

# AGAINST ALL ODDS

*An Immigrant's Journey from Ethiopia, Addis Ababa City to  
General Motors*



Dr Ashenafie

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**DR. ASHENAFIE**

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## *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to my nephew Solomon Tesfaye, who passed away a few years ago. When I came to this country, I was changing his diapers—something I had never done in Ethiopia. He considered me his third dad: God first, his father second, and me. When he passed away, it shattered the world as I knew it. I knew from the start that time would help, but would not help me heal.

He left us with a continued love that can still be felt. His love for his cousins, uncles, aunts, and family members was unimaginable. Handsome, smart, and humble, he always cared about others who did not have as much.

His father and mother opened their house for our family. My sisters, brothers, and nieces lived with them for years until they got married or finished college. They made everyone comfortable—you never saw a hungry face. They brought all my brothers and sisters from Ethiopia. God has His reasons for what happened, but it broke my heart and made them sad for such a wonderful family.

His brother Michael Tesfaye, another wonderful young man going through difficult times, was his best friend. I am praying to make him strong and bring him happiness for the rest of his life.

This book is also dedicated to my wife and my two children. I have been blessed to have a great family. I met my wife in college in 1993 in a small Michigan town with a population of only 12,000. We met while I was pursuing my bachelor's degree in engineering and she was in pharmacy school. She is from my country, also from the same city of Addis Ababa. We got married in 1996 and had a beautiful wedding in Addis Ababa through a church ceremony. She blessed me with two children: my daughter Lydia Ashenafie and my son Nathaniel Ashenafie. Both are wonderful Christians—humble, with no ego, loving toward family, and very respectful.



## *Author's Note*



## *Preface*

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## *Chapter 01: Roots in the Red Soil of Ethiopia*

The smell of fresh-cut grass mixed with cattle feed still takes me back to those early mornings in Addis Ababa, when the sun hadn't yet burned off the cool highland air and the neighborhood was just beginning to stir. I was born in 1963 in Ethiopia's capital city—Addis Ababa—into a lower-middle-class family, in a time when the country stood at a crossroads between ancient tradition and uncertain modernity, when Emperor Haile Selassie still ruled, and nobody could have predicted the upheavals that would soon transform everything we knew.

My father, Ato Tsegaye Legesse, was a postal delivery worker—a position that commanded respect in our community, even if it didn't command much money. Every morning before dawn, he would put on his uniform with the same care that a soldier might don his dress whites, pressing the creases sharp and

buttoning it with precision. For forty-two years, he would walk the streets of Addis Ababa delivering letters and parcels, connecting people across distances, carrying news both joyful and tragic. He took pride in his work, and people in the neighborhood knew him by name. When he finally retired in 1995, he received a Distinguished Service Award, but what mattered more to him was the line of colleagues and community members who came to honor him, testifying that he had been a man of integrity.

When he was sixty-six and retired, he was awarded a Distinguished Service Award for his commendable service to his country. He didn't stop there—he continued his service in the church and local community organizations voluntarily. Looking back introspectively at my life, I see it as a good reflection of his exemplary leadership, discipline, and dedication.

My mother, Wezero Zenbech, had come to the city from the countryside at the tender age of thirteen—a young girl thrust into urban life with nothing but determination and the clothes on her back. She worked hard to ensure she adapted to new city life, taking all kinds of jobs—selling and raising chickens, trading, working minimal jobs to make it. While my father worked his single job with dedication, my mother worked what seemed like twenty jobs simultaneously. Later, after she married my father, they built our home and engaged in raising cattle in order to sell the dairy milk. She tended gardens at our home, coaxing vegetables from the red Ethiopian soil. She raised sheep, their wool and meat providing additional income. She worked, as we used to say, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. My mother baked bread and gave us some, and our home-cooked meals were delicious, but we knew from childhood that in order

to make it, we all had to work hard and rely on each other. Watching her, I learned that there was no such thing as work being beneath you when your family needed to eat.

