

RELEASED: Wednesday, 21 June, 2017

***Australian Story* – Monday 26 June, 8pm on ABC and ABC iview**

Shooting For The Stars – Mayor Chagai

When six-year-old Mayor Chagai made the epic trek from South Sudan to Ethiopia fleeing war and famine he could never have imagined that one day he would be an acclaimed basketball coach in Sydney, nor that his young protégés would be sought after by US basketball teams.

Mayor was one of Sudan's 'Lost Boys', wandering the desert for months in search of food, safety and a place to live.

"My memories don't haunt me," he says. "They inspire me; they make me stronger."

Australian Story tells how this former refugee took the long journey from the cattle camps of his homeland to the basketball courts of western Sydney. It is a moving tale of survival and success against all odds.

"Mayor is a visionary because he's not just building basketballers, he's building people," says Superintendent Mark Wright, the former police commander at Blacktown.

Thursday nights in Blacktown used to be called "fight night" as young men from different ethnic groups clashed regularly. But not anymore.

Mayor quickly realised that sport could heal the trauma of war and keep wayward Sudanese youth out of trouble. His basketball program, based around a team called Savannah Pride, soon reaped rewards.

"What we saw was 150 to 200 young Sudanese boys not roaming the streets of Blacktown but actively engaged in an environment," says Superintendent Wright.

American basketball coaches now regularly attend tournaments here to recruit the best and brightest of these tall and remarkably athletic young men. Fourteen have now been recruited to the USA where they play in the highly competitive high school and college competitions – stepping stones to NBA glory.

"At the end of the day he's impacting more people than most of us ever do in a lifetime," says Joe Mantegna, head coach of the Blair Academy in the US.

Just as Mayor's efforts achieve international recognition, however, dark clouds are gathering. His work until now has been entirely voluntary but family responsibilities weigh heavily. He tells *Australian Story* that he fears he will have to abandon his program and seek paid employment elsewhere.

"If he was to leave that would be a devastating blow for that program," says Chris Gardiner, former CEO of the Police Citizens Youth Clubs.

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