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Former Sudanese “Lost Boy” graduates from Georgia Southern with Doctor of Public Health

DECEMBER 7, 2018

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Abraham Deng Ater, DrPh, with Gulzar H. Shah, Ph.D., department chair, Health Policy and Community Health in the Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health.

In 1987, at the age of nine, Georgia Southern graduate Abraham Deng Ater was one of an estimated group of 20,000 South Sudanese boys who trekked more than a thousand miles by foot to Ethiopia and Kenya to escape civil war. During the journey, half of the boys died at the hands of starvation, dehydration or crossfire. Those who survived became known as the “Lost Boys” and lived in mud huts across sprawling refugee camps for upwards of two decades.

Ater was able to relocate to the U.S. in 2001. With him came high hopes of completing his late father’s wish — to earn a good education. Today, he walked across the stage at Allen E. Paulson Stadium in Statesboro to earn a Doctor of Public Health in Public Health Leadership from the University’s Jiann-Ping Hsu College of Public Health and honor his father.

“My father sent me away when I was nine years old to search for an education and to bring it home,” said Ater. “The civil war in Sudan took his life. I dedicate it to him.”

An Atlanta-based public health researcher in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Global HIV and Tuberculosis Division, Ater is also co-founder of United Vision for Change, a private foundation dedicated to building schools and health clinics in rural towns of South Sudan.

His long-range plans involve returning to East Africa to work in clinics, organize health workshops and empower local health workers to improve community health. In tribute to those who helped him along his own arduous journey, making a difference in the lives of children and refugee camp dwellers is paramount.

“Georgia Southern gave me this opportunity to succeed,” said Ater. “I plan to improve the health status of those who live in rural areas in East Africa and other parts of the world.”



Georgia Southern University, a public Carnegie Doctoral/Research institution founded in 1906, offers 141 degree programs serving nearly 26,500 students through nine colleges on three campuses in Statesboro, Savannah, Hinesville and online instruction. A leader in higher education in southeast Georgia, the University provides a diverse student population with expert faculty, world-class scholarship and hands-on learning opportunities. Georgia Southern creates lifelong learners who serve as responsible scholars, leaders and stewards in their communities. Visit GeorgiaSouthern.edu.

Armstrong Campus undergraduate research student, recruited by pharmaceutical giant, graduates

DECEMBER 7, 2018

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On Saturday, Armstrong Campus student Ariana Vargas earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry from Georgia Southern University and will begin her career as a scientist for pharmaceutical giant Pfizer in January.

"I have never seen an undergraduate student do this before," said biochemistry professor Brent Feske, Ph.D. "They created a position for her at their Global Research and Development Campus in Groton, Connecticut. I think this is notable because it was her work conducting faculty-mentored undergraduate research that had this company heavily recruit her."

For three years, Vargas, who moved from Mexico to the U.S. in 2009, conducted research on pharmaceutical synthesis with Feske.

"The research I did with Dr. Feske helped me get this position," said Vargas. "The fact that I had to research on my own and collaborate with him and the Georgia Institute of Technology was important. The team at Pfizer that interviewed me said not many people in undergraduate programs understand how to do this research."

Feske's educational and professional guidance has also been vital to her success.

"It's meant a lot," she said. "Dr. Feske had a lot to say about my work and my future. It really meant a lot to get that support from him. He was a really good mentor and set the bar high for me."

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Military veteran graduates, lands dream job with global company

DECEMBER 7, 2018

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Georgia Southern University student Deyoun Johnson, who graduated with a health informatics degree in an Armstrong Campus ceremony on Saturday, served in the Army for almost 15 years, first enlisting to work in transportation and logistics until he found his niche serving as an information technology (IT) and communications specialist. However, an injury in Afghanistan forced him to step down from a military career sooner than expected.

Yet with help from the VA and the University's TRIO services, which offers comprehensive services to first-generation students, low-income students and students with disabilities, Johnson enrolled in Georgia Southern's IT program. There he learned about the health informatics degree, which links information technology, communications and healthcare to improve the quality and safety of patient care. He was intrigued by the alignment of his past experience with his interest in healthcare and switched studies.

"I've always been interested in healthcare," said Johnson. "I've lost a lot of comrades and seen people with medical issues and injuries. I've always wanted to be part of that, especially with my injury. Once informatics came along, I thought I can help and do IT. So it's exciting to be able to do that."

During his program, Johnson participated in an internship with St. Mary's Health Center, an outfit of St. Joseph's/Candler health system, which offers free health services to the community. He was asked to create three quality healthcare measures within an in-house, electronic health record system that wasn't being utilized well. After a one-day crash course on the system, he created 16 quality measures and a manual on how to use it.

"He trained providers on something they'd been using for years," noted Paula Tillman, DNP, Georgia Southern Health Informatics Program Coordinator. "In follow-up, his work is living on. Now other physician practices want to use this. He put so much into it. He left a legacy and gave them something back."

Johnson was also personally rewarded by the experience.

"I was actually able to help people that have health issues, but I was also able to help people who are struggling with insurance," explained Johnson. "I was able to help them with a more efficient way of getting healthcare."

Tillman encouraged Johnson to apply for a program assistant position at the 2018 HIMSS Global Conference & Exhibition, which brought almost 50,000 people together for world-class healthcare education and unique networking opportunities, in Las Vegas.

He was the only undergraduate student to land the role and left the conference with 16 job offers. The vice president of Cerner Corporation, the world's second largest supplier of health information technology solutions that recently signed multiple billion-dollar contracts with the VA, Department of Defense and Coast Guard, took a particular interest in Johnson. He flew him to the company's headquarters in Kansas City a few weeks later and offered him a position training clients like the NBA and Johns Hopkins Medicine.

Johnson accepted the position and will begin early 2019.

"It's a dream job," said Tillman. "He's so inspiring. There is nothing he will not tackle on his own."

And as Johnson looks to the future, he won't forget his alma mater.

"I've really enjoyed being part of Georgia Southern and being a part of this program," he said.

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