

## Big Kenny and Christiev Alphin Visit to Kunyuk Girls School - Akon Village

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KUNYUK GIRLS SCHOOL - AKON VILLAGE

Report by Liz Walker, MSK Board Member

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MSK's most recent mission to the village of Akon, Sudan, with Kenny Alphin (the 'Big' half of the hit country music duo Big and Rich) was a labor of love. The risk of love became abundantly clear from the very start. Our twin engine charter, headed for Sudan, had just taken off from Jomo Kenyatta Airport in Nairobi when the latch on the engine cover came undone. As the pilot quickly turned the plane around and headed back toward the airfield, someone wondered out loud if we were going to be all right. David Marks, one of Big Kenny's friends and a pilot himself, assured us that as long as the cover didn't fly off and hit the tail, we'd be fine. That's when the cover flew off. It missed the tail. Our plane landed safely and we were back on the runway before we realized just how dangerous the mishap had been. We eventually were assigned another charter and off we went on one of the most unusual Akon missions in which I've been involved.

Big Kenny Alphin and his wife heard Reverend Gloria preach about MSK's work in Sudan at a church gathering in Nashville earlier this year. They were so inspired they decided to organize the mission there that included an independent documentary crew, Matt Dyer and Matthew Hamilton; Kenny's musical protégé and young preacher, Damien Horne; and the doctor/real estate developer/pilot, David Marks, whose eagle eyes and quick reflexes no doubt saved our lives on that first flight. The mission, dubbed Love Everybody after Big Kenny's company, carried medical and school supplies, t-shirts and musical instruments for all the students at the MSK sponsored Kunyuk School for Girls in Akon.

As his MSK hosts, Sarah Rial and I were to serve as liaisons between Kenny and the Akon community. It really wasn't necessary. From the moment the plane touched down on the dusty airstrip near the village, a global connection was made full of hope and possibilities. Hundreds of villagers met our entourage at the runway with music, dance and welcoming rituals. Kenny responded with his own music and the love affair began.

My Sister's Keeper's relationship with Akon began when Reverend Gloria and I made our first journey into Sudan in 2001 as part of a slavery redemption mission with the Switzerland based human rights group, Christian Solidarity International. We witnessed the purchase and retrieval of thousands of Dinkas who had been kidnapped into forced labor as part of 20-year genocidal civil war between the government based in Khartoum and the southerners. Akon was one of the many villages to which the former slaves were returned. Their welcome home was one of the most deeply moving sights I have ever experienced. Of course that was not the end of their suffering. A war of that proportion has a devastating and long lasting impact on the people. The village of Akon, like the rest of Sudan's south is still in the midst of restoration. One of the biggest post-war biggest challenges is learning to move from a "crisis" mode into an existence of stability and peace. It is not easy. Most of the NGO's, which are set up for emergency services, are cutting back and moving out. There are no counseling programs available, limited government assistance, and very little economic initiative. There is always the threat that the war will resume. Amid many broken promises, skepticism prevails.

The Kunyuk School for Girls is one of the few signs of hope in the village. But there are still many big challenges. While we have provided uniforms and supplies, the 1000 girls who answer their headmaster's bell every morning are still waiting on the actual construction of the school to begin. Progress is slow in a land where nature rules. While the building materials have been purchased from surrounding areas, major flooding has halted any overland shipment. The cost of transporting materials by cargo plane is prohibitive. The most optimistic estimate is that construction will begin in March. The girls study under the trees and the village anxiously waits. Big Kenny's visit to Akon eased a lot of that anxiety.

The highlight of the trip is a concert that Big Kenny and Damien Horne put on for the girls under one of the huge old Kunyuks (trees) that have become the symbol of the school. It doesn't matter that the girls have never heard any of Big Kenny's hits nor does it matter that the village is not familiar with the country music genre. The melody and the beat transcend the boundaries of language and culture. Big Kenny is a gifted performer who energetically and emotionally engages his audiences. He moves right up to the girls, makes them laugh and connects with them personally, eye to eye, spirit to spirit. There is no need for interpreters. Kenny's music is a light that warms the heart.

One, two, three, like a bird I sing... 'Cause you've given me the most beautiful set of wings".

The shy and reserved Dinka girls are moved. They offer a few of their own songs.

'We welcome you to see our land'

It is a little difficult to understand all the words but their voices are clear and strong. Then Damien, who looks like a cross between Michael Jackson and Prince, begins to dance. Kicking up the dust, he effortlessly performs flips and splits and break dancing that even the most revered Dinka warrior has to envy. He slides and shuffles and every time he moves, the crowd goes wild. The girls giggle and scream. By the time Kenny and Damien call on Sarah Rial, the Program Director for MSK to join them for a couple of verses of the gospel "This Little Light of Mine", the concert has turned into a bona fide happening. Sarah, usually very composed and reticent, breaks out into a Diana Ross pose that steals the show! It is a joyous occasion. Something wonderful is happening. For a moment, all the cares and challenges of life in Akon are lifted, the distance shortened between Sudan and America . . . and everybody under the tree is in the same groove.

Big Kenny Alphin is committed to helping us finish the school. He has promised to get the word out in the documentary he is producing on his trip and through his many musical outlets. He is man of immense talent and heart who deeply believes in the words of a song he wrote during our visit to Akon.

Nyan Niarraan even. Akol riec even. Nhialic Nhom.

Translated, The Dinka words (written phonetically) mean "Love everybody, all the time, in front of God." They express the simple yet profound message of this very special cultural exchange which I believe will resonate for a long time to come.

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