

Picasso would be proud: talented Somali refugee dreams of new life in America to honour father who died for his art



Abdirahim with his stepfather Muhamed after receiving his Certificate of Achievement for the 'My Somalia' art competition. © UNHCR / A. Needham

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia, June 30 (UNHCR) – It's been said that if you suffer for your art, you will never die. For 16 year-old Abdirahim Abdulkadir Osman, his father's brutal murder at the hands of Al Shabaab may prove not to have been in vain as the talented Somali refugee artist and his family look forward to a new life in America, where he and his family can live out the life his father had dreamt of for them.

On a typically hot and sun-bleached Mogadishu afternoon in June 2009, Al Shabaab gunmen forced their way into the home of Abdulkadir Osman Ahmed, teacher and twin brother of the founder of the Picasso Art School, a wonderfully incongruous oasis of creativity in the midst of a city that was a daily nightmare for its residents, a deadly war zone.

They violently battered Abdirahim's mother Lul with the butt of a rifle, leaving her in a coma for weeks and shot Abdulkadir dead along with three of their young children, six-year old Amina, five-year old Abdisalam and little four year-old Khadija. Also killed was thirty-year old Fadumo Abdulkadir, a mother of six young children and a half-sister of Abdirahim.

Abdirahim , just 11 years old at the time, and his elder brother Abdulahi were attending the Madrassa (Koranic school) at the time and were spared, along with three other siblings who escaped the gunmen's fire.

**Abdulkadir and his twin brother Muhamed had studied art in Russia and were influenced by the works of the great artist, famed for his anti-war painting Guernica. They found their calling in teaching art to an eclectic mix of talented Somalis of all ages at their school in the Dharkenley district of the Somali capital. While the talented and budding artists who flocked to the school appreciated what the two brothers were doing in the name of art, Al Shabaab did not.**

They had repeatedly sent chilling warnings to them to close the school, which they said was 'haram' or unclean and against the teachings of Islam. "If I leave the art school, how can I live?," Abdulkadir told his family in the face of these death threats at the time. "Everyone has something in their life and that school was his life," says Abdirahim, speaking of his father, as he sips on a macchiato coffee in the canteen of the UNHCR office in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

"When I was small, he would carry me on his back as he was teaching," he adds as recalls good and bad memories of Mogadishu, among them the daily sounds of gunfire and the constant threat of death. "I don't remember too much but I, we, - we can't go back. If I was in Mogadishu I would see places I know and remember and I will go crazy," he says.

**How Abdirahim and his family ended up in Addis is in itself a tale worthy of a contorted Picasso masterpiece. After the attack, with his mother lying unconscious in a hospital bed, neighbours hastily arranged for the two eldest boys to flee Mogadishu with them on the next available flight to Hargeisa, the capital of Somaliland, in northern Somalia. From there they crossed the border to Ethiopia for Aw-barre refugee camp where their grandmother was living.**

Abdulkadir's twin brother Muhamed remained in Mogadishu to look after Lul and take care of the three youngest children. When she emerged from her coma and was well enough to travel, she bundled herself along with sons Abdulfatah, Abdulkudus and daughter Halima onto a plane to Berbera, Somaliland and then on to Aw-barre to be reunited with her eldest sons.

Muhamed remained in Mogadihsu, undeterred even in the aftermath of the brutal murder of his brother, and continued to run the school. "He wanted to teach art to people and that's why he stayed. He felt he needed to teach them," says Abdirahim of his uncle, who, in an unusual twist to an already labyrinthine tale, is now his step-father. He was eventually forced to leave Mogadishu, however, when Al Shabaab cranked up their threats: "You will go the way of your brother," was how it was put to him in a chilling mobile phone call one night.

He married Lul when he joined her and her children in Aw-barre in 2011. “We were happy to have a daddy and to be a full family again,” is how Abdirahim puts it. While not unusual in Somali culture for a brother or close relative to marry a widow in order to provide support for her and her children, the fact that Muhamed was the twin brother-in-law of his now wife adds another colourful layer to the already rich palette of this family’s story.

Life in Aw-barre was tough but good, according to Abirahim. He and his brothers and sisters earned a meagre living supplementing their rations by painting signs and posters for UNHCR, the Ethiopian government refugee agency ARRA and other partners for events including World Refugee day and 16 Days of Activism.

**While it was his love for art that cost Abdulkadir his life, it was his family’s artistic talent and skill that he helped nurture that would prove to be their ticket out of the refugee camp. A fair selling refugee art and handicrafts was organised in nearby Jijiga, another of Ethiopia’s Somali refugee camps and Abdirahim travelled there with his younger brother Abdulfatah, to sell their paintings.**

While waiting in the UNHCR office, the younger – but by Abdirahim’s own admission, the far more talented – brother quickly knocked up a startling likeness of UNHCR High Commissioner Antonio Guterres after seeing his photo on the wall.

Spotting the budding talent before her, a UNHCR staff member had the painting sent to Addis where [it was later presented to the High Commissioner himself on a subsequent visit](#). The painting still hangs in the Representative’s office to this day, along with a grainy passport-size photo of a young Abdulfatah stuck in the corner of the frame.

The family were eventually assisted to leave Aw-barre and come to Addis where it was felt there would be more outlet and opportunity for them to use their artistic skills to earn a living while also supported by UNHCR’s urban refugee programme.

Now living in Bole Michael, Addis’s smaller but no less lively version of Nairobi’s famous Eastleigh district, both of which are home to many Somali refugees and migrants, [their small home is adorned with paintings](#) and sculptures (Abdulfatah is an accomplished sculptor but lacks the necessary materials to sculpt properly) done by all seven family members.

Lul is also an artist, having taught at the Picasso school before the attack. They eke out additional income by selling paintings depicting Somali and Ethiopian culture to the mainly Somali hotels and businesses in and around the ‘Little Mogadishu’ of Addis.

[Last year Abdirahim won first prize in the UNHCR Somalia World Refugee Day art competition](#) for [a painting on the theme of ‘My Somalia’ which depicted UNHCR’s support to refugees and IDPs](#). When asked why the ‘master’ Abdulfatah did not win

with his entry, Abdirahim just smiles and says that his brother paints in the style of Picasso while his entry was more 'basic' and probably appealed to the judges more. Modest as well as talented.

As he drains the last coffee ground- and sugar-filled dregs of his milky drink, Abdirahim talks of the possibilities that lie ahead as he and his family enter into the final stages of what will hopefully be a successful resettlement process to America.

"I want hope. Hope to give back. I want to live an artistic life," he says. He doesn't care where or what city they may be resettled to. He wants to improve his English (it is extremely good for a 16 year-old who has never done any formal education) and go to high school. A precocious talent, he says he hones his English by watching movies and laments with a wry smile that he cannot say the word 'brother' properly like they do in Hollywood.

Despite his knowledge of American culture, he doesn't dream of Big Macs, big cars or skyscrapers. All he dreams of is a better life. Away from Mogadishu, away from Aw-barre, away from Addis – which is "good and full of peace but still difficult". He even wants to work for or help UNHCR in the future. When he is a famous artist one day, inshallah...

"We hope now that we can all get a good education and have a good future. The life our father dreamed for us and which cost him his life." Picasso would be proud.

*By Andy Needham in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia*

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