



SUCCESS AGAINST ALL ODDS: INSPIRATION FOR OUR ERITREAN YOUTH IN DIASPORAS

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Eritreans in Diasporas have diverse educational and career background. The majority of us came to North America, Europe, Australia, Middle East, and some African countries as refugees and we are mostly engaged in labor-intensive work. The rest few of us who came on scholarship for educational opportunities are scholars engaged in professional jobs. Most Eritrean parents in Diasporas who came as refugees, did not have the opportunity to earn college education. Obviously, they could not have the necessary skills to acquire decent jobs. They did not have choices except being forced to work odd jobs, drive old cars, and live in government supported low-income houses in order to survive and raise their children. If the younger generation do not go to college and earn college education and acquire the necessary skills, they may end up in a similar situation as their parents

Our children are raised in different households with varied career backgrounds and life experiences. We have children who have gone off track and many of them hold the same kind of odd jobs as their parents. We have also many children who have listened to the good advice of their parents and followed the foot-steps of some Eritrean role models, becoming successful in their professional careers. All our children have the potential to be outstanding scholars and professionals. It is necessary for them to get proper and appropriate guidance at home and in school as well as mentorship and inspiration from Eritrean scholars and professionals who have achieved and secured successful professional careers. It is when successful Eritrean scholars and professionals come back to their community and aspire to become role models to our younger generation that our national identity and cultural heritage are preserved and strengthened. The stories of four Eritreans as significant examples in our time are narrated below. They are just handpicked from among many extraordinary Eritreans, who boldly denied the odds to find success in life.

Dr. Gebremeskel Habteyonas Gebremariam is one typical example who succeeded in his professional career against all odds. He is the son of a farming family and had to face the loss of his dear mother at a very young age. He had to combine school and farming activities in his early life. He had to travel 20 km round trip from the farm to school. Dr. Gebre, as a young boy, has also educated himself behind bars during his 12 years of incarceration as an Eritrean Prisoner of War in an Ethiopian Maximum Security Prison called “Alem Bekagn,” which literally means “farewell to the life in this world.” Life in prison was very precarious for him because he had to live under the constant shadow of death. His life is an inspiring story to tell and learn. It is a story about how he survived and stood up above the extraordinarily hostile prison environment and yet was able to spear-head and start a school without the necessary classrooms, school supplies and teaching materials where he educated himself and several fellow prisoners to obtain his High School education inside the prison. It is a story about how he was able to score the highest record, with 11 A’s and 2 B’s, in the Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination. That record still stands the highest ever to this day. It is also a story about how “grit” fueled by a sense of purpose and anchored on conviction, self-evaluation, and sheer determination helped him develop a teachable perspective and character. All these attributes were instrumental not only in



helping him survive his lengthy incarceration under the threat of death for 12 years, but also learn from his fellow prisoners through “peer-driven” and “self-teaching” learning endeavors. After he was released from the prison, he returned to Eritrea and resumed his college education at Asmara University. After earning his bachelor degree and working one year as a graduate assistant, he went to Scotland to do his M.S. degree at the University of Strathclyde. He returned to Asmara University and taught for three years before he joined West Virginia University for his Ph.D. degree. After completing his degree program he was hired to his current professor of Economics position at Virginia Tech University. Dr. Gebre has received numerous awards and recognition for teaching and research over the years. He has established a high standard for success. His far-sighted vision and success in his professional career against all odds is an inspiration for our Eritrean youth.

Yohannes Tsegay Berhe is one typical example who succeeded in life and education against all odds. He is the son of an ordinary self-employed and well-respected priest-father and a wonderful mother. After completing 9th grade in Asmara, he joined the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front when he was just 16 years of age. He was trained and assigned to serve at the frontline of the fighting army as a member of the medical team. He was severely injured during the sixth offence (the so-called Ethiopian Red Terror). He lost one of his legs which is amputated above the knee. The injury also left him with the loss of hearing on one side and other subsequent physical disabilities. As a result, he had to endure a debilitating pain and sufferings for many years. Since his injury was very critical, he had to stay under close medical treatment in the Front hospital for two years. He had gone through ten intensive surgical operations inside Eritrea and abroad. When he was under medical treatment in the hospital, he collected reading materials of high school subject matters and he read them to educate himself. After his recovery of some of his medical problems, he was assigned to work with the Eritrean Relief Agency (ERA). After the national independence of Eritrea, he started to attend 10th grade in the evening class at Keren High School, but he was later informed to discontinue his study. At the same time, he was admitted to study college education by correspondence with the University of London. He received financial support from the Band-Aide to cover his tuition expenses for the correspondence. At the same time, he took and successfully passed the college entrance examination and he was admitted to Asmara University. Instead, he decided to pursue his education through correspondence and successfully completed his B.A. and M.S. degrees both in Agricultural Economic Development. While he was working with ERA, he was involved in research which was supported by Lead University. In 2000, he went to Lead University for some research conference and decided to remain in the UK. While he was there, he studied Accounting Finance and received a B.A. degree from South UK University and worked as an Accountant Technician for a while until he developed himself to Information Technology (IT) and became self-employed in this area of expertise. Yohannes is a self-motivator and dedicated to serve his Eritrean community. He possesses a strong sense of purpose and pursues the responsibility and devotion to become a person of great service to the Eritrean society by developing a very proactive website called SNITNA.COM. He is a real textbook fighter to stand up strong and courageously pushing through his physical pains and sufferings and his every day emotional and psychological issues. His struggle and endurance against all odds and his utmost determination and aspiration for success makes him an inspiration for our younger generation in Diasporas.





