

[00:00:00] **Stephen Calabria:** From the Mount Sinai Health System in New York City, this is Road to Resilience, a podcast about facing adversity. I'm your host, Stephen Calabria, Mount Sinai's Director of Podcasting.

[00:00:12] On this episode, we welcome Lual Mayan. Lual was born as his parents were fleeing South Sudan, and he was ultimately raised in a series of refugee camps in sub-Saharan Africa.

[00:00:23] It was there Lual taught himself English and computer coding, which set the stage for his big break that would catapult him to worldwide recognition.

[00:00:32] Lual's remarkable story illustrates some of the seemingly insurmountable challenges faced by many around the world, and how healthy doses of hope and resilience can be the drivers to a better life.

[00:00:43] We're honored to have Lual Mayan on the program.

[00:00:47] Lual, welcome to the show.

[00:00:48] **Lual Mayen:** Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be part of this conversation.

[00:00:51] So my name is Lual Mayen. I'm originally from South Sudan. I actually was born as my family was fleeing South Sudan to find a place of refuge in Uganda. So I grew up all my childhood, I grew up in Uganda. I'm a former refugee, a lot of people may know. When it comes to work, I am a game programmer and a director.

[00:01:10] **Stephen Calabria:** Could you take our listeners through your first 22 years? Living in multiple refugee camps?

[00:01:17] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. Yeah. So first of all, like when I tell people that I'm from South Sudan and I spent almost 22 years in a refugee camp, a lot of people sometimes ask like, How does that look like? What is actually the main cause of my family had to, like, go to Uganda.

[00:01:33] When we look back at South Sudan itself, before they were independent, we were, like, one country Sudan, and there was a conflict, which resulted in a civil war that started a long time ago and it actually started 1953.

[00:01:46] So it's a long, it's a long war that revolved, and then it turned into like becoming like a tribal war, which actually affected my family directly in

South Sudan. So, that war, affected a lot of South Sudanese. a lot of people were killed and my family had to actually not just flee the country, but just, they had no idea of where they're going to.

[00:02:06] A lot of people think that, you know, you wake up in the morning and leave what you love. No, it wasn't like that for them. It was like a, it was a journey of life and death, whether you either like remained in the country and you don't see another day, or you just run to a place that you don't own and see like how tomorrow morning is going to, like, look like for you.

[00:02:24] So, my family had to make a choice of fleeing the country. But, during that time I wasn't born. That was like around 1992. That was like the war that actually directly affected my family. The part of the country. And that war was just insane. My dad, had to like, flee by himself.

[00:02:39] My mom had to like, take my sisters and my, all my siblings, they had to like, walk, for like over 250 mile of a place, just running in the bush, sometime like, wild animal can actually attack them. it was just a very horrible situation that they found themselves in and at the end of the day, all they wanted was to find a place of refuge.

[00:02:59] And during that time, when my family almost reached Uganda, so that was a time whereby I was actually born on the way, I was born in the way as my family was actually fleeing the war. It wasn't an easy, task for my mom, being able to like, fight for your life, and also you have a baby.

[00:03:14] And also being born in a place where there was like no water as a child, there was no, no hospital. It was a crazy situation. I was born on the way and then we were able to, like, get some help from the UN where we were welcome. My family was welcome to Uganda.

[00:03:30] **Stephen Calabria:** So in our previous conversation you had talked about how a lot of children are born during these situations and they're left behind. What was, to you, the reason why your mom kept you?

[00:03:45] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah, that's a question I sometime I ask myself and, , sometime I, as, as a child during that time, I couldn't really remember anything. For me, I, I had to like, learn a lot of stories from my mom. You know, we'd sit down and I say, Hey, tell me more about what happened, what's going on?

[00:04:00] And I remember when my mom told me. She's right now in Canada. When I was talking to her, I was asking her like, how was that situation to her?

[00:04:08] And so, like, even though you were not the only child that was actually born on the way, there were actually other women that actually gave birth, to children and they didn't want the children to suffer, though, so they threw the children away.

[00:04:18] And I was like, why did you like, keep me? On the way, I lost two of my sisters because of the war and they couldn't survive. And to me, my mom was like, this is a gift to me, even if I suffered as a child. During that time I didn't have, milk to drink. I didn't have water, I didn't have anything.

[00:04:37] It was just a very horrible situation, whereby it's not even half, it wasn't even for her to like keep me, it was natural thing that could actually affect me and don't survive as a child. It's not even her saying, Oh, I wanna keep it. I will provide all the necessary thing for the child to survive.

