

An arduous trek to graduation

Fleeing a background filled with tragedy and loss, Eritrean emigrant Dawit Habte has faced many tests in his quest for a college degree

By Richard Peterson
USA TODAY

BALTIMORE — A hand-size, well-worn journal partially ripped down the spine is pulled from inside Dawit Habte's pocket.

He points to an entry marked Sept. 14, 1989, the day he fled his home in war-torn Eritrea, on Africa's eastern edge next to Ethiopia, and began a two-year trek to the United States.

Today he'll add another entry; he graduates from Johns Hopkins University here with a bachelor of science degree in biophysics.

Between those two entries is a long list of dates reminding the 21-year-old Habte of the obstacles he has overcome to make it to today's graduation ceremony on the campus quadrangle: a two-month walk to Kenya to avoid the Ethiopian military draft at age 14, two months in a standing-room-only Nairobi prison cell with little food, and a two-month stay in a refugee camp.

"If I feel like I'm at a dead end, I open it to see how far I've come," Habte says of his journal.

Impressed in his memory are the reasons he studied pre-medicine at Johns Hopkins in the first place: a sister who lost her hearing from a misdiagnosed ear infection and the death of a sister from the lack of medical attention after a tragic bus accident. Because of those incidences, he vowed to practice medicine in Eritrea, where physicians and proper medical treatments are few.

While some may throw in the towel when faced with such misfortune, Habte's ability to overcome those obstacles makes his story one of the most remarkable among those of the 10,000 refugees that the Department of Immigration & Naturalization Service says come to America each year.

"He's not a person to give up," says Rose Varner-Gaskins, Habte's counselor at Johns Hopkins for the past four years. "What we see as obstacles, he sees as possibilities."

One by one, Habte ticks off those journal entries during an interview in the gardens outside the Baltimore Museum of Art, adjacent to campus.

In 1979, when Habte was 3, his father fled their home in Eritrea for the Sudan. The former communist Ethiopian government demanded his father's capture for his involvement in the Eritrean liberation movement (the country became independent from Ethiopia in 1993). Habte and his father would be reunited several years later.

In 1985, at the age of 9,

Habte was aboard a bus with his three sisters and an aunt when the vehicle's brakes failed on a mountain road. The bus toppled into a ditch.

His sister died after she was taken to a nearby hospital; no doctors were there to treat her.

At the age of 14, when many teen-agers worry about pimples, Habte was drafted into the Ethiopian army at the height of the country's civil war. Rather than send their only son into a bloody conflict, the Habte family decided to flee to Kenya, hiring a driver to take them in a pickup truck.

It took two months for the family to reach Kenya. They walked much of the way to avoid government checkpoints. Once there, Habte and his father were arrested for illegal entry.

The Kenyans put him in a 2-by-2-meter Nairobi prison cell: "There was no place to sit because they put 26 people in one cell. We had to stand the whole time," Habte says.

After a friend paid a bond to free the Habtes from prison, the family was reunited in a Nairobi refugee camp. Habte learned Swahili and worked as a bus conductor from 5 a.m. to midnight, five days a week.

He spent weekends studying math and physics textbooks and reading novels — Agatha Christie, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Charles Dickens, among the authors. It could take him a month to finish a book, but he was determined to learn English.

His favorite became Jules Verne's *Around the World in 80 Days*. "It's about adversity and different cultures, and the main character (Phileas Fogg) had a goal," he says.

An American church decided to sponsor Habte, who came to Silver Spring, Md., and enrolled at Springbrook High School at the age of 16. He whizzed through in two years.

A year later he was a freshman at Johns Hopkins, holding down four jobs so he could pay for his sister Akberet's trip to the USA. She lost her hearing because of an untreated ear infection when she was 3 years old. He paid for three surgeries — sometimes selling his textbooks for cash — which eventually helped restore some of Akberet's hearing. She's now living in Baltimore with her brother and attending school.

Despite his jobs and tough academic schedule, Habte maintained a 3.2 grade point average. "I'm surprised I made it to graduation," he says.

