

“My Personal Hero”
By Mr. Vincent Iovine (March 2009)
(English Teacher at Windham High School, Willimantic, CT)

Picture if you will, a 17-year-old-man, saying goodbye to his mother, his aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends to journey, alone, to a new land and a new life. In 1920, Vincenzo Iovine, my father, traveling mostly on foot with an occasional assist from a friendly ox-cart driver, kissed his mother good-bye and walked out of the little village of Mongiana, in Reggio Calabria on the southern tip of the Italian peninsula, never to return. Traveling north, Vincenzo eventually arrived at his destination, the city of Naples and its port. For him and for the many thousands of other hopeful souls who defined the early twentieth century’s great Age of Immigration, this was the gateway to a new life.

Once on board the grand ocean liner, ‘Vincent’ found a space in Steerage, the passenger area near the very bottom of the ship reserved for the poorest of travelers. Holding his one suitcase tightly, he settled in, ready to come to America to his future. The trip took about twelve days through storms, rough seas and more than a few bouts of seasickness, but ultimately, the ship entered New York harbor and the hundreds of weary, but excited travelers raced to the rail to catch their first glimpses of their “New World”, the Manhattan skyline, and more importantly, ‘The Lady’, the Statue of Liberty. Young Vincent could not believe his eyes; he had finally made it. There was, however, one more hurdle, the immigration-processing center on Ellis Island. The officials were all very kind and patient, as they. The new arrivals, Vincent included filled out the necessary paperwork, answered countless questions, endured the mandatory physical exam, then signed his name into the registry of new arrivals. Visiting www.wallofhonor.com, I found his name, his port of departure and the date he arrived.

After enjoying his first American meal in the sprawling Ellis Island cafeteria, Vincent boarded the ferry to the mainland where his older brother, Joseph, his sponsor was waiting for him. A train took them from Grand Central to the rail station in New Haven, Vincent’s home for the next twenty-one years. Joseph, by this time, was a successful businessman, owner of a thriving grocery store-deli in the heart of New Haven’s Italian neighborhood. Vincent began working in the store the next day, opening before 7:00 AM and closing sometime after 11:00 PM seven days a week. Staying up into the early morning hours, Vincent studied for his citizenship papers. His daily exposure to customers served as his teacher in the English language. During this period, his mother, a widow, joined her sons. The family seemed complete. Ultimately, he gained his citizenship, but continued to study and work, the two principles that governed his entire life. For recreation, he would sketch some of the regular customers he had come to know. From this he experimented with simple oil paints when he could afford them. His artistic talent developed and at 27 years of age, ten years after arriving in this country, he applied to and was accepted to the Yale University School of Fine Art in New Haven. This was both the most exciting and the most rigorous of times for Vincent. Though he was a full-time student, he continued to work long hours in the store, many nights barely getting one or two

hours of sleep once his homework was done, but all through this, he felt fortunate. It was my father who taught me that another word for obstacle is opportunity.

Unfortunately, his dreams of graduating and becoming a professional artist were derailed when his brother decided he wanted to return to Italy to resume his old way of life. Vincent had a difficult choice to make, stay in school and lose the store and livelihood for him and his mother, or leave school after two rewarding years to keep the store and his only means of support. The decision was made, Vincent said goodbye to his professors and classmates and became a full time grocer, marking one of the many significant steps in a process that continued to define his number one priority throughout the rest of his life, family first. A testimony to the stature he achieved with his classmates and professors is underscored by his inclusion onto the Yale Alumni roster with all privileges and rights accorded thereof for the rest of his life.

I cannot begin to enumerate the countless sacrifices my father willingly espoused; nor can I recall, without the greatest admiration, the many opportunities he had, to take credit for his singular accomplishments and the innumerable acts of charity he engaged in, never seeking recognition nor acknowledgement. He was a simple, humble, yet supremely talented, charitable individual possessed of a superior intellect, an extraordinary sense of humor and an ingrained inability to speak ill of anybody. As I matured and better learned to understand my father as an individual, and as a man, I began to see the contentment he enjoyed, knowing he had done everything necessary to provide for his family; the fact that I and my sisters graduated from college owing \$0.00 in student loans is testimony to his devotion to his family and his uncompromising commitment to his responsibilities as a parent. As a young child, I can recall the days he worked at New London Textiles, a factory that manufactured hand designed and hand painted dry goods and clothing. I still have several ties he crafted.

My Dad passed away in 1973, fate robbing me of the opportunity to share my adult life with him, denying me the chance to call for fatherly advice, or simply spend a few private moments together, man to man, father with only son. As I go on in this life, the realization that I am more like my dad than I previously understood is both sobering and enlightening. My pride in that connection and that ongoing emotional bond is the frequent tonic I look for when faced with day-to-day demands of living. It has never disappointed me.

**“Fleeing Sudan: Lino Paul, Sudanese Immigrant”
From Boise State University’s Idaho Issues Online (Fall 2005)**

Sitting on a long leather couch in his comfortable apartment on the Boise Bench, Lino Paul lives literally in a whole new world. With his wife Mary and new baby Nancy, the family recounts the life of fear and immense hardship in war-torn southern Sudan, and their wonderment at America—a civilization the likes of which they had never seen.