[00:04:54] She could do that, but there was no, nothing at all. And for her to even lose her own children on the way it was horrible for her.

[00:05:01] And also giving birth to me on the way. At the end of the day,, to her was like, she felt like I was a gift from God. She felt like, no matter the the suffering is , I will do everything to survive with her and the family.

[00:05:12] **Stephen Calabria:** So you made it to Uganda? Yeah. And you were in three refugee camps?

[00:05:17] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. Mm-hmm.

[00:05:18] **Stephen Calabria:** Describe for our listeners what it is like in a refugee camp. I imagine some of them are different from others, but what was your experience like to stay today?

[00:05:26] **Lual Mayen:** Yes. Yeah. So yeah, so we ended up being settled in Uganda.. And when we think about a refugee camp, a lot of people think that a refugee camp is a temporary place where you go there for five years and you go back to your home country.

[00:05:37] It's not like that. A refugee camp is a permanent home for people. I've been there for 23 years. Yeah, 22, 23 years, before I came to the States, and imagine that was like 1994. And even some people went there earlier.

[00:05:51] So there are people that spent 50 years in a refugee camp, they're born there. It become their home. And what happened is that the problem with

the refugee camp, it's more than just being called a refugee camp because when you look at refugees, these are people that only, all they want is, is survive and see a new day.

[00:06:09] Right? And coming from where they love, coming from where, like, their memories, their families, that is a place that belonged to them. Whenever they flee that country because of maybe climate change or war, or thing like that, they don't even think about any other thing.

[00:06:24] The only thing is peace of mind. A place of, like, whereby, wow, like at least I have another chance in life. For example, when my family came to Uganda, the government of Uganda fall a place like unsettled place.

[00:06:36] Like maybe there's a lot of trees, there's a lot of bush. Place that have never been settled before, and all you do is like, hey, you can settle yourself here and then you as the refugees, at least you have a land, a plot of land. And then you will clean it up.

[00:06:49] You will like build your own, maybe put tents there, you will like, start your new life from there. It's like, this is the beginning of the world for you. And during that time, it's become so difficult for refugees themselves.

[00:07:00] One is, you might have a family, and that family, you don't have a strong people in the family, maybe men. So for them to even clear the land, it's so hard for them.

[00:07:09] They have mosquitos, malaria, like there's no clean water, there's no bohool there. So it's a place where, but it's just, you're trying to begin yourself with what you have and at the end of the day, like, it's not that we didn't care. We were happy with that because that's all we had.

[00:07:25] That's more than just waking up in the morning and see somebody being killed or like somebody like, because of the war. So it become like , it's all or nothing. Yeah. You get it all. Like, Oh, you survived with that environment.

[00:07:37] **Stephen Calabria:** How many people lived in those camps that you were in?

[00:07:39] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. This, Yeah. A refugee camp is a lot. It's a lot. First of all, when, when you look at only the refugees that flee South Sudan itself, they're like 2.5 million refugees. Only from South Sudan.

[00:07:49] And when they settle these places or all these camps are like, they're like spread away and all this camp, each camp can have over like maybe 20,000 people or 50,000 people. And that's just one camp.

[00:08:01] It become really, really a big, it become like a good society later on. Cause people are like ,people that stayed there for over like, maybe 10 years. Like you have like new buildings now. Like even it, it help, So Yeah, they're big, like big, big spaces. Yeah.

[00:08:14] **Stephen Calabria:** And so, because there are so many people and because so many of those people have been there for an extended period of time, I imagine that brings a sense of community among people who are from the same country who then fled to and find themselves in the same refugee camp.

[00:08:33] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. So it become like a very good sense of community. Though the problem is like, most of the refugee camp as well, there's also conflict, cause all these people and tribes that have been in displaced, you have to make sure, like, when you are actually, like... for example, if it's a, it is a tribal conflict, right?

[00:08:52] And, there's Dinkas and there's Nuer people, and they're all like, displaced and they come back to the refugee camp. These people don't like themselves. Like they say, Hey, you actually like, you are behind cause of your tribe.

[00:09:03] It's affected my family. Same thing affected them all difficult, traumatized. Then at the end of the day, it's like fighting every time. So that's where the policies come in. The UN comes in and say, Hey, identify people from this tribe shouldn't live there.

