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Adam Abdelrahman earns statehouse honor

HOLYOKE – The first thing most people notice about Adam Abdelrahman is his smile - big, bright, ever present.

"It's like a light that shines around him," says Denise Roy, one of his advisers at Holyoke Community College, where the 23-year-old Springfield resident will graduate June 1 with high honors and his associate degree in criminal justice. "He has a pretty big presence here and in the community and he has affected so many people. His heart is so big and he wants to do so much."

Abdelrahman will be honored May 3 at the State House in Boston as one of the "29 Who Shine," an annual event that recognizes one student from each of the 29 public colleges and universities in Massachusetts based on their academic achievements as well as their college and community service.

Roy, a learning specialist with HCC's STRIVE student support program and a Feeding Hills resident, will also receive an award that day in Boston as Abdelrahman's staff mentor, whom he describes as a "second mom."

"I'm so proud of him," she says. "If you think about how large his family is and what they've gone through and the violence they've experienced and the path he's chosen to get himself here, well, it's heroic."

Abdelrahman could easily be forgiven for not smiling.

He witnessed his first murder at the

age of six, two cousins shot by soldiers from the Sudanese army who attacked his village in Darfur. His family spent the next seven years living in a refugee camp where sickness and murder were all-too prevalent.

"I lost a lot of family members and tribe members," he says, including his grandfather, a local mayor. "I faced death many times too."

When he was 14, the family escaped, trudging for two weeks through the jungle to Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, before moving on to Cairo, Egypt, where they sought asylum through the United Nations. Three years later, the family - Adam, his mother, father and six younger siblings - were relocated to Springfield, Massachusetts.

"We could have wound up anywhere," Abdelrahman recalls. "Sweden, Denmark, Australia, New Zealand, the U.K. anywhere. But America chose my family."

He spoke three languages when he arrived - Arabic, Fur (his father's), and Dinkah (his mother's) - but not a word of English. To get started in this new land, he joined the First Generation Theater youth group in Springfield, part of the Performance Project, where one of the artists recommended the academic ESL program at HCC.

In 2014, he started in level one and



Adam Abdelrahman

progressed on an accelerated pace through level four and then moved on to the regular academic program, majoring in criminal justice and earning many honors and accolades along with the way, including dean's list (five times), three HCC Foundation scholarships (so far), a class achievement award for ESL, the Lorraine Hansberry Award for Ethnic Diversity, a scholarship

from the Massachusetts Educational Opportunity Association and induction into the Phi Theta Kappa honor society.

He embraced campus life like few other HCC students in recent memory.

During his four-plus years at HCC, he held a work-study job in the ESL program office and served on the HCC Student Senate. He was the president of the International Club, a New Student Orientation leader, a STRIVE peer mentor, an academic tutor and a member of the Criminal Justice Club and eSports Club. He has also worn the college's Cougar mascot costume for HCC events and parades.

"I love it here," he says. "HCC became my family. Everybody was so kind to me. Being a refugee and coming to a new country with a new culture and new language, I was very afraid in the beginning, but everyone was so supportive. It means so much to me."

He also has an impressive history of community engagement: volunteer ESL teacher at the Islamic Society of Western Massachusetts in West Springfield; mentor, advocate and translator for new Sudanese immigrants at Gray House and Jewish Community Services in Longmeadow. He has participated in letter-writing campaigns in support of immigrant rights and voter registration drives.

If that was not enough, he works full time with mental health clients as a residential counselor at ServiceNet in Chicopee.

He has applied for transfer to a long list of colleges and universities, including UMass, Boston University and Georgetown. He intends to study international law for his bachelor's degree, then go to law school and work as a lawyer on issues relevant to refugees and immigrants, possibly returning to the classroom as a professor.

"I want to hold governments accountable for the terrifying and horrible things they do to their own people," he says. "That's my main focus. I cannot stop war by myself, but at least I can contribute and work toward stopping it or preventing it before it happens."

Words like that make those who know him best smile too.

"This is why I do the work that I do and why I love my job," says Roy, his HCC adviser. "I get to watch people like him grow and possibly change the world."