"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 others. She knew I was meant for nursing, and I was like, ‘You’re crazy.’ But now I look back and she was right.”

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

**CLASS OF ’24**

The hut where Phukis grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

**The hut where Phukis grew up in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.**

Phukis was raised in a small hut in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Her family barely made ends meet, and she had to work to help support herself. She was one of eight children, and her parents were struggling to make ends meet. When she was 12 years old, her father passed away, and she had to work harder to support her family.

**Outlook 2024**

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 about 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.
“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 others,” 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 healthcare 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.”

AFRIKE PHAKOS