

# Yet another daughter of Ethiopian refugee to graduate as valedictorian

## Embrace by US 'drove me to invest in my children'

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The story seemed truly singular at the time: a janitor at Wilson Magnet High School, a refugee who scrapped for a college education after growing up illiterate in rural Ethiopia, encouraged his children to do better and saw his eldest daughter graduate as valedictorian from the very school where he sweeps the floors.

In her valedictory address, the young woman, Biiftu Duresso, credited her success to her parents' hard work and sacrifice. That fall, the family packed her off to Barnard College in New York City.

Her younger sister, Dursitu, came along for the trip, and decided Biiftu's story need not be unique after all.

"I remember going there to drop her off and thinking: 'That could be me,' " Dursitu Duresso said. "It's going to be me. ... I have to be number one, too."

Two years later, she has fulfilled that goal. Like her older sister, she graduates Saturday at the top of the class at the prestigious Rochester high school where her father, Jamal Abdullahi, works the swing shift as a custodian. She, too, will attend Barnard College with an eye toward medical school.

"It is a very wonderful day for me," Abdullahi said.

He came to the United States in 1983 and found work shortly thereafter with the Rochester City School District. He studied when he wasn't working and managed to earn a series of degrees: a high school equivalency in 1990, an associate's degree in 2003, a bachelor's degree in psychology in 2008.

He dreamed of becoming a teacher, but realized pursuing that path would prevent him from providing for



MAX SCHULTE/@MAXROCPHOTO/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
Jamal Abdullahi and daughter Biiftu Duresso share a moment at Wilson Magnet High School, where Abdullahi works the swing shift as a custodian and Duresso was valedictorian in 2015. The family success story may not yet be complete.

his four children. Instead, he has pushed them, as well as the other young people he mentors at Wilson Magnet.

"This country made it possible for me when they took me as a refugee, and exposed me to a world that is big and better than where I used to live in many ways," he said. "That drove me to invest in my children."

Biiftu has finished two years at Barnard, where she's concentrating on science in order to end up in medical school. Dursitu said both Biiftu and her father were an example for her.

"I pretty much had the inspiration of my father and my sister two years ago," she said. "I wanted to take advantage of all the opportunities I had, in school and outside."

She got a student internship at Rochester General Hospital and took the most challenging coursework in Wilson's International Baccalaureate curriculum. Like Biiftu, she said a 2007 trip to visit family in Ethiopia opened her eyes to how far her family has come.

"I was just a little child, but it changed me into an adult in a way," she said. "I saw people in poverty, and my family who are still there. ... My parents have done so much for me, so I have to go out and be as amazing as I can."

The family success story may not yet be complete. Biiftu and Dursitu have two younger brothers, ages 15 and 6. The older one is entering Wilson's IB program in the fall, while the younger one, Abdullahi reports, "is already reading a lot."

Abdullahi, 59, said he would love to take some classes that would help him advocate for humanitarian issues around the world, particularly regarding education. For now, though, he is content to keep sweeping the floors at Wilson, providing the foundation for his own children's successes.

"These children — and not just my children, but all children — can lead anywhere in the world," he said. "We need to be the engine driving for their education. We need to advocate for our children."

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