

FACING FACTS

From a Prison to Princeton

Ellis Cose

WHEN ABASS HASSAN MOHAMED WAS BORN IN SOMALIA IN 1982, HIS father honored the event with a variation on a traditional Somali ritual. Instead of tying the umbilical cord to a goat or wad of money—in hopes that the child would prosper when he grew up—Hassan Mohamed Abdi tied it to a book and buried it near a school. “A book and a pen. I did that for all my children,” says Abdi, a bearded man of regal bearing. He was convinced that his progeny, members of a scorned minority tribe, would need a strong education to make their way in the world.

Little did he know how far his son would go. Abass is now a junior at Princeton University. And he has become something of a legend in the refugee camp where he was raised, for having blazed a path out of a sanctuary that is also a kind of prison, where young people languish with little hope for a productive life.

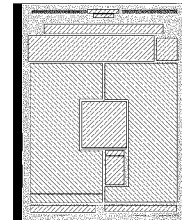
Abass's odyssey began in Ifo—one of three refugee camps carved out of the Kenyan desert and collectively called Dadaab. He and his parents, grandmother and five siblings fled there from Somalia in 1992—a harrowing journey by foot, truck and bus. The camp is a depressing, dry and dusty place. Their new home was constructed of twigs covered with a plastic sheet. There were no beds, no toilets and no schools. Instead, a fellow refugee convened classes under a tree. “He didn't have chalk. So ... he would write in the sand and we'd copy,” says Abass.

His father had long revered education, crediting his modest success and even his marriage to a woman of higher clan status to his own schooling. Abass and his brothers were very much their father's sons. Once camp officials built a bare-bones elementary school, they were always at the head of the class. When Abass and his younger brother took the test for the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education, they scored first and second highest of all those in Dadaab. A few years later Abass received the highest score in all of northeastern Kenya and the eighth highest in the nation on his high-school exams.

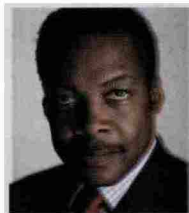
Of the roughly 170,000 refugees who call Dadaab home, a handful make it to Western schools each year, thanks largely to a program operated by World University Service of Canada. Since 1978, WUSC has sent close to 1,000 students from around the world—including Abass's brother Osman—to Canadian universities. Abass found another route out. A visiting professor from Princeton heard about his academic success and sent a Princeton application to Dadaab officials. CARE, which administers the camp and its schools, arranged for Abass's first-ever plane ride so he could take the SAT in Nairobi.

Months later, when his acceptance package arrived at CARE's

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offices, Abass was ecstatic: "I didn't want to cry—that would be unheard of for a Somali man—but I was extremely overjoyed." Two staffers in the Dadaab office of the United Nations High



Commissioner for Refugees prepped him, instructing him on American customs and manners. One of them even dipped into her purse to pay his plane fare to America (which he eventually repaid). Hearing he had no money for a visa, Somalis at the camp sent \$100 to help out.

In August 2005, Abass landed on U.S. soil. He moved into a tiny dorm room: the most magnificent dwelling he had ever seen. "The room was very beautiful, well furnished with a bed, with a mattress, with a chair, with a table, with electricity. I didn't have to use my kerosene lamp anymore," he says. It took Abass weeks to figure out the radiator on the wall. He also had to learn how to use the shower. His first day in the dining hall, he was astonished at the amount and variety of food: "I thought it was part of Princeton's hospitality welcome ... Then I realized that was the same thing that was being served almost on a daily basis." He found two jobs and quickly adjusted to the strange new place.

Now a junior studying environmental science, Abass is still working two jobs and sending money back home. But he's also settled in. "I miss my family ... but I feel at home in Princeton," he says. Earlier this year he was approved for political asylum, which means eventually he may be able to marry a girl in the camps he has his eye on, and even bring some family members to the United States. That hope makes their lives so much brighter than the lives of tens of thousands of their neighbors, who see only desert sand stretching into infinity.

For kids in Dadaab without Abass's diligence and luck, options are few. Even if they can get into a Kenyan university, they're prohibited as refugees from taking jobs in the country once they graduate. If they are not awarded a precious resettlement slot in a peaceful country, or spirited away by a program like WUSC, they essentially have three choices. They can languish, vanish into the illegal netherworld or return to violence-racked Somalia. An estimated 7 million refugees worldwide are similarly "warehoused"—separated from society, deprived of basic rights, trapped in a stateless limbo. That number gives only a hint of the daunting odds a would-be Abass has to overcome.

N For more about Abass, including audio photo galleries, video and additional stories, go to againsttheodds.Newsweek.com

Adapted from "AGAINST THE ODDS," a radio production of Ellis Cose, Inc., distributed by Public Radio International and supported by the Ford Foundation.



A LONG, STRANGE TRIP: *Abass at Princeton*