

REAL PEOPLE, INSPIRING STORIES

Refugee's foundation helps others in need

Knowledge Aid Foundation announces its first scholarships.

BY H.M. CAULEY FOR THE AJC



Oglethorpe University senior Awet Woldegebriel (right) poses with Governor Nathan Deal (left) and Coca-Cola Chairman Muhtar Kent during a campus event. Woldegebriel's foundation, Knowledge Aid, recently announced scholarships for refugee students. A. WOLDEGEBRIEL / CONTRIBUTED

By the time 10-year-old Awet Woldegebriel arrived in Atlanta 11 years ago, he'd already seen a lifetime of violence and tragedy. A refugee from Eritrea, he saw his parents and 11 siblings separated by war.

“One of my brothers ran away to escape being captured and made to fight,” Woldegebriel recalled. “We thought he was dead and even had a funeral before we found out he'd been smuggled into Kenya. We spent two years going from

country to country as refugees until we finally got the approval to come to the U.S.”

Woldegebriel, his three sisters and another brother arrived in Atlanta; other family members wound up in Europe. Knowing only the alphabet, he started fourth grade and learned to speak English by watching hours of PBS television. By the time he got to Norcross High, he knew college was his goal.

“I was president of a lot of clubs, but I had a fear that I’d be one of those kids who did everything and still didn’t get into college,” said Woldegebriel. “So I applied to 32 colleges.”

While working at Chick-fil-A, Woldegebriel had a chance encounter with a former dean of Oglethorpe University who convinced him to pay a visit to the Brookhaven campus.

“I told him I had applied to schools in the north,” he recalled. “When I was a kid, I dreamed of going to New York, and I felt I’d already experienced the South. But my father always said when an older person asked you to do something, you did. So a few days later, I went there.”

Woldegebriel was met by the head of admissions and financial aid. The former dean was so confident Woldegebriel would turn up that he put the school on notice.

“He had told her my life story,” said Woldegebriel. “I was immediately hooked that we had a connection. It felt like I was home.”

Woldegebriel never opened the letters from his other college choices. In the four years he’s been at Oglethorpe, he has been tapped to attend the Clinton Global Initiative and began working at Coca-Cola, where he will have a full-time job after graduating in May. He also launched Knowledge Aid Foundation that has sent 4,565 books to impoverished countries in Africa.

“One of my biggest inspirations was my father,” said Woldegebriel. “He always worked hard and never believed in handouts. When it comes to international aid, we invest in sending food but not in teaching people how to grow it, how to farm, how to make it sustainable. We also haven’t taught students world history — the stuff that really helps society grow. We have to

change the conversation.”

Woldegebriel recently announced the foundation's first scholarships. This fall, five refugees will receive grants toward their college education.

“Education is the key,” he said. “The last thing many refugees think about is going to college. I am so fortunate to be completing my journey, and I want to make sure others like me get the same opportunity.”

Who has inspired you?

Every other Wednesday, H.M. Cauley brings you positive stories from our community. To suggest a story idea, e-mail hm_cauley@yahoo.com.

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Information about Knowledge Aid's mission and scholarships is online at knowledge-aid.com.