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Orchard Gardens graduate excels with determination, support

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THOMPSON ISLAND – Five years ago, Abubakar Suleiman was hunting zebras with spears and trying to avoid antagonizing cheetahs.

There was a school where he lived, in rural northern Nigeria, but he had barely been there in his 10 years. He found the teachers cruel, the pidgin English impossible. There was no running water at home and patchy electricity. His family ate little beyond what they could grow or kill. When he wasn't hunting, or tending to the chickens and donkeys on the farm where his grandmother was raising him, he was playing soccer.

One foggy day last week, Suleiman was dressed in a slim blue shirt and black pants, on a Boston Harbor island thousands of miles from the beautiful, ruthless place where he was born. The 15-year-old sat with his eighth-grade classmates, all of them beaming: They were graduating from Roxbury's Orchard Gardens school. They have all come a long way, putting worlds between themselves and the hardships that had threatened to defeat them just a few years ago – impossible neighborhoods and family situations, dismal grades, low expectations, and stunted ambition. Most of them are now headed to excellent public and private high schools.

Even in this remarkable group, it would be hard to find another who has traveled as far as Suleiman. His parents left Nigeria when he was a baby. He thought his grandmother was his mother, refusing to believe otherwise even when his mother, Amina, visited when he was 5. When he was 10, his grandmother died and his parents brought Suleiman and his siblings to Boston.

"At first, I didn't want to come to America," he said. "My parents were strangers." Boston was another planet.

"It was strange to meet light-skinned people," he said. "I thought, 'Who are they? Are they human?'" He had never seen a television: "I tapped on the screen: 'Why are there people in there?'"



David L. Ryan/Globe Staff

Abubakar "Bubbles" Suleiman, 15, has made great strides at Roxbury's Orchard Gardens school after moving to Boston from Nigeria.

He was assigned to Orchard Gardens K-8, a failing school in a state-of-the-art building. He arrived for his first day of fifth grade in traditional clothes – light pants beneath a long, dress-like shirt, and sandals. He was freezing.

In addition to being weather-inappropriate, his outfit was pink. "Everybody kept looking at me, like 'What is this kid wearing?'" But he was not bullied. For all of its problems, the school had attracted kids who were tolerant and generous, gently nudging the newcomer along as he gathered up a whole language. They gave him the nickname "Bubbles" because Abubakar was too hard to say. Hardly anybody calls him by his real name now, and he's fine with it.

Learning English has been the biggest challenge of his life. He had to repeat fifth grade. Teachers worked hard to bring him along, but the school was in crisis.

Then, when he was in sixth grade, Principal Andrew Bott arrived. He remade the faculty and welcomed new funding and partnerships with nonprofits like Citizens Schools, which allowed him to extend the school day, and Play Ball!, which brought football and school spirit. The

school expanded arts programming, one-on-one tutoring, teacher training, and accountability. A partnership with Thompson Island's Outward Bound program took the kids to the island for summer school and overnight camp. The school — a place of love and pride — became a national success story.

When he started sixth grade, Suleiman was reading at a first-grade level, Bott said. By the end of seventh grade, he was at a fifth-grade level. He graduates at “a high seventh-grade level,” said Andrew Vega, his English teacher. He scored proficient on this year's MCAS English

Language Arts exam, getting perfect scores on two of his essays. In sixth grade, he struggled with basic arithmetic. Teachers and tutors swooped in to catch him up, and to discover his gift for geometry. They got to know his gaps and his interests, then found ways to fill in the former with the latter. He's more than ready for high school math now.

How does a kid make up this much ground, this fast? Part of it is Orchard Gardens. But it's mostly Suleiman — mature beyond his years, mindful of his weaknesses, determined to overcome them.

“He's a kid who owned it,” Vega said. “I saw moments when he had to stop and collect himself when it got hard. It took him 6½ hours to finish the MCAS exams.”

Along with these giant language leaps, Suleiman learned to play American football, a game he'd once thought stupid and dangerous, and became a track star, helping Orchard Gardens take the citywide athletic championship earlier this month. Suleiman won all but one of his 400-meter races and anchored the 4x200 relay team. He placed first in javelin.

“I have a technique,” he said with a wry smile. The zebras.

He has done all of these things while living in a Roxbury apartment with his giant, blended, loving family — two parents who work in human services, and nine children ranging from 4 months old to their mid-20s.

Because his older siblings and parents are usually working, it falls to Suleiman to help care for his younger brothers and sister, babysitting, supervising homework, taking them to school. Otherwise, he rarely leaves his apartment because his mother worries about his safety. He doesn't complain.

If you could bottle the things that brought Suleiman this far — what happens inside that school in Roxbury, what lives in this 15-year-old's heart and home — you could transform a whole city.

At Thursday's graduation ceremony, Bott called Suleiman “the epitome of the American Dream.” His classmates voted him most improved. He looked delighted by the honor, and appalled by the spotlight.

If his family and friends can find a way to close the gap between his scholarships and the cost of books and transportation, Suleiman is headed to Catholic Memorial, the college prep school in West Roxbury, in September. There he will find track, football, and a clear path to college.

He will likely face some challenges at Catholic Memorial. But nobody who knows this wry, self-possessed teenager is worried.

“I didn't have the opportunity to do this in Nigeria,” Suleiman said. “Now that I have it, I'm not going to waste it.”

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