

Voice of the refugee

BY JIMMY NESS

21 July 2011



A bright future: Makuei Aken proudly holds Beyond The Dark Journey, a refugee anthology in which four of his stories are published.

Former refugee Makuei Aken is expressing his struggle and making his voice heard in the world of arts and music.

Aken's stories, poems and music have earned him one of Arts Access Aotearoa's national awards, the 2011 Big "A" Winton and Margaret Bear Young Artist Award. The contest recognises the creative achievements of people who have faced personal barriers.

Aken is to receive his award today at Parliament and says he is very excited.

"To me it was quite a big shock. I thought there were some people there who were better than me. It was quite unbelievable."

The 21-year-old Trentham student fled Southern Sudan at age nine. He spent five years in a Kenyan refugee camp before moving to New Zealand in 2003 with his aunt and two cousins.

"It was pretty tough," Aken says. "There were a lot of things we went through. The place was pretty dangerous. My aunty was the only adult who was looking after four of us."

Aken learnt guitar at school and records music from his home.

He began telling his story after writer Samson Sahele encouraged him to talk about his childhood during a by thete Wellington Refugees as Survivors Trust workshop.

Four of Aken's stories and poems were later published in a refugees' anthology, Beyond the Dark Journey.

Sahele says he believes Aken's ability to write short stories and poetry has enormous potential to influence the wider refugee community.

"[He is] an insightful, creative young man who has a dream to become a writer. He is very focused and determined.

"By receiving this award he will be seen as a role model for his community and inspire other young refugees."

Aken is studying information technology at WelTec and hopes to study political science in the future. He says he will always pursue music and writing. "To be able to put your thoughts on paper is a great thing."