[00:09:16] We need to take them somewhere and all, but slowly by slowly there is a sense of community that is created because these are all the survivors of war. So like, it's like some people say, Haha, I don't really wanna think about what is going on.

[00:09:28] Then, let's bring in that unity. And that's why like when schools are there, kids learn under the trees and that's where like kids play football. We start playing soccer together to bring people together.

[00:09:39] And that's one thing I miss about the refugee camp because, it's more than just what people think that it is just that bad. Yeah, it's bad. It's crazy. It's

not, Nobody deserve it. But the thing that, that we enjoy in term of like, again, community.

[00:09:53] Like, people that enjoying the small thing that we have, enjoying the people around us because there's nothing else that we think about. So that sense of community is always there, helping each other. Maybe eat one meal a day.

[00:10:04] That's it, then you can share. And all those things, when you live in that's kind of community it's kind of like, help people a little bit.

[00:10:10] **Stephen Calabria:** So you having grown up in this environment from a very young age. This is a kind of environment that a Westerner would probably think of as one of the worst places in the world to grow up. But it sounds like for you it was pretty normal because, from when you were little, that was all you knew.

[00:10:30] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. I think, yeah, and that kind of helped me become who I am today because it was more than just that kind of a mindset, but it was a mindset of like, I wasn't just born to live that way, but my circumstances and my environment have actually made me to be that way.

[00:10:46] And there's nothing I can do. I cannot change anything based on that. First of all, it's like how do I respond to that as a person? And all that did not just come from like, how would a child think about that way even. Why, why would you even think about that? And I think that was something that was within the house.

[00:11:03] My mom, my dad, my brothers, sisters, everybody, and the way we talk in that family and what we learn was like, Oh, my mom was this kind of person that just want us to become better people in life.

[00:11:17] More than just like, Hey, we just here the refugee camp. Like, yeah, you can actually do better. You can actually do this. She works every day. When I was in a refugee camp, I would actually go and build a house with my mom.

[00:11:29] I would actually climb a roof of the house to build a house, and I was like, maybe like seven, 10. I would actually help mom, my mother to lay bricks, cause my dad wasn't been feeling okay. Right. So all those things are that hard work.

[00:11:43] Like my, I would help her, like she, she would say, Hey, let's do this. We do this together. And she also has hand on in what she's doing.

[00:11:51] For her to like, think that way it help us as a, helped me as well, as a person to like, to keep just doing a thing that I love in a way that it led me to a, to the new world of technology where I end up getting into it, but there was a source of it.

[00:12:07] **Stephen Calabria:** You've talked about how you had to split one meal a day, how food was scarce. How did your mind and body adapt to being displaced, forced from your home, existing in such a sparse environment with such an irregular diet?

[00:12:28] **Lual Mayen:** I think I was used to it, right? So when I, when you are used to something, you're numb to, become like part of you, then you live that way to the extent whereby, I remember like, one of the worst thing that always happened to me is, I had this mindset where I feel that I can actually live without eating.

[00:12:44] Like, I don't need food to live. I don't need anything to like really live, cause that's, I think my body was used to that. Cause if I can only have one meal a day, or even nothing in a day, or maybe my body, already I digest, do that and say like, Okay, really, I can live with this.

[00:13:00] I can sustain you with this. We can go with that. And that kind of help us in term of, of course, like you start every day like you really need to eat. And your mind is, I remember like, we would go to the bush to look for mangoes, go look for anything that we can eat.

[00:13:15] And, you wake up, that's all we do. Wake up in the morning, go to the bush, find something to eat, you come back home maybe at night and you find something, you have food and then you can eat. The same thing, like every day. It's like survival. What should you do to have a full stomach? And then my body, like our bodies, digest that, because we had nothing.

[00:13:31] **Stephen Calabria:** In that kind of horrible situation, where it seems like you're only existing to survive, how does a person hope for a better life than the one you just described? Was that ever really a consideration?

[00:13:46] **Lual Mayen:** That's a really good question. I think mine was really different. If I ask how do I hope for a better life? I didn't, I didn't at all, because

I felt like I was lying to myself. All I had to do was accept the reality and felt like, Wow, like this is all I have.

[00:14:03] So, I'm just going to utilize it. I didn't have a mindset telling myself that I have to do this to do better, so to live a better life. I didn't think that way at all. And I had three things in mind that kind of helped me a lot.

[00:14:16] One was to be content. I was in a refugee camp. I was like, Wow, this is all I have. There's nothing. So I was happy with that. I was content with that situation. I woke up in the morning and I didn't think about, oh, like I gotta do this in order to like, something dramatically change.

