



UB's Educational Opportunity Center Salutes Another Class of 'Redemption Stories'

Part Two

James Simmons' & Hamadi Shebule's Stories

James Simmons: UBEOC Distinguished Alumni Award

UBEOC Class of 1982 and 2013:

"I aimlessly wandered in wrong directions because I couldn't believe in 'me' or in anybody else," says Simmons, who just graduated from Buffalo State College with a bachelor's degree in sociology and who earned an associate's degree in mental health assistant substance abuse counseling from Erie Community College in 2015. "I appreciate the court and human service agencies for turning me around. And I am so thankful for EOC administrators, faculty and staff who then pointed me in the right direction."

"They had faith in me that I absorbed as trust in myself. I hope my story can inspire others to also believe and achieve."

Simmons found the mental imprints of segregation and childhood trauma from his father's unnatural death made it very difficult for him to adjust.

"I didn't know how to talk with people of other races," he said. "I knew of cotton fields, not city streets. I was confused and scared." These emotions turned into stifled anger, according to Simmons, and led later to many troubled years hanging

Hamadi Shebule: Arthur O. Eve Education and Community Service Award

UBEOC Class of 2017:

"My math instructor told me not to dwell on any 'one aspect' of a problem," said Shebule. "Instead, he told me to put 'two and two together' to see the big picture. I did and I am."

A refugee from Kenya with other Somali families, Shebule clearly remembers living in the forest with other Somali families escaping the war in their home country, where they built their own home where he and his family lived for over a decade. The family initially was rejected in their appeal for immigration status to the United States, but Shebule's personal persistence prevailed. He remembers rejoicing when his family received approval documentation and moved to Buffalo in 2004.

Since leaving Africa, Shebule has been committed to creating "new memories," the first was the production job he found at SweetWorks Inc., (formerly Niagara Chocolates) shortly after arriving in Buffalo. More of these "new memories" came working at Culinary Arts Specialties for 10 years, where he initially performed assembly work, and then advanced in title and responsibility to assistant supervisor. He earned his high school equivalency diploma at the UBEOC in

led later to many troubled years hanging around pool halls, shooting dice, stealing and not going to school.

As a teenager and adult, Simmons lived "on the streets," which he said "won out for over a decade." At 17, he developed what he himself described as "an entitlement attitude," and he didn't trust anyone.

Simmons' grandmother urged him to join the Army. He enrolled in the UBEOC then, and earned his high school equivalency diploma in 1982. He then joined the U.S. Army Reserve.

When his grandmother died and his mother remarried and moved to Kansas, Simmons felt lost. He resorted to drugs and alcohol to "bathe my life's undealt-with pain away," according to Simmons. He found himself high, drunk and homeless, repeatedly serving 10- to 15-day jail sentences.

Eventually, a judge told him to "Get help or serve one year," a stark admonition from someone Simmons now admires and respects for helping him change his life. That ultimatum emboldened him to finally accept help from a variety of social service agencies (Sheehan Hospital Rehab, Genesee County Supportive Services, Salvation Army Rehab and Cazenovia Independent Living Rehab).

In 2012, 30 years after initially enrolling, Mr. Simmons returned to UBEOC, studied hard and graduated from the College Preparation program with academic honors and an Incentive Award. After earning his associate's degree and graduating from Buffalo State with his bachelor's degree in sociology, Simmons said it is important for him to mentor and reassure others experiencing trauma and substance abuse, serving as an example of how there is a way to move forward.

supervisor. He earned his high school equivalency diploma at the UBEOC in 2017, adding yet another landmark new memory.

Shebule took his math instructor's advice about putting "two and two together" to see the big picture to heart. It's an analogy, he says, that inspired and continues to inspire him.

Visualizing his own bigger picture, Shebule sought out the services of the UBEOC College and Community Connections Office and is now a full-time student at Erie Community College. In 2017, Shebule passed the United States of America citizenship exam and proudly took the Oath of Allegiance.

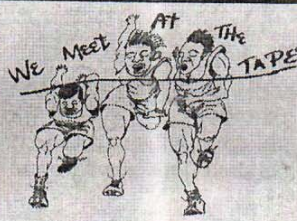
Shebule currently works in the Buffalo Public Schools as a teacher's aide where he assists and motivates students from around the world to see their own futures.

UBEOC administrators and teachers praised Shebule's commitment to the community at large and desire to provide service to those less fortunate; his desire to act as a role model for students in the public schools; his responsibility as the Buffalo District Soccer League (BDSL) Coach for young adults, and his work in assisting others as they strive for their own academic excellence.

These admirable traits show why Shebule earned their respect and was honored with the Arthur O. Eve Education and Community Service Award.

Margot Barrett Keysor, UBEOC Alumni Affairs administrator, said these two honorees illustrated the meaning behind the tagline of the Alumni Affairs Office: *We knew you then. We want to know you NOW.*

"Knowing that UBEOC genuinely impacts the lives of our students and graduates over time, like Hamadi and James, is so much more than just professional satisfaction," Keysor said. "It is a personal privilege."



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