

Prompt D- An influential Individual

A Hidden Heart

“Elelelelelelelele!” my fellow Ethiopian women in the crowd roared at my sister’s graduation party while she danced the “eskista”, a traditional Ethiopian dance where we bob our heads like chicken and sway our shoulders back and forth. I attempted to mimic the ring in their voice used as a form of applause, but I was only capable of clapping my hands in celebration. My mother simply kissed my cheek and reminded me that I was her “tatari”, Amharic for her “one and only diligent worker”. Routinely celebrating my Ethiopian side, I was never free of scrutiny from family and relatives. I tried to sync my shoulders with the Ethiopian beats, converse with elderly relatives, and practice the “Ethiopian roar”. However, the ridicule never ceased, and my insecurities bolstered, making me feel like I was not an “authentic” Ethiopian.

My cousin Kebede (Kub), helped me reconcile with these differences. He and I had similar upbringings, however, Kub was the epitome of a perfectly “adjusted” Ethiopian-American. I envied his versatility - his ability to effortlessly lead a life alternating between his Ethiopian and American identities. Over the years Kub came to our home almost every night, entertaining us with countless stories. He became my brother.

On February 8, 2016, after peacefully leaving my home, he suddenly passed away in his sleep from a heart attack. The loss shocked and devastated my family. I tried to make sense of what happened but to no avail. This was until I learned that Kub lived an entirely secret, and altruistic second life, actively seeking to better the wellbeing of the homeless and the disadvantaged. He played chess with prison inmates, spent holidays at shelters, and worked to sponsor orphans in Ethiopia.

This revelation prompted me to take a step back and evaluate my purpose in life. I never knew this side of Kub. His charitable deeds were concealed in his humility. Learning that he secretly spent his time and energy for others, I too felt a similar kind of responsibility. His life taught me that the most sincere deeds are done with no lights or cameras, and with no intent to self-gratify.

His deeds ultimately inspired me to find happiness through goodwill and benevolence. It suddenly felt all too vain to dedicate my work to seek material success and gratification but rather, to ensure the success of those around me. This is why I developed a vision and launched the Kebede (“Kub”) Desta Girma Foundation. Along with my father and a small group of family, this organization began in order to work personally with homeless shelters, prisons, and other disadvantaged groups in the Northern Virginia community and Ethiopia. I lead the youth section of the foundation that is currently in the process of filing its legal papers. At the moment we have just wrapped up our first annual luncheon, which consisted of 200 members that signed up to participate/donate to our community service projects targeting each of the three groups.

I am now much more resolute in consistently seeking an opportunity within higher education to better myself and those around me. My goal is to build and influence the prospects of others. My mindset, once crumbling and panicking has now developed to accept and adapt to life's unpredictable nature. Challenges I previously looked at as impediments to my success are now somewhat experiences I appreciate. I strive to focus myself on their inherent lessons. Today, I bring a unique and global perspective to any institution. I apply an in-depth view and acknowledge the value in overcoming obstacles.

My determination is one that will enrich my academic, social, and cultural experience and that of others. Given the opportunity, I look forward to my collegiate experience as a first-generation immigrant to bring my unique upbringing and cultural makeup to further enhance the dynamism of the student-body.