[00:14:30] No. All I had to do was like, Yeah, I'm happy. This is my place. I'm gonna use it. I'm gonna be happy. Whatever I have, I have it. Second to that was like, it wasn't a choice for my family to live in that space. It wasn't a choice for them to wake up in the morning and say, We wanna be refugees.

[00:14:45] No, they actually helped me for us to find a place of refuge. I had nobody to blame for it. As a child, I'm growing up and I'm like, Well, I didn't have anything. So that helped me a lot to just use that moment, live with it, and just find anything to entertain myself, find anything, to do anything. And that kind of helped a little bit.

[00:15:05] **Stephen Calabria:** And so you found something that you thought was entertaining. Describe for us when you first saw a computer game.

[00:15:13] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. So like a computer game. So, it helped me. Sometime I would actually ask myself one thing that. During the refugee, there was like, that was around 2007.

[00:15:22] So what they do is, the UNHCR, they come and then do the registration for new refugees. But during that time they were actually like registering refugees. And then they were using computers to enter data, collect data. And then that's when I was like, I saw a computer and like, Wow, what is that?

[00:15:36] I'm like, Wow. Like my mom was like, That's a computer. And I'm like, What? How did you even know that? She hasn't been to school. By that time I saw that I was like, wow, I want to utilize that. I want to use that one day. I don't care what it takes for somebody to use a computer.

[00:15:50] I just had that type of mind, because I love electronics. I love things that, for entertainment. I used to love them a lot. And the reason was, it's so funny, in a way that, when we are in a refugee camp, I used to be like, all we love was playing soccer.

[00:16:05] So playing football is like everybody, like you wake up in the morning at 6:00 AM you go to a field and you play until it is like 3:00 PM. It's sunny. You start in the morning because that's all we love. We love to play soccer.

[00:16:16] But, there are kids in the refugee camp that were actually bigger than me. Sometimes they were like, I will go and I wanna play. They will say, No, you're not playing. And then they will fight. And I cannot fight. I was small, like I couldn't do anything.

[00:16:30] So every time I would come and I'm like, Wow, it's their ball. I cannot do anything and I cannot fight them. So what I did was, instead of playing soccer with them, I would just come back home and just cut stuff. I made a small film show at home by using, cartoons, muppets, and stuff like that.

[00:16:47] And at 8:00 PM, I would put a show for one hour and then everybody is watching a TV show. And I just created that and everybody would just, we could have around 150 people in my house just coming just to watch it.

[00:17:01] And then the kids who, who actually go and play soccer and they don't want me to play. I would not never, I don't allow them to come and watch the show. I kept on doing that and everybody was happy.

[00:17:11] Like it was big entertainment like, by eight, during the nice season, there's no rain. It would just sit outside on the floor. And I would just do that every day and everybody was really so happy. And that was the reason actually my mom ended up buying me a computer.

[00:17:26] And she realized that, if I can do something like that and I ask the computer, I can be able to do anything. It was that moment and I, that moment I credit it because like, Kids couldn't allow me to go play soccer.

[00:17:37] I'm like, Okay, go for it. I'm gonna use my mind to create something that is actually entertaining. And then that kind of helped me a lot. Like that creativity was already instilled in me. Yeah.

[00:17:46] **Stephen Calabria:** Right. So you asked her for a computer. And what was her first response?

[00:17:52] **Lual Mayen:** So actually I ask her for a computer around 2013. That was like, it wasn't like from the time I saw a computer like. And I asked for a computer and I'm like, I want to buy a computer. And she looked at me, she laughed. Like, Where are we gonna get the money?

[00:18:03] Where are you actually going to charge the computer? Cause there was no power. Where are you going to actually find for you to actually learn? So all those things, I learned there, because she was a mother, she kept quiet for three years looking for \$300.

[00:18:16] And then one day she came and she was like, Hey, here are \$300. You can go and buy a computer. I'm like, what? That day I was like, Should I cry or should I, Like what would like.

[00:18:26] **Stephen Calabria:** So she saved \$300 over the course of three years.

[00:18:30] **Lual Mayen:** Three years. And I actually forgot it. I even forgot I ask her for a computer and stuff like that. And then, When I bought the computer, that was when I was like, Wow, I shouldn't have even asked for computer.

