Finding safety, hope and the chance to start a new life

With the support of a foster mother’s love, this South Sudanese orphan shifts her focus from survival to education.

When fighting broke out in her village in South Sudan, Joann shepherded her pre-teen sister away from violence—and away from home. They escaped with nothing but their lives. With no food, they drank from streams, slept under trees and journeyed south until they crossed the border into Uganda. There they found their first good fortune: In the emergency shelter they met Joyce, another South Sudanese refugee, who took the scared, hungry orphans under her wing. Under the protection of her new foster mother, 15-year-old Joann finally feels safe, loved and free to dream of a more promising future.

The support allows refugees like Joann regain their footing so they can pursue a path toward a better future.

For Joann, that brighter tomorrow includes education—in part so she can help others, too. “School makes me happy,” she says. “When I was in school before the war, this is when I was happiest.” Having her immediate needs met—food, shelter, and safety—enables Joann to look ahead to the education that will lead to her ultimate dream, becoming a physician.

“I want to be a doctor so I can help people in need,” Joann says. “I will treat people who are sick.”

Both of her parents died from HIV, leaving Joann and her sister to live with a grandmother until the elderly relative could no longer keep them safe from the looting, burning, and shooting that plagues South Sudan.

Joann adopted the role of caregiver, soothing her sister’s swollen legs and terrified spirit during their long trek to safety.

Now that they have found safety and a maternal protector in Joyce, this intrepid refugee girl can turn her attention to school and making friends, instead of basic survival. “You have to leave the bad things in the past,” Joyce tells Joann. “Everything that happened in Sudan—leave there. What you should have in your mind is study. In the future you will succeed and be a good person.”

Joann is just one of 875,000 South Sudanese refugees—most of them children—who have sought shelter in Uganda as the conflict and famine continue in their home country. Joann’s early role as caregiver is not unique, either: Many children cross borders as orphans or separated from family, and older siblings sometimes take on responsibilities that seem outsized for their small shoulders.

The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) provides aid to refugees around the world, including in Uganda.