



"A Guarantee from Sudan"

Neema, age 18, Sudan - October 28, 2008

We used to play "family" with my friends in the backyard of my grandmother's house. Playing family is the most common children's game in Africa. We used to pretend that we were in a happy family with both a mother and father: the ideal family. I like happy families. The father would go to work in town and the mother (often played by me) would stay home to cook and take care of the children. That game is my favorite childhood memory. It was my way of having a real family, and it still is.

My name is Neema. I am an 18-year-old girl from southern Sudan who has known many challenges. My father died 17 years ago, when I was only a baby, and my mother lived until I was 10 years old. I have also known many people who have died from AIDS. It hurts to watch your loved ones being eaten away by the monster AIDS. I had to move to the village with my grandmother after my mother died. Then, when it came time to start school, I moved again to a different town where I stayed with my step-mother and step-father.

At their house I had to learn to do all the household chores and to look after my 1 year old step-sister. The hardest chore was to carry water. My step-father owned a brick-making business, and water was needed to make the bricks. I used to carry water on my head all day from the river, which was three miles away. It was very challenging, but I managed.

I was driven to work hard because I wanted to stay in school. School is not free here, and I struggled to pay the fees. My step-parents did not want to pay the fees because my step-mother said it was useless for girls to get an education. But I was determined to stay in school, so I earned my own tuition by carrying water for the brick-makers on Saturdays and Sundays. It takes about 12 buckets to fill one drum of water, and I earned \$2 for every drum of water I filled.

I carried so many buckets. So many heavy buckets.

But now, my friends, I am very happy to tell you that I no longer carry water to go to school. I have earned a scholarship to attend a high school built by the New Sudan Education Initiative (NESEI), and I now spend my weekends working on my studies instead of carrying water in the hot sun. Because of these efforts, I am the top-ranked student at the school and also the student body president.

My best subject is mathematics. I think math is easy, although a lot of my friends don't agree. Math makes me think and helps me find solutions in real life, as math is all about finding solutions. I like thinking a lot. I also enjoy reading story books. My favorite of all time is *Cinderella*. I love that story because it shows that no matter how much one suffers, one can succeed.

That is why education is the most important thing in my life. I have been given the opportunity to empower myself with knowledge which will help me empower others when I share it. Education is paving a way for me to be able to help my family with the basic needs in life. I want to become an accountant to help people in southern Sudan with their financial problems and help them start small businesses.

Above all, I want to help the needy, the suffering, and especially the orphans and widows because I have seen these things at a very young age. I watched my mother struggle so much as a widow and it broke my heart. I want to be able to help orphans and widows, and that is why I study so hard. In life I am inspired by the orphans and the widows.

If we want to make the world a better place for them – and for everyone – we will need more love and unity. I have always believed that if people in the whole world loved each other there would be no war, no hatred, no fighting or genocide in Darfur. And we must care for children, because they are the keepers of tomorrow's world. I want to give my children the best education imaginable. Love guarantees all these things.

Neema earned her scholarship through the New Sudan Education Initiative (NESEI), a US-based non-profit founded by Sudanese refugees that is building high schools in Sudan. If you, your classmates, or your whole school would like to help provide a scholarship for a girl like Neema, please visit www.nesei.org to learn how.

Discussion questions:

1. What are some things for which you have had to work very hard in your own life? How were your efforts similar to Neema's efforts? How were they different?
2. If you had to earn your own tuition to go to school, would you be willing to spend your weekends carrying water?
3. Neema says she especially wants to help orphans and widows because of her personal experiences. Are you motivated by any personal experiences of your own?
4. Neema says that education is "paving a way" for her to help meet life's basic needs. What are the various ways in education can help to overcome poverty?