Historically, Muslim Arabs controlled northern Sudan and the capital city of Khartoum, dominating and neglecting the non-Arab Sudanese in the south of the country. Shortly after Lino and Mary wed, the military regime in Khartoum passed a resolution mandating that education throughout the Sudan be conducted in Arabic only. Until that time, most of southern Sudan conducted classroom instruction in English; the culture at large used tribal dialects for business and social expressions.

It was not long before the northern regime began enforcing their dictates on schools in southern Sudan. This outraged students like Paul, who assumed responsibility for organizing protests against the government edict. For his actions, the government branded him a ringleader and he became a marked man. After watching northern soldiers kill thousands of students and throw their bodies into the Nile River, Paul knew he must flee.

With no other option, in 1991 Paul left his wife, grabbed a bedroll, and he and five cohorts headed from the city of Juba to the Kenya-Sudan border. Almost immediately, rebel troops with whom they allied detained the group and forced them into prison labor—which included taking ammunition to the front, washing dishes, and cooking. The soldiers suspected the group may be northern spies, Paul says, so detaining them was their safest option.

Confusing the soldiers was the fact that though the northern Sudanese consider themselves Arabs, their outward appearance differs little from the African southern Sudanese. Thus there was no way to tell if Paul or his friends were African friends or Arab foes.

After six months in the rebel camp, Paul and his friends were set “free”. This freedom, however, simply meant that they were alive—for the time being—and able to seek refuge in the safety of Kenya which lies just to Sudan’s south.

The journey had its own perils. Paul and his friends had no food or water; they ate only fruit they could pick from trees. They were in constant danger of wild animals. Traveling only at night to avoid the blistering heat and roving bands of soldiers, they arrived in Nairobi, Kenya, after a six-month journey—entirely on foot.

Arriving in Nairobi in December 1992, refugee resettlement officials moved Paul to Kakuma (a refugee camp) in southern Kenya, where tens of thousands of Somali-Bantu refugees awaited final sanctuary in host nations such as the U.S.

Paul spent 1993 and 1994 in “Camp EFO”, as he recalls the name of the camp in Kakuma. Not until December 1994 was Paul able to begin paperwork to secure his own asylum in the United States.

The Joint Voluntary Agency (JVA), a mission of the World Church Service, helped Paul begin required State Department Paperwork. Their first question: “They asked me if I knew anyone in the United States. I told them I had a friend in Nashville, Tennessee, so they said, “Ok, you’re going to Nashville.” And by June 1995 it was so.

Paul recalls the descent into the Nashville airport with wonderment. The government in Khartoum, Sudan largely allocated all revenues to infrastructure development in the north. The south of Sudan remains an uncomplicated, undeveloped natural plain—most people still live in huts in the brush and there is almost no electricity. Paul described arriving in Nashville: “I remember looking out of the airplane window and seeing all the lights and thinking, ‘Oh my God, I’ve never seen so many lights.’” Getting off the plane brought another surprise: an outburst of environmental noise.

The local office of World Relief helped Paul find an apartment. They paid only for the first month. “Immediately when I got there, my friend took me around and helped me put in applications for jobs.” He found a job stocking shelves on the night shift for a large publishing company. He also received food stamps for one month—his only receipt of government benefits.

Paul had not had any contact with Mary since the day he escaped from Juba. He again sought help from World Relief to fill out the paperwork to bring his wife to America.

In Nashville for only six months, Paul moved to Salt Lake City, where he remained for a year, then to Boise, Idaho, arriving in January 1997. Bad news awaited. After a two-year search World Relief officials could not locate Mary, who had by this time been displaced from the city of Juba to a refugee camp. Paul was at a dead end.

In 2000, he filed another set of papers, the prior papers having expired. When World Relief finally did locate Mary, there was a new twist: she now had two boys. Since Paul had become a U.S. citizen on December 16, 2002, he now had to file a new set of papers to include asylum requests for the boys.

July 2004 brought Paul one step closer to his dream of reuniting his family when Mary finally set foot in Boise. This time her surprise was pregnancy—their daughter Nancy was a result of Paul’s trip to Kenya just a few months prior.

As for the boys—9-year-old Innocent Jimi Paul, and 6-year-old Noel Paul—their fate lies in the hands of the U.S. Embassy in Kampala, Uganda, where the boys live with Mary’s brother. The State Department requires DNA tests of Lino, Mary and the boys before authorizing the boy’s resettlement here in Idaho.

Mary works days in the deli at Wal-Mart “learning to make American food,” Paul jokes. Paul works nights at Hewlett-Packard. Nearly finished with a degree in criminal justice, he dreams of law school at the University of Idaho. In the meantime they wait, and they pray with their newfound American friends and others fortunate to have escaped from Sudan that an African peace holds, and that their long separated family is at last reunited.

Written by Chris Blanchard.