[00:18:41] Cause, what am I gonna do? Am I just gonna keep the computer in the house as like a museum thing or, cause what can I do to use it? And that reality like hit, Cause I have actually two brothers. And if my mom bought for me a computer and I don't use it, next time they're going to come and ask my mom, Hey, I need this something special.

[00:18:58] And then my mom would be like, I bought Lual a computer. He never used it. So I was also thinking about what is to come. And then I'm like, Yeah, man, if, if she can actually spend three years looking for \$300, what about me? I can do it.

[00:19:12] So I start doing research. I found a place where I can charge my laptop, right? I walked three hours per day to go and charge it.

[00:19:18] **Stephen Calabria:** So you walked an hour and a half...

[00:19:20] **Lual Mayen:** Three hours.

[00:19:21] **Stephen Calabria:** Oh, three hours to get there.

[00:19:22] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah, to get there.

[00:19:23] **Stephen Calabria:** And then three hours to come back just to charge your computer,

[00:19:27] **Lual Mayen:** And the worst part of it was, when I go there, I would go and Cause it was like a United Nation center, like the base camp.

[00:19:34] It's like a big camp where like they can register refugees. But it's far. So I would do that. I would go there and then the problem, part of it is two things that were the problem. One is, I would go and I will find that there's no generator. The generator is out of power. And nobody will tell me. Right.

[00:19:52] Sometime I would go there and it's raining and so it's raining on me and I'm just working there. So like those thing, but I didn't care. I was happy. I was like, I would go there every day, like just go charge it.

[00:20:01] The computer last only for two hours, . Right. So, it was a lot going on, but I was really content. I was like, happy. I was like, Yeah, that's all I had, and kept on learning. Yeah.

[00:20:12] **Stephen Calabria:** So, you got the computer and what activities did you at first use it for?

[00:20:18] **Lual Mayen:** That's, that's a good, that's my favorite part of it. So when I got the computer, I didn't know anything I can do with it. So what I start doing was just like, Play music, play videos and things like that.

[00:20:29] Then I start teaching myself with Microsoft, Microsoft Word, Publishers, Microsoft Slide, the slide Excel. I would just try to use everything, like anything I would try to do with it. And then with that, Everybody was really surprised.

[00:20:44] Especially like I would design certificates for people. I would write an advertisement for people. And then from there I start really, I would tell people, Hey, let me check my computer for free and then I would write for you do, I would design for you this one?

[00:20:55] Yeah. And then from there, I start enjoying it and then I never thought anything about a video game. Like, at all. Not even. I never thought like

I would ever make video game. I never thought like I would. Not at all, but then when I took my computer for charging my friend, it was internet cover.

[00:21:10] My friend installed Grand Theft Auto on my computer. And then I came back home and I didn't know. So I came back home and I look on my desktop, my computer screen, and then the first icon I'm seeing is Grand Theft Auto. And I'm like, What? And I start playing it.

[00:21:25] I'm like, Wow. This is amazing. This is really good. I didn't know actually, video game are created by people. I thought they just fall from heaven. Had no idea. I had no idea. And then I started interacting with the game. I didn't know how to play, so I just watch some tutorial.

[00:21:36] And then over and over when I start playing the game, I was like, Wow, games are really powerful. I'm from a country whereby almost 70% of the population is under the age of 30, or young people.

[00:21:48] They were born in war, raised up in war, and I explained before in a refugee camp, some of them, their only thing is like to solve a problem is conflict everything.

[00:21:56] Every time, right? Yeah. And I'm like, When they start playing game like this, I may think that, you know, like sometimes it's, there's violent of there and I'm like, they might think that's how things are done, but games are powerful. I love it. How about if I can make game for storytelling or for peace and conflict resolution? That might be good.

[00:22:12] And that's the moment I like, I'm like, okay. What is next?

[00:22:15] **Stephen Calabria:** And so what was next?

[00:22:19] **Lual Mayen:** What was next? I was like, Yo, what can I do to learn games? So I start getting, downloading offline tutorials, and then I'd start programming, learning programming and then, Oh, I wanna make my first game.

[00:22:28] So I made my first game, Salaam. So when I made Salaam, it was that moment. It was really difficult. I would say, it was like sometime, I would learn programming, a couple things like that. And then I don't know how to fix something, so it may take me like a week to like, keep on building and building it.

[00:22:43] And then when I made Salaam, it was like I made it as a app, like an apk. I couldn't actually send it. I couldn't put it on Google Play. I couldn't send it to people cause there was no internet. Second to that was, people don't have smartphone. It's so hard for them to have a lot of smartphone.

