

Big 'A' Winton and Margaret Bear Young Artist Award 2011

Winner: Makuei Aken, Southern Sudan, Upper Hutt resident

Judges' comment: "It's great to have a young person focused on creative writing and Makuei shows real promise – writing, as he does, in his second language. His stories and poems are powerful and insightful, drawing on his experience as a refugee. He is also a musician. We hope that receiving this award will inspire other young people in his community to write creatively about their life experiences."

Some background: Makuei Aken was born in the village of Aweng in Southern Sudan. At the age of nine, he was forced to flee the civil war ravaging his country. His family was scattered and he still does not know where some of them are.

He spent five years at Kakuma, a refugee camp in north-western Kenya crammed with tens of thousands of people displaced by wars in neighbouring countries. Kakuma is the Swahili word for "nowhere".

In 2003, aged 13, Makuei was accepted into New Zealand with his aunty and two young cousins. When he arrived, he spoke his native language fluently but could not read it. He attended St Bernard's College in Lower Hutt and last year, he passed an English proficiency course at Massey University.

His immediate goal is to pass his information technology course at Weltec, followed possibly by a degree in political science at Victoria University.

Now aged 20, he also has a "big dream" to express himself through words poetry and music. When he was a school, he learned to play the guitar, and he and a group of friends wrote and recorded their first song, called *Southern Sudan*.

Makuei has attended a refugee youth media workshop and creative writing workshop, organised and led by Samson Sahele of Wellington Refugees as Survivors Trust (RAS). He has also participated in a refugee drama project, organised by ChangeMakers Refugee Forum, and in The Mixing Room refugee project, facilitated by Te Papa.

Following the creative writing workshop in 2010, a collection of the participants' stories and poems was published in *Beyond the Dark Journey*. Four of Makuei's stories are included.

"Samson taught me how to write poetry and that helped me write songs," he says. "Then seeing my work in print was great."

Samson describes Makuei as "an insightful, creative young man who has a dream to become a writer. He is very focused and determined. During the writing workshops, he was the most prolific writer, revelling in the opportunity to write about his refugee experiences."

The Big 'A' Winton and Margaret Bear Young Artist Award recognises the development of a talented young artist aged under 21 in the Greater Wellington region who faces barriers to pursuing his or her artistic talent. The Winton and Margaret Bear Trust supports youth living in the region.

Samson believes Makeui's ability to write short stories and poetry has enormous potential to influence on the wider refugee community in the Wellington region. "By receiving this award he will be seen as a role model for his community and inspire other young refugees to become writers."

As for Makuei, he says that if you want to be a writer or a musician, you need to read a lot. "I like to read books and discover things. One of my favourite rappers said the first thing you have to do is keep reading, and learn what other people are thinking and doing."

The other piece of advice he has for people wanting to be artists and writers is to ask for help. "There's a lot of help out there if you want it."