We were eight brothers and sisters, and we had both parents in our household raising us. My parents worked hard to meet our needs. Our household was very fortunate to have a very supportive family who were willing to sacrifice with hard work, dedication, and compassion to raise us with education and meet our daily needs, striving in spite of the many challenges they faced while sending us to school and making sure that our future was bright and better than theirs. We lived in the Parking Page family area near the Lideta Orthodox Church village, in the suburb of Addis Ababa, where we had a lot of land to raise animals. When I grew up, the pollution was less, making it ideal for raising livestock. Our house was small, and resources were limited, but somehow we never went to bed hungry. We had a nice childhood life. Even though we didn't have enough as individuals, as a community, we shared with neighbors what we had—nobody went to bed without eating. Life was very secure with the little we have as a community. The neighbors helped you with your rent and groceries. That security didn't come from individual wealth but from the fabric of communal living that characterized our neighborhood. If one family had injera, they shared. If another family had lentils for wat, they contributed to a common pot. We all came from different ethnic groups, but at the time we didn't even know our ethnic backgrounds—we were all Ethiopians. The people were kind, humble, and worshiped God, appreciating the little they had.

After school and on weekends, my siblings and I were expected to contribute to the household work. We fed the cows, cut grass

from empty lots around the neighborhood, and hauled animal feed on our backs. These weren't occasional chores but daily responsibilities that taught us the dignity of labor and the mathematics of survival. Every handful of grass we cut meant milk we could sell. Every hour spent tending animals meant eggs or meat or income that kept our family afloat. But our parents balanced work with play—we had time for soccer games with the local team, for different kinds of games with our local team members, and especially during the summer school break, we danced and laughed with our friends. That still brings happiness to me.

It was my mother who taught me the deepest lessons about human compassion. What I am most proud of about my mom is what she did with a little girl from my father's side of the family. The girl's stepmother abused her, and the little girl's name was Sallishe, which means "I wish you were not born." The stepmother abused the girl by starving her, burning her body, and emotionally damaging her. My mother raised the little girl since she was twelve years old, took her for treatment, and gave her unconditional love. The young lady passed away in her early thirties and had a four-year-old boy. Since we didn't have his father around, my mom raised the young boy. Now he's married and has a kid. My mom is eighty-nine years old now, and she always needs help. Since most of her kids are overseas, the young man is a great help to my mom.

We also had people coming from the countryside for treatment, or young girls who had been forced into marriage at a young age and ran away. My mom raised them and educated them. Most of them have a better life now. When holidays come, they bring

their kids to our home to visit my mom. One thing I learned is the importance of helping others.

This was not an isolated act of charity but a pattern that defined my mother's life. She regularly took in people from the countryside who came to the city seeking medical treatment. She sheltered young girls who had run away from forced early marriages. She raised them, educated them, and gave them opportunities to build better lives. Many of these young women now bring their own children to visit during holidays, introducing my mother as the person who changed their destinies.

When I reached school age, I was sent to a traditional Ethiopian school called Kess Timhrete Bet, where I studied the Amharic language, reading and writing. I fell in love with knowledge because I was able to read Amharic language writings. My parents always taught us the value of education because they believed that if we pursued and excelled in education, our lives would be brighter, and they encouraged us to study hard at home.

But my truest education came from watching my parents navigate life with dignity despite poverty, from observing my mother's compassion in action, from learning that intelligence took many forms and that character mattered more than credentials. In addition to our education, we were taught respect for others, responsibility, and the value of hard work to succeed in life. We were expected to work after school to help feed the cows, cutting grass and carrying animal feed from the neighborhood after school and weekends.

As I grew older, a particular fascination took hold: as a child, I was fascinated with cars. Because of this inclination, I joined a trade school named Tag Bared night school and studied Automotive Technology while working daytime at a military base—the Military Motor Transport Maintenance Facility (RIMME). The area I grew up in, most of my father's friends were in the military, and they helped me do an internship as a technician there.

The military base workshop was a highly sophisticated, Western-influenced shop. They had different departments such as Battery, Electric, Welding, and Powertrain. The technicians were highly trained—most of them got their education in Western countries or the Soviet Union. I remember they built an American Army truck from scratch to the end, run by Tekeza, a very brilliant engineer. During the Derg period, the skill of the ground techs was very knowledgeable and well-organized. They ran their shop like a Western country. I'm proud to say it was one of the best military motor transport maintenance facilities in Africa.