Another typical example who became successful against all odds is a 38 year-old actress and comedian named Tiffany Haddish. She is one of the many rising and shining stars in the entertainment industry to represent the State of Eritrea. The story of her life can be narrated by the glorious successes achieved and lessons learned. Tiffany is an inspiring example of perseverance and resilience through many difficult life experiences. She was born and raised in Los Angeles. Her father is an immigrant from Eritrea and her mother is an African-American. Tiffany's early life involved profound hardships and difficulties. Her father left Tiffany's family when she was just three years old. Her mother later remarried and had more children, before suffering from a traumatic brain injury due to a serious car accident. When Tiffany was ten years old, she was taking care of herself and her younger siblings as their mother became abusive and struggled with mental illness which was caused by the car accident. The family was broken and the children were separated. Tiffany spent many years in foster care, living in different group homes. She was being abused before being put under the care of her kind grandmother to whom she is very grateful. Although she had troubles in school and challenges with reading, she graduated from high school and gained an interest in acting and comedy. She survived homelessness and kept her head above the water by working various odd jobs and struggled to find opportunities to better her life. With an unwavering persistence, Tiffany did not let her treacherous circumstance or horrible past experiences hold her back from pursuing her dreams of being a famous comedian and superb actress in movies and hosting events. She instead boldly incorporated her hardships into her jokes and stories to connect with other people. The strength of Tiffany's character and her ability to make others laugh is a culmination of the challenges in her past and how those have shaped the person she is today. Despite the difficulties and hardships at her young age, she is able to stand out in the crowd and harvest the fruits of success from her tenacious struggle. Her utmost determination and desire to excel stood firm and strong against all odds and her success in life has become an inspiration to our Eritrean youth.



Another very typical example who aggressively fought against all odds to achieve success in life is a 30 year-old scholar named Haben Girma. She is the daughter of immigrant parents from Eritrea to the United States. Haben is the first deaf-blind person to graduate from Harvard Law School, earning her J.D. with Honors. It has been revealed that Haben attributes her success in her professional career and activism to her brave and dear mother. She benefited from civil rights laws including the Americans with Disabilities Act. Haben advocates and advances for equal opportunities for people with disabilities. President Obama named her a White House Champion of change. Because of her disability advocacy, she has been honored by President Obama, President Clinton, and many others. Haben has been featured extensively in media around the world, including BBC, NBC, Forbes, NPR, and many others. Haben is also writing a memoir that will be published by Grand Central Publishing in 2019. She has traveled to Africa and other places. She offers diversity training, consulting, and professional speaking services. Haben combines her knowledge of law, sociology, and technology to provide her professional services. She is the kind of person who has the courage to refuse to compromise with her disability. She has realized from the very beginning of her life that there was no easy way out of her disability except to challenge and combat it with confidence, courage and strong discipline. Haben has proven to all of us that any physical disability can be tolerated and challenged with vigor and zeal,

while arrogance, ignorance, hypocrisy, bigotry, negative attitudes, moral disorders, and behavioral disturbances are the worst mentally related disabilities. Despite the fact that she is physical challenged, Haben is the most prominent scholar in her professional career who received the Helen Keller Achievement Award from the American Foundation for the Blind. . Her successful struggle against her unique disability makes her to be an outstanding role model for the Eritrean youth of her age group and younger generation.

People always try to be prepared for disasters even in a war but sometimes, we find ourselves in situations we least expect to happen like being captured in a war; incarcerated in a prison cell; or severely injured in a battle field; or born with some unique disabilities; or even neglected by our birth parents at childhood. During these hard times, our will to survive is seriously tested. We have heard of many heroic stories like the stories narrated above. These four heroes have been in trying situations where no one would expect them to come out alive and achieve their dreams. Having an extraordinary determination to survive and succeed, they have looked far beyond their obstacles and limitations and listened to the words of encouragement and hope of our cultural wisdom which says, *“Winners never quit and quitters never win.”* Our younger generation must be encouraged to follow and act the same way when their hearts and minds become cluttered, confused, or filled with their doubts and fears in their struggle for success in life. The stories of the four Eritreans are incredible and define motivation and inspiration for our younger generation and encourage them to never give up no matter how high the odds are stacked against them. No matter how chilling and challenging the forces and constraints that play against their desires and wishes, they need to have the courage to confront the problems independently instead of depending on someone else. Their own parents may attempt to bail them out when the children are simply sitting on the sideline and watch the time go bye in despair. It is essential to believe that every one of them has a unique expertise that enable the person to excel in life. It is also necessary they believe they can be whatever they want to be with the will and desire to pursue their career and have a productive and happy life. When they believe in their capability, believe in it all the way. It is obvious that there are always obstacles and roadblocks along the way. But if they face them with confidence, determination, and discipline, success is inevitable.