But associates say Habte takes life in stride. "He still smiles," Varner-Gaskins says, "and continues to go on without giving up."

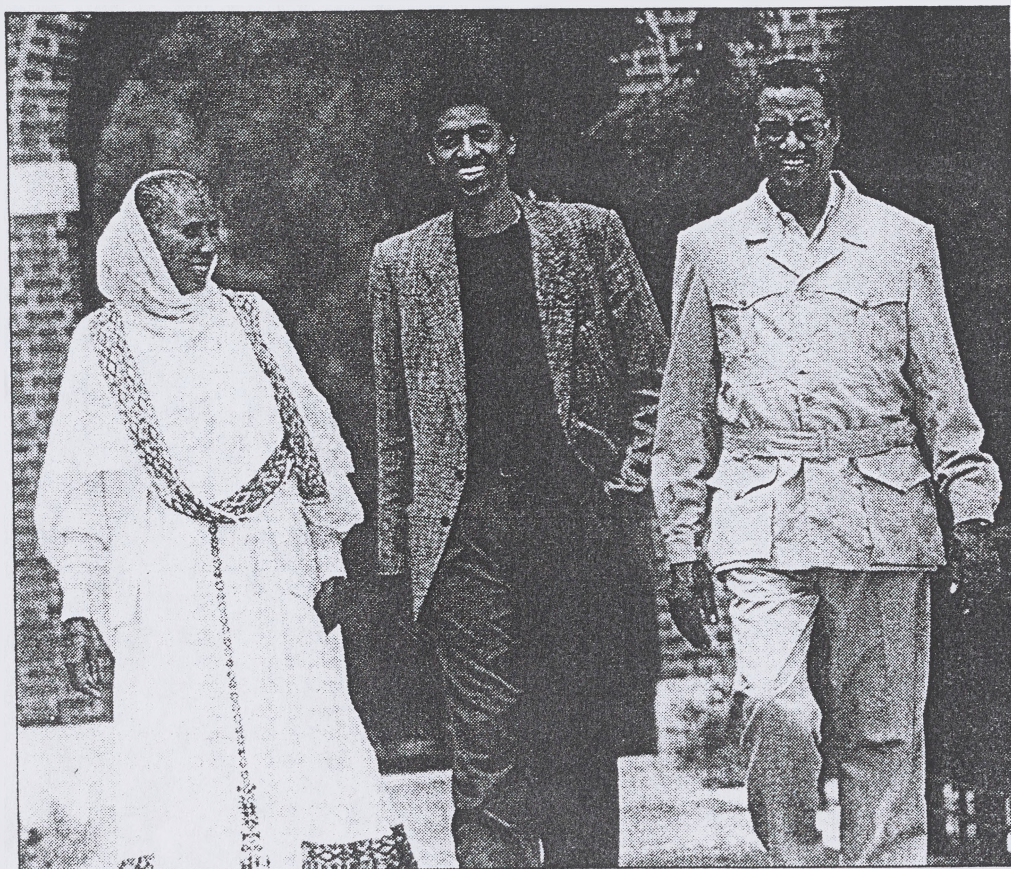
This past year Habte saved money to bring his parents from Eritrea to Baltimore for graduation. They arrived several weeks ago and will accompany their son for a short time

when Habte moves to New York City as a computer software developer for Bloomberg News Service.

"Twenty-seven years ago I had a vision that one of my children would get a degree, no matter what," says Dawit's father, Gebremichael. "God answers your wishes."

Habte's plan is to attend medical school or obtain a graduate degree in computer science; his job in New York will allow him some time to decide and save money. He hopes to return to Eritrea to teach or practice medicine.

"Not long ago my goal was to live for the day," he says smiling, then pauses, "Now I want to be the best teacher I can be."



By Tim Dillon, USA TODAY

A proud achievement: Dawit Habte, center, strolls the campus of Johns Hopkins with his mother, Tsige Weini Teclé, and father, Gebremichael Habte, who have come to the USA for their son's graduation.

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