

LONG ROAD TO FREEDOM

When Isaac T Moses was 13, he was taken from his family in South Sudan and forced to become a child soldier in the troubled country's civil war. He would spend the next two years of his life "terrified and alone".

More than a decade later, the 30-year-old Berry Street Family Services social worker still finds it hard to talk about his past. "As a child, to be pushed into that life was terrible," Mr Moses said. "It was terrifying because you did not know if you would make it out alive." Born into a refugee camp during the war in South Sudan, Mr Moses had never known freedom. His escape came when he fled the army at 15.

He told his poignant story to a crowd of more than one hundred at the House of Welcome fundraiser lunch held at Nazareth House, Ballarat on Wednesday as part of National Refugee Week. In the background, a screen projector illuminated harrowing images of child soldiers in South Sudan.

In 2006, Mr Moses was granted a visa to come to Australia and live with his father's relatives. He went on to complete his Victorian Certificate of Education at Damascus College in Ballarat before undertaking a masters degree in social work. Now, he wants to dedicate his life to reaching out to vulnerable young people, like he once was. "My job is to help young people who are disengaged or disadvantaged find their own path back to schooling or employment," he said.

Mr Moses said highlighting the personal stories of refugees and asylum seekers was critical to increasing understanding and awareness of their plight. "We come here to be safe above all else," he said.

There are an estimated 16,000 child soldiers in South Sudan, according to the United Nations Mission in South Sudan and UNICEF. Many fight on the front lines or participate in suicide missions. Most are abducted or recruited by force, while others join out of desperation believing that armed groups offer their best chance for survival.



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