winter 2010.