[00:22:57] So what I did is, a couple of kids that have a smartphone or family, I made the game less than 10 MBs, like very light. And then I start sending it through Bluetooth to the kids in the refugee camp. And then we'll have like have centers and then we'll just come play there every day.

[00:23:11] And everybody was so happy and I had no idea this is gonna bring me, I didn't even think about business perspective for it. I didn't even think about anything. All I want, and I say before, I was making something, I was creating something for the people that were around me for the kids in the refugee camp.

[00:23:27] And I already had my audience. Oh, these are the kids that want to play something. Let's do it together. That's fun together. And we start playing that game, even if it was not the best game in the world, but everybody enjoyed it, everybody like, Wow, how did you do it?

[00:23:37] Or, I love this. The critics were the-- there were no critics. They were like, Oh, we love this. Keep going. Then it gave me, wow, like at least I'm doing something great.

[00:23:45] **Stephen Calabria:** And there was no one there to tell you that this was bad. Yeah. No.

[00:23:49] **Lual Mayen:** Nobody there. Nobody there. Cause it was just like, everybody was excited for what I was creating.

[00:23:55] **Stephen Calabria:** And you didn't expect it to receive any kind of big--

[00:23:58] **Lual Mayen:** Not at all. Oh yeah. I remember, so one day, I had this, it was crazy, actually. And so it was in the evening actually, and I was like, I can't upload the game on a on app store. I can't do anything. I can just send it to people by Bluetooth.

[00:24:12] So I had a Facebook page. And you see how people like post their pictures on Facebook page. I had a file. The APK and I'm like, I'm just gonna

upload this file on my Facebook page and I just upload it. And I just, it was at night and then I'm like, Hey, I made a game.

[00:24:30] I woke up in the morning, it went viral. I was like, What? People start emailing me, the people in the game industry, like one of my friend in, Germany reach out to me. Was like, I want you to come to South Africa next week. I'm like, What? I want you to come and talk about the game. We love it.

[00:24:44] And I'm like, That's crazy. And. And then, yeah.

[00:24:48] **Stephen Calabria:** So before we get to what happened next, could you explain to our listeners how the game directly helps and provides support for refugees?

[00:24:56] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. Yeah. So, when I made Salaam, so Salaam, , which is like the first version I made, it was more like a peace game. People like destroy bombs with peace and so on and so on. And then from there I'm like, Oh, I'm adding more features to the game.

[00:25:09] So the game is actually like the high tension on a game right now, whereby you take , a refugee from a war-torn country to find a peaceful environment. So for you as a player, you have to carry on with their journey.

[00:25:20] A lot of things happen on the way, when they get injured, you have to give them medicine, when they run out of food, you need to give them food, for them to have the energy to keep running and finding their place of refuge.

[00:25:29] So in the games, when you buy food in the game for your character, you are actually buying food for somebody in a refugee camp. So if you are providing your own money and putting it into the game, that money then goes directly to the refugees. To the people in the refugee camp.

[00:25:42] And that money goes in different ways. So we partner with UNHCR and it is a big partnership and that's why we are actually working on more to the game right now. It's cause my main focus for the game is to help people.

[00:25:53] I wish, and I always tell people that I wish we live in a world where we don't have to teach empathy. And a lot of people, when they look at refugees, especially when they come to policy making, they don't understand who these refugees are. They don't understand their journey.

[00:26:04] They just make policies somewhere where they're peaceful involved, but they haven't seen this. They haven't seen what that journey looked like. And to me, it's like being powerful and being in a place of power doesn't mean that can just think that the world is flat.

[00:26:20] It's like the same, it's not. We have different experiences and that's why like even like to me, when I think about a refugee by myself, the most difficult part of being a refugee is not about being a refugee. It's the journey.

[00:26:34] And a lot of people do not understand and that's what that journey lead for me. The journey and where you have settled. You're settling, you are in a place of peace, but people are actually making bad policies on where you are, but they don't understand the journey you are in.

[00:26:46] It's adding more difficulties in your life and a lot of these refugees traumatize everything. All the think about is like, oh, how did like on that journey, it's crazy. And that's why I want people to understand also in the game, understand that this journey is more than that.

[00:27:02] And also like how can you be part of this? Of that journey for you to understand. And this is a long game. A lot of people may think that, maybe somebody who is 15 years old right now can play the game.