The knowledge I gained working there helped me to accomplish my dream of working at General Motors for the last thirty years.

I didn't know it then, but this experience during the Derg period—the communist military government that had overthrown Emperor Haile Selassie—was preparing me for a future I could barely imagine. The skills, the work ethic, the attention to detail, the understanding of how complex systems functioned—all of it was building toward something. Even as Ethiopia descended into political chaos and economic hardship,

even as the promise of education became increasingly difficult to access for ordinary citizens, I was gaining invaluable knowledge.

By the time I completed my diploma in automotive technology, I had spent years working on heavy equipment, military trucks, and jeeps at the military base. After I graduated from technical school, I found a good job getting a good wage as a senior tech. I had proven myself capable, and I was offered a position as a regional assistant for technical support—a job that promised stability and respect. It was the kind of opportunity that most young men in my position would have accepted gratefully and built a comfortable life around.

But there was a problem: I had developed an impossible dream. Somewhere along the way, through exposure to American military equipment, through conversations with technicians who spoke about Western automotive manufacturing, through reading whatever technical manuals and magazines I could find, I had become obsessed with General Motors. I wanted to be an engineer. I wanted to work in America. My dream was to come to America to study automotive engineering and work for General Motors. I had no money, my English was rudimentary at best, I had no connections in the United States, and I had no clear pathway forward. Every practical consideration argued for accepting the position I'd been offered and building a good life in Ethiopia.

But the dream wouldn't fade. It burned in me like a fever, irrational and persistent. And despite having every reason to be sensible, despite the skepticism of people around me who saw only barriers, I made a decision that would change everything: I

would find a way to America. I would study engineering. And somehow, impossibly, I would work for General Motors.

Looking back now from the distance of decades, from the perspective of someone who eventually achieved that impossible goal, I can see how naïve I was. I can see all the ways that dream should have died, all the obstacles I didn't even know existed. But I can also see that sometimes the most important qualification for success isn't knowing all the reasons why something is impossible—it's having the audacity to try anyway.

The red soil of Ethiopia had given me roots. Now it was time to see if I could grow wings.



## *Chapter 02: The Leap to America*

Applying for a US scholarship as an Ethiopian was an ambitious decision, especially given the potential financial and logistical challenges.

The letter arrived on a Tuesday afternoon, thin and official-looking, bearing stamps and postmarks from the United States. My hands shook as I opened it. I had applied for a scholarship to study in America months earlier—a Hail Mary application sent with more hope than expectation. The odds of a young Ethiopian automotive technician with limited English and no connections being selected seemed infinitesimal. I had told only a few people about the application because I didn't want to face their skepticism or, worse, their pity when it inevitably failed.

But the letter began with one word that made everything else blur: "Congratulations."

I had been accepted. Approved for a scholarship. The dream that had seemed like pure fantasy suddenly had paperwork, had legitimacy, had a pathway forward. I should have felt pure joy, and part of me did. But another part felt something more complicated: terror. The reality of actually leaving Ethiopia, leaving my family, leaving everything familiar to pursue an uncertain future in a country I had never seen, suddenly became concrete. This wasn't a daydream anymore. This was a decision with consequences.

My challenge in leaving Ethiopia was not being able to support my family financially. My parents were supporting over twelve kids living with them, including my cousins who came from the countryside for a better life and to go to school.

The Socialist military government had taken farmland and rental properties from the citizens. My parents had owned small farmland and rented part of our house to generate more income to support our family. They had a difficult time putting food on the table and sending their kids to school.

It was a very difficult decision to leave my parents in that circumstance with their financial burden, but my parents insisted that I continue my education and fulfill my dream.

My family's reaction was mixed. My father, ever practical, worried about the financial implications. American education was expensive, even with a scholarship, and we had no financial cushion for emergencies. My mother worried about my safety and well-being, about sending her son across the world where she couldn't help him if things went wrong. My siblings were excited but also sad—I was close with several of them, and my

departure would change our family's daily dynamics. Nobody tried to stop me, but nobody pretended it would be easy either.

