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AFRIKE PHAKOS



Holyoke Community College nursing student Afrike Phakos, seen above working in a simulation lab, grew up in Ethiopia and lived in a tiny straw hut, with a thatched roof and mud walls, much like the one pictured below that Phakos' father, Bante, lives in today. (DON TRISGER / THE REPUBLICAN; SUBMITTED PHOTOS)

Student's journey to nursing degree began in a straw hut 25 years ago

BY STASSI HEROPOLLOS
Special to The Republican

CLASS OF '24

HOLYOKE — In June, Afrike Phakos will graduate from Holyoke Community College's nursing program, receiving her diploma during a ceremony at the college. But the first steps toward achieving this pinnacle began nearly 7,000 miles away in Wolaita Sodo, a small village in Ethiopia.

Phakos, 25, was born and lived with her three siblings and parents in a tiny straw hut, with a thatched roof and mud walls, an hour away from Addis Ababa, the Ethiopian capital.

The hut had one room and a dirt floor. The entire family slept together on a straw

mattress. No one knows her cause of death. Phakos and her siblings were left with only their father, Bante, who was in the Ethiopian military. Officers gave him two days off to bury his wife and arrange for his children to be placed in an orphanage. He was then forced back into military service, away from Afrike and the others.

If Phakos had stayed in Ethiopia, she would have been married and started her own family when she was 15 years old. But she, a baby sister and an older brother were adopted by a Southampton couple — Lisa Minter and Alex



The hut Afrike Phakos' father, Bante, lives in today, similar to the one Afrike grew up in. (COURTESY PHOTO)

mattress. None of the children went to school. They worked in the fields, picking peanuts, vegetables and fruit. The only time they wore shoes was on Sunday, when they went to church.

Every day, the children hauled dirty water to their home from a creek a mile away. They boiled the water over an open fire to kill bacteria and viruses before they could drink or cook with it. There was no electricity in the hut.

Dogs were considered to be wild animals; goats, cows and donkeys were the family pets.

"I would take my goat for a walk, like someone would take their dog," said Phakos.

Sudden death

When she was 7 years old, Phakos' mother, Almaz, died unexpectedly. One of the neighbors pronounced her dead. He had no medical training, but everyone in the village came to him when they had a question about their

health. Phakos — who already had six children. Phakos and her siblings weren't sure how old they were when they came to America, because their birth dates on adoption forms were wrong. Doctors did a bone density test to determine their ages.

The first car Afrike had ever seen was when she landed at Boston Logan International Airport, after a 16-hour flight from Africa. "It was a crazy transition, because I didn't speak English and my new parents didn't understand us. But a family friend helped translate our conversations. We also learned English in private and public schools," said Phakos.

There was only work and no school for children in Wolaita Sodo. Phakos' first experience in a classroom was in Western Massachusetts. But she was so far behind her peers, her mother home-schooled her every summer until she caught up with others her age.



The economy in the Pioneer Valley is thriving — we are investing in our workers, building our economy from the bottom up and middle out. As we continue to make great strides through investments in our infrastructure, clean energy, and our healthcare system, I am optimistic of what the future holds for our region and what we can accomplish.

Thank you for your continued support.

It is an honor to represent the people of western and central Massachusetts in the United States Congress.

Robert E. Healey



Afrike Phakos' biological father, Bante, from Ethiopia. (COURTESY PHOTO)

“Patients deserve the best care, and I’ll provide it, no matter what.”

AFRIKE PHAKOS

Holyoke Community College nursing student Afrike Phakos (closest to camera), during lab class. (DON TREGGER / THE REPUBLICAN)

Nursing

CONTINUES FROM PAGE J10

“It was all so surreal. I can’t put it into words, because I would never be able to do those things in Ethiopia,” she told *The Republican*.

Caring for her grandmother

When Phakos was in the ninth grade, her aging American grandmother came to live with the family. They offered her hospice care and Phakos was there to assist.

“I remember asking to help, because I cared so deeply for her. She was the first grandmother I ever had

in my life. I wanted her last days to be surrounded by the people she knew and loved. Elderly people lose dignity as they age. I want to give them the end they deserve, because they’ve lived such a long life,” she said.

Caring for her grandmother helped forge Phakos’ interest in becoming a nurse. After she graduated from Hampshire Regional High School in Westhampton, she earned her certified nursing assistant degree at HCC.

“Everyone, including my mother, has always told me, way before I even said I wanted to be a nurse, that I was meant to be in a field where I could care for oth-

ers,” said Phakos. “She knew I was meant for nursing, and I was like, ‘You’re crazy.’ But now I look back and she was right.”

Once Phakos became a CNA and took preliminary courses, she entered HCC’s two-year associate in science nursing program. Between lectures, lab work at the school and clinical duties at three local hospitals — plus working two or three part-time jobs at a time to pay bills, including tuition and books — it’s all been so arduous.

“There’s so much they need to teach us in two years,” she said.

Phakos has worked many

overnight shifts in health care, at the Veterans Home at Holyoke and in private settings. When her patients were asleep, she’d keep an eye on them while pushing through her studies. She’s earning high grades at HCC now — all As and B-pluses — but she admits the first semester started a bit rocky.

“No one prepares you for the difficulty of a nursing program. You hear people talk about it, but until your first semester, you don’t understand how difficult it will be. It’s a crazy amount of work,” she said. “The nursing program is not for the weak. There’s definitely been times when you’re knocked

down over and over and you’re like, ‘Is there a light at the end of the tunnel?’”

Phakos’ instructors are also nurses, working locally and giving students a realistic idea of what they can expect to see in hospitals that are understaffed and where the work is overwhelming.

Phakos knows what they’re talking about, because she sees it first-hand when she’s doing her own clinical work. Even with what she’s seen and experienced — including seeing “people quitting left and right” in the profession, Phakos’ resolve remains strong.

“If you have passion and go into nursing for the right

reasons, no matter what obstacles are thrown at you, you’re going to overcome them,” she said.

When Phakos receives her official nursing pin this spring, it might be unclear whether the toughest days are ahead or have been left behind in a small African village.

“I know how hard it is, the traumatic things you go through in life. I’ve always been a caring person. I love working with kids, I love working with geriatric patients. There isn’t an area I don’t like,” she said.

“Patients deserve the best care, and I’ll provide it, no matter what.”