[00:27:13] Never experienced any refugee life journey and the game might actually take them. So one day they might actually be in the power, in the place of power. They might make actually a better decision because they understand what their journey is.

[00:27:25] People that are actually fleeing their country because of climate change, because of war, because of fear, because of war. And beyond that, there is one thing that is the journey and that's why I want people to understand through the game.

[00:27:36] **Stephen Calabria:** After it went viral, you received phone calls from a few companies in the US. What were those companies and what happened after that?

[00:27:45] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah. it was a journey that really, that the way it started, I didn't actually imagine at all, and I always love to say that because, It was just doing something that I love and keeping building it and just like new innovation coming in and doing different flood form.

[00:28:00] When I went to South Africa, when I got called to South Africa, it was just like,, my first flight, my first time going into a plane. And I couldn't believe. I was like, Wow, this is insane. My first thing was, Okay, I have this opportunity, and we talked about this before.

[00:28:14] We say that, hey, everybody in the refugee come, Oh, the game is great, right? The game is great. No, no critic. My first call up for me to South Africa, I want to now know what the industry look like. I wanna get like mentorship and wanna get to connect with different, Cause it was a big festival and during that, I'm just with my phone every day I'm showing people the game.

[00:28:32] Like, yo, this is a game I'm working on. You try it, they try it, then they gimme feedback. This is how it is. And all the people that I met during that time in South Africa, it was just incredible, great people.

[00:28:43] And then, the year after that, I came to the US and it was because of a determination of, yeah, I'm creating something that is important for me. That is part, and that's why I always tell people if I wasn't a refugee, I wouldn't be a game developer and that stuff.

[00:28:55] Yeah. I wouldn't because where would I actually use that? Where would that experience come from for me to use game as part of that? And that's why I always say this, no matter how long it's going to take, I'm part of this journey.

[00:29:07] I'm chained to it. It is part of me. And I always say that we can use our partner, our, and our experience is to create sustainable future for other people. And I think that creating that product m was just part of what I've been through and I want people to also understand it.

[00:29:20] And that's why I feel like, yeah, I think that it is more than it takes us back to when we are talking about, what was that experience in refugee camp? Did you enjoy it?

[00:29:30] Did you like it? Or, you look like it's really horrible. But it's still, there's some part of thing that I enjoyed and the thing that I enjoyed that was just being myself and just doing the thing that I love.

[00:29:40] **Stephen Calabria:** So you had your shot. You had the opportunity. You were flown to South Africa for this festival. You were getting offers from around the world. You had the opportunity to finally escape the refugee camp. But fate had other plans. What happened?

[00:30:00] **Lual Mayen:** Again, there were a lot of things when I said before that I just wanted to focus to being a refugee camp and that opportunity to find out, came through for me to see wow, at least, as a refugee I can go somewhere and like even present my idea and what I'm working on.

[00:30:14] And there was only one place that I took outta my books that I will never, I don't think that I will ever make it. And that is North America. And the reason was because, when you live in a refugee camp, there are opportunities for resettlement.

[00:30:26] Their refugees are resettled in Uganda, they're already in Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, everywhere. But they also apply for like resettlement like, Canada, US, Australia, Europe. They resettle you, which is a good thing because you are getting better opportunities, better like life, life that can change and so on.

[00:30:46] And then my family applied for a settlement for like, 10 times and since 2000, ten times and were rejected for nothing. So we would apply like, it's like a visa. You apply for it. Then they would just pick up the names. So people go and then they, you go the reset.

[00:31:05] I could see some of my neighbors going into Australia every day, and we apply and nobody for no reason. And by that time I gave up, I'm like, yo, like maybe there's something wrong. Maybe I'm like, this is where I'm supposed to live.

[00:31:18] And then when I got invited to San Francisco, that was actually 2017, February. That was actually 11 times. and I was like, Wow. I was, I was really excited. I was like, Wow. I,

[00:31:33] **Stephen Calabria:** And they came after you? They came to you?

[00:31:35] **Lual Mayen:** They came to me. Yeah. They, they, yeah. One of the biggest, conference in the world, it's called GDC Game Develops conference. They actually invited me to come to GDC and speak. It bring 30,000 people around the world.

[00:31:47] I'm in a refugee camp and I'm like, at least now, I'm going to the US not even to resettle there, I'm just going there to present my idea, my business and so on. So at least

[00:31:56] **Stephen Calabria:** You earned it.

