psychology senior Achol Mayen is determined to change the world, or at least her portion of it. As a native of South Sudan, the world’s newest nation, she has big plans to bring aid to the war-torn and famine-stricken country.

Mayen, a poised and beautiful young woman, was born in the southern region of Sudan in 1986. When the civil wars became too dangerous, her family was forced to flee to Egypt, where they remained for two years waiting for permission to enter the United States. The Mayen family moved to Austin in 1996 and began living the American dream.

Even in a new country, Mayen was passionate about helping her community. She volunteered with Catholic Charities, the same organization that helped her family resettle in Texas, and networked with other South Sudanese in the area. She began to see a need for an organization committed to the growth and cultural education of South Sudanese youth.

“My family and I were always discussing the need to start a movement or an organization for the youth of my homeland to influence our nation building, bring about social change and promote our ethnic identity,” she said. “There are now entire generations of South Sudanese that were born in America and don’t have a strong connection to our homeland. I want to change that.”

Mayen, along with several friends and family members, started Y.E.S.S. – Youth Empowering Society through Service, an organization that will focus on bringing aid and self-sustaining farming methods to South Sudan, as well as promoting youth action.

“For now, Y.E.S.S. is focusing on helping South Sudan, but I want this organization to become global,” she said. “I want to create a model that other young people across the world can adopt and use in their own societies.”

To jump start her initiative, Mayen was invited to attend the Clinton Global Initiative University, held March 30 through April 1, 2012 at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

“I knew this would be a great opportunity to learn how to turn this idea into action,” she said. “I truly enjoyed being in a room with hundreds of other youth who were passionate about making real changes in the world. It was so energizing and motivating.”

While at the conference, Mayen also had the opportunity to speak personally with President Bill Clinton. During a community service project, Mayen was able to share her Y.E.S.S. initiative with Clinton, who offered advice and even collected her contact information.

“I explained to him my initiative of bringing students together to relieve the food shortage in South Sudan and he seemed genuinely interested. He asked questions and was surprised to learn how many South Sudanese reside in the U.S.,” she said.

Mayen’s hard work and dedication have also caught the attention of UHD faculty and staff.

“She has courage, commitment and compassion,” said Jean DeWitt, director of UHD Community Engagement and advisor to Mayen. “Her work reminds us that we are all global citizens. Soon she will be a UHD graduate and continue her outreach to South Sudan. I am very proud she chose UHD as her academic community.”

To gain a greater understanding on the region’s needs, Mayen and several Y.E.S.S. executives will travel to South Sudan upon her graduation from UHD in May. She explains that visiting the country and speaking with locals will help her understand what aid tactics will be successful there.

Mayen also models, works as a social work intern at Catholic Charities, and will graduate in May 2012. After returning from her research trip to South Sudan, Mayen plans to enroll in a graduate social work or psychology program.

Above: Former President Bill Clinton with Mayen.

Opposite page, left:
• Mayen with Chelsea Clinton.
• Attending Clinton Global Initiative University, spring 2012.
• With President Clinton and youth at a community service project.

Opposite page, right:
• Mayen enjoys modeling and hopes to one day walk the runway in New York and Milan.
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To South Sudan With Love From A UHD Student

By: Mary Ann Cozza

Achol Mayen