ach spring, thousands of new college graduates set off for Europe, Asia and other exotic locales, eager to experience a bit of the world before settling into jobs or continuing their studies. Alex Logono’s post-graduation trip completed a journey begun nearly two decades before – and culminated in a brief reunion with his mother, Lona Sitti, whom he hadn’t seen since fleeing his war-torn homeland as a child.

Logono left Albany May 21 and traversed two hemispheres by air, truck and foot – only to discover that Sitti was living in another village, near Sudan’s border with the Democratic Republic of Congo. After another long truck ride, “I finally found my mom,” he recounted. “We greeted and started talking. My escort asked whether she knew me; she said no. He told her I was her son. We started crying, crying, crying, and she hugged me. ‘I prayed and prayed for you,’ she said. I told her all the stories about how I survived.”

In 1989, the Christians in southern Sudan were battling the Arab rulers who demanded they convert to Islam, and the fighting soon reached Lanyi. At age 9, Logono became separated from his family and fled, along with 25,000 other displaced youngsters who came to be known as the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” Their journey was a perilous one; the boys braved fear, hunger, wild animals and other horrors. The luckier children survived the terrifying days and nights in the bush and reached Ethiopia, where the government, at the request of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, permitted them to establish a refugee camp. Kakuma. There was a lot of sand; sometimes it covered our eyes, and we couldn’t see. There were respiratory diseases, and problems with the water; it was just for drinking. We showered in the rain.”

Schools were built at Kakuma, and Logono attended classes until 1999. He later taught English and Swahili, and volunteered at the camp hospital, where he was trained to “examine patients, prescribe medications, and give health education and treatment.”

Years later, “a group of people from the United States came. I did not know where the United States was. They saw the huts where we lived, and interviewed us. They went back to the U.S. and asked Congress to take some of us, then came back to Kakuma and took pictures of us. After the pictures, nothing happened, and we started forgetting,” Logono noted.

But the visitors remembered the “Lost Boys,” and “started transporting us from Kakuma to Nairobi, then to different states.” Logono’s own trip to the U.S., sponsored by the Lutheran Church Federation, was delayed by two weeks following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.
“I was brought to Utica, N.Y,” he said. “It was the first time for me to see a city, use a flushing toilet, see a kitchen – everything was new for me. I went to orientations to learn how to use stuff.” Logono also attended English classes, but had learned the language at a more advanced level at Kakuma. He asked about college and was told he would have to find work first. The food stamps and housing allowance he had received to assist in his resettlement were cut off, but Logono did not lose hope. “I became closer to God. My faith helped me believe that nothing would happen to me. If I did not die in Sudan, I was not going to die here. I prayed to God to help me find a job.”

His prayers were answered. Hired at St. Elizabeth Medical Center in Utica as a nurse’s aide, Logono was promoted to nursing technician within a few months. While he worked, he took classes at Mohawk Valley Community College. “I also sent money to friends in the camp. I don’t forget them,” he added.

After completing science and mathematics studies at MVCC in 2004, Logono decided to continue his education. “I want to become a doctor, and go back and help people in southern Sudan,” he said. “A lot of people are dying there because of a lack of medical assistance. There are no schools, no health facilities.” Logono applied to the SUNY schools at Binghamton, Geneseo and Buffalo, and “all of them accepted me. I chose UAlbany; it has nice pre-med and research programs.”

Logono majored in biology and found a job at St. Peter’s Hospital in Albany. “I work weekends doing EKGs, drawing blood, doing vitals and general patient care.” He will take the Medical College Admission Test (MCAT) next year and plans to attend medical school “wherever I am accepted.”

Prior to returning to Africa last spring, Logono had learned that Sitti was ill. He took her to Uganda for treatment; “my mom has a blockage in an artery and a kidney problem. The doctor can’t do anything about the blockage, which causes sweating and chills and other symptoms, but he gave her some medication for the kidney infection.” Released from the hospital over the summer, she continues to take medication and follow up with the doctor.

Logono hopes to bring Sitti to the U.S. for treatment. While still a student at MVCC, “I filled out family reunification forms two times, but I have not heard what is happening. I was told because I am a Sudanese, it is going to take longer,” recalled Logono, who became a U.S. citizen last March. His family includes the brother he was reunited with last spring, and three sisters. “My mom does not speak English, so they can be her best companions,” he observed.

“I really love my mom, though I am away from her,” said Logono, his face lighting up at the memory of their brief reunion. “I would like to spend time together with her.”

As he waits to reunite his family, Logono continues to focus on his studies. “If God helps me and I get into medical school,” he vowed, “I will go back to Lanyi and open a free clinic for the people. I will provide medical services and health education. That is my goal.”