[00:31:56] **Lual Mayen:** Yeah, I earned it. I was excited and I'm like, Yeah, man. I was excited. And then I woke up in the morning. This was part of it. I woke up in the morning and I dressed up. I was now going to the embassy for my visa.

[00:32:11] And then, I went to the embassy and then the next thing, they were like, No, and I'm like, What's going on? That day was the day announced the refugee travel ban. And I was like, What?

[00:32:26] This is like how I was excited. I'm like, What? This is the eleventh time now. I got rejected because from America or like an opportunity for me to come to North America. I earned this. I'm not going there as a refugee. I'm not going there for anything.

[00:32:40] I'm like, I'm going there. I'm taking my knowledge. I was excited and I came back home. I was annoyed. I was crying. I threw down my computer and my mom came to me. And so I walk crying and I'm like, You gotta tell me what's was going on. Every time we apply for everything, there's maybe there's a cut somewhere.

[00:32:58] Like anything just happened anywhere and like nothing ever worked out. This time I was really, really excited it my, did the work that I did by myself and something like this just came out of nowhere, right?

[00:33:10] And throw down a computer and I told my mom I gave up. I'm not doing anything anymore cause I'm not seeing any outcome. And my mom looked at me and she was like, Did you know that you cannot steal water from, from an ocean? And I'm like, What do you mean? Like, was that supposed to, What does that, what do you mean?

[00:33:28] And she was like, She, she, she described she was, You cannot get a basket. It doesn't matter how big that basket is, and you go to an ocean and you withdrawn water from there. No matter how much water you take from the ocean, no matter how big the basket is, it doesn't dry up.

[00:33:44] It keep up on overflowing and that's how you are as a person. You like more opportunities come, never give up. There's more opportunities. You are an ocean than more come coming up. And I'm like, whatever that mean, man. I was annoyed.

[00:33:58] Then I pick up my computer. One month later, I got one of the best opportunities ever, to come to the US. And then I got, a G4 visa with the World

Bank. And that moment changed me, that moment when my mom told me that you cannot steal water from an ocean, it changed me.

[00:34:16] I end up like, keep doing, keep working, and then within a month, I came here.

[00:34:22] **Stephen Calabria:** Does religion and faith play a role in your life? Did it play a role when you were in the camp? Was that something that you grew up with?

[00:34:33] **Lual Mayen:** Not a lot of people ask me that question, actually. I'm glad we can talk about that. Yeah. I would say, yeah, like religion really play a very big role. I would say religion and faith. I would say like faith.

[00:34:45] So, it did play a very big role in our life in a refugee camp. cause I think that it gave us the idea of living in a devotional space of life whereby you take life as it is. Don't give up, keep growing.

[00:34:59] You have faith in you that though, I say before, I meant to live in a refugee coming a space where, I love it, I enjoy it and so on. But that also Came from, first of all is, you have to be grateful for life. You have to look back at people who are made and not made it in term of seeing tomorrow.

[00:35:17] And those ideas and faith came from the religion, came from, we sit up together as a family. If somebody's sick, we pray and hope for the best. We didn't have. medication or go to the doctor, you have faith in something that that person is gonna be okay, no matter you don't have the resources that you have.

[00:35:33] All those things, like those ideas lived with us and worked for us because, That's all we heard. and that help a lot. I think it, it does help a lot. and I think that's where also the knowledge come from my mother. The knowledge of, don't give up.

[00:35:48] The knowledge of no matter where you are, things will change. All those things help. And then from there it's like how do you respond to that as a person? You have to like do work then more than just the faith that you have. You keep on going and then just believe that it's gonna be okay. So yeah, did play a lot. Yeah.

[00:36:04] **Stephen Calabria:** Lual Mayen, thank you so much for your time.

[00:36:06] **Lual Mayen:** Thank you so much. Thanks for having me.

[00:36:07] **Stephen Calabria:** Thanks again to Lual Mayen for sharing his incredible story. That's all for this episode of Road to Resilience. If you enjoyed it, please rate, review, and subscribe to our podcast on your favorite podcast platform.

[00:36:19] Want to get in touch with the show or suggest an idea for a future episode? Email us at [podcasts at MountSinai.org](mailto:podcasts@MountSinai.org).

[00:36:25] Road to Resilience is a production of the Mount Sinai Health System. It's produced by me, Stephen Calabria, and our executive producer, Lucia Lee. From all of us here at Mount Sinai, thanks for listening, and we'll catch you next time.