The guilt started before I even left Ethiopia. My family was still struggling with poverty. The money I had been earning as a senior tech had helped support the household, and when I left, that income would disappear. Instead of contributing, I would need financial support myself—an inversion that felt deeply uncomfortable. My culture emphasized family obligation and collective support, and here I was, prioritizing individual ambition over immediate family needs. I tried to tell myself this was a long-term investment, that succeeding in America would eventually enable me to help my family more substantially. But that felt like rationalization for abandoning people who needed me now.

My sister, Belyou Solomon, helped me pay for my airline ticket. By that time, she was living in the States and working minimum wage.

During socialism, our military government had relationships with socialist countries. Those countries offered Ethiopian students scholarships, and I had a chance to go to those countries, but I declined the offer. My dream was to come to America to study automotive engineering and work for General Motors.

When I boarded the plane to America in 1981 with a student visa, I carried two suitcases containing all my worldly possessions, a folder with scholarship documents I checked obsessively, and a knot of anxiety in my stomach that wouldn't loosen. I was eighteen years old. It was the first time separating from my family, and it was hard—going to a different country

and culture, specifically coming from a third world country. The flight itself was surreal—my first time in an airplane, soaring over continents and oceans, watching Ethiopia recede into the distance until Africa itself disappeared beneath clouds. I wondered if I was making the biggest mistake of my life.

Landing in America was a collision between dream and reality so jarring it took weeks to process. The scholarship I had received covered tuition, which was enormous. But it covered virtually nothing else. I had no money for housing, food, books, or any of the thousand small expenses that constitute daily life. As a foreign student, it was hard to find a job without a work permit, and I was not able to afford to go to college. I couldn't access financial aid or student loans available to American citizens. And I didn't know anyone who could help me navigate this alien landscape.

The first few weeks were desperate. I slept on couches of people I barely knew, stretching the boundaries of hospitality and friendship far beyond what was comfortable. I skipped meals to make my meager savings last longer. I walked miles to save bus fare. Every single dollar had to be strategically allocated, and there were never enough dollars. The stress was suffocating—I had come to America to study automotive engineering, but I was spending all my energy simply trying to survive.

In order to survive, through the church, I found a job at William Carey University, which is a theology school in Pasadena, California, as a gardener. The job provided room and board, which solved my most immediate crisis. I worked all day cutting grass and trees for three years to cover my room and board and learn how to read and write in English. But it was humbling

work—physically demanding outdoor labor that represented a significant step backward from my position as a technician at RIMME. I had been working on sophisticated military equipment, solving complex mechanical problems, and earning respect from skilled engineers. Now I was cutting grass, trimming hedges, and maintaining flower beds. I cut grass and fixed equipment we used.

Pride is a luxury you can't afford when survival is uncertain. I took the job, and I worked it well. I learned how to read and write in classes offered by students who attended the university.

But I also looked for additional work to supplement the room and board. I also worked at a fast-food restaurant, Carl's Junior, as a cook. I was employee of the month and got a \$3.15 raise. In 1980, the minimum wage was \$3.35, and I added another job at Dunkin' Donuts at nighttime to pay my rent and groceries.

Since my dream was to work on cars, I found a job doing pre-delivery inspection when new cars arrived at the dealership and got a better wage—\$12 an hour.

My days became a blur of movement—gardening work, fast food shifts, car detailing, and somewhere in between, trying to attend English as a Second Language classes that were supposed to be my primary purpose for being in America.

Since I was obsessed with cars, living in California from 1981 to 1989 and working minimum wage with two jobs while going to community college to study Automotive Technology, I found community with my classmates, most of them from Mexico. All we did on weekends was work on cars. I bought many used cars for cheap and tore up the vehicles myself—from fabrication to

modification—to increase horsepower for speed by increasing more airflow, including installing cold air intake systems and high-flow air filters. For the most significant gains, I considered forced induction systems like a turbocharger, though it was a very expensive habit.

In the 1980s, lowriders or dropping the car was very popular. I dropped most of my vehicles one inch from the ground by replacing coil springs with short suspension, low profile tires, and massive big wheels.