It is far more common that our younger generation have to overcome many obstacles and suffer some pains before achieving success. They must be taught starting from childhood to dare to be great and at the same time they must realize that greatness is the fruit of toil, sacrifice and high courage. It is evident that they will have hard times on the way, but it will always shake and wake them up to explore and develop their potential expertise. The bigger their dreams, the tougher their challenge, the more ambitious their goals, the more likely it is that they will face difficulties in their way towards achieving their dreams. Though they have to face bumpy roads, they need to stick to whatever they tried long enough for their effort to work. The courage and persistence to keep going on is powered by their purpose and strength. Since success is the sum of small efforts, it does not matter how slowly they go so long as they do not stop or quit on the way. They also need to remember that a dead fish floats down to the bottom of a stream while a living fish floats up to the top of a stream. Our children need to act like the living fish to swim up to the top by tackling any obstacles on the way. People who succeed against the odds all have something in common; they all have determination, persistence and perseverance to accomplish their goal. What our children need are mentors or role models to raise or pick them up and inspire them and give them impulses to grow up great and achieve their potentials. All our younger generation need somebody to lift their spirit and pull them up

so that they can spread their wings and fly or stand strong and powerful to make their dreams to happen with great success. Our children may be surrounded by thorns and weeds, or they may grow up in a contaminated or polluted environment or community that pull them down in life. They need to understand that success is not measured by what they accomplish, but by the kind of hurdles and obstacles they encountered, and the courage with which they have maintained the struggle against overwhelming odds

It is quite clear that our children may aspire for success. A few successes may happen by mere chance. But they have to realize that if they wait for that chance to happen, good things will happen to them only when they are in their graves because good things to happen may take their time and effort. To wait for the miracle of success to happen by chance is just like waiting for food to come by itself to an open mouth. When people live and wait for success to happen by chance, they also live in fear and anxiety. When they live by intent, purpose and courage, it does not matter what is happening or not happening at least they are in control of what is happening to them. It is quite alright if they fail down 100 times in the day, it is 100 lessons learned. A certain earthworm was trying to climb on the stem of a tree. The worm tried six times and failed six times. The worm did not give up and tried for the seventh time. Finally, the worm succeeded. Winston Churchill is quoted as saying, "*Success is not final, and failure is not fatal. It is the courage to continue that counts.*" There are numerous people in history whose struggles against all odds are proof of extraordinary courage they possessed. Even when every circumstance was screaming at them to quit and give up, these Eritreans - Dr. Gebre, Tiffany, Yohannes, Haben, and many others prevailed and turned their days of adversity into a wonderful success. The lifetime treasured memories of their demonstrations of struggle for success against all odds are resourceful lessons to learn. The fact of the matter is that if these four Eritreans and others can be successful under challenging situations, then there is no reason or even excuse why our younger generation cannot be successful under comfortable situations. They just need to work on their attitudes, motivation and aspiration. Our children should not let the obstacles in their lives discourage them from accomplishing their desired goals. Our younger generation should be encouraged to be confident and never give up on what they really want to do. It is often the last key in their efforts that usually opens the door to success. They may encounter tough times, but the difficulties which they face will make them more determined and committed to win and succeed against all odds. They just need to remember that success is what happens after they have survived against all odds and every skill they acquire doubles their odds of success.

Thus, we need to understand that people tend to think and work together in collaboration as people of diverse ethnicity, gender, age, professional expertise, political affiliation, and religious beliefs come together and interact with each other and know each other. We should be aware that it takes the whole village to raise and nurture a child with the necessary guidance and encouragement so that the child will be successful in life. It is evident that we cannot raise heroes, but we can raise sons and daughters. If we properly and appropriately raise and treat them like sons and daughters, they can turn out to be heroes. To do so, we need to restore our '*people to people*' culture because our cultural and traditional values are based on passion and moral obligation for serving our fellow Eritrean. We need to rebuild our dysfunctional Eritrean communities and strengthen our religious institutions and lay a strong foundation and conducive environment for our younger generation to be able to absorb and embrace our cultural heritage and honor and cherish our Eritrean identity. Remember that life is really a mystery, when we struggle against all odds and against all logic, we still hope for sweet success and happiness in life.