I faced many hurdles, including legal and financial barriers, culture adoption challenges, and discrimination because of my accent and language barrier. I was exploited due to my vulnerable position, including wage theft.

The ESL classes revealed just how far I had to go. My English in Ethiopia had been rudimentary—enough to read technical manuals with a dictionary, enough to understand basic instructions, but nowhere near sufficient for academic work or navigating complex American institutions. There was a language barrier. I struggled with idioms that made no literal sense. I missed cultural references that everyone else found obvious. I spoke haltingly, painfully aware that my accent marked me as an outsider and that native speakers often struggled to understand me.

But language was only one barrier. The entire American system was bewildering. I also faced culture shock. How did banking work? How did you find an apartment? How did you navigate health care? What were labor laws? How did you establish credit? Every single task that Americans navigated unconsciously required research and often mistakes for me to

learn. And mistakes had consequences—late fees I couldn't afford, missed opportunities because I didn't understand deadlines, misunderstandings that damaged relationships before they could form.

Social isolation—adopting a new culture and country caused me to feel loneliness and withdrawal. Building a personal and professional network was difficult.

Through all of this, I maintained the dual burden of trying to support my family back home in Ethiopia. Even working three jobs for poverty wages, I sent money home whenever I could—small amounts that wouldn't have made a difference in America but could help with a medical bill or school fees for my siblings back in Addis Ababa. Every dollar I sent home was a dollar I couldn't use for textbooks or food or saving toward next semester. The mathematics of survival for immigrant families rarely makes sense on paper—you're always robbing Peter to pay Paul, always one emergency away from complete financial collapse, always carrying guilt about the people you're helping insufficiently and the goals you're pursuing inadequately.

The psychological toll was harder than the physical exhaustion. I was lonely in a way I had never experienced in Ethiopia. Even in poverty, even during political turmoil, I had been surrounded by family and community. People knew me, understood where I came from, shared cultural references and expectations. In America, I was anonymous. My classmates were friendly but couldn't relate to my experience. My coworkers at the various jobs came from different worlds. I had no close friends, no confidants, nobody I could be fully myself around without

constantly translating not just language but entire systems of meaning.

There were moments during that first year when I seriously considered returning to Ethiopia. The opportunity I had turned down at RIMME was probably gone, but I could find work. I could be near my family. I could eat food that tasted like home and speak my language without self-consciousness. The dream of General Motors and becoming an engineer seemed increasingly absurd—a fantasy that had led me to trade a decent life for poverty and isolation in a country that had no particular reason to care whether I succeeded or failed.

But something kept me going. Maybe it was stubbornness—having told people I was going to America to study engineering, I couldn't bear the humiliation of returning having failed. Maybe it was the memory of my mother's sacrifices, all those young women she had helped who now lived better lives. Maybe it was my parents insisting that I continue my education and fulfill my dream, even as they struggled. Maybe it was simply that I had come too far to turn back, had burned too many bridges, had invested too much suffering to abandon the goal now.

Whatever the reason, I decided to stay. And that decision, made during the darkest period of my American experience, changed everything. Not immediately—there were many more difficult years ahead—but that moment of choosing to persist despite every rational reason to quit was the foundation of everything that followed.

I didn't know it yet, but the hardest part of my journey wasn't surviving poverty or learning English or working multiple jobs

while studying. The hardest part was going to be learning to navigate the invisible rules of corporate America—the cultural codes, political dynamics, and unwritten expectations that determined who advanced and who remained stuck. Technical skills would prove to be only the beginning. The real education was just starting.

But first, I needed to get through tomorrow. And tomorrow. And tomorrow.

One day at a time, one class at a time, one shift at a time, I was slowly, painfully, building the foundation for an impossible dream.



*Chapter 03:  
Building the Foundation Through  
Education and Love*

The green card arrived in a plain envelope, but it might as well have been wrapped in gold. That small plastic card transformed everything overnight. Suddenly, I could access financial aid. I could apply for student loans. The desperate survival mode that had defined my first years in America could shift to something more strategic, more focused on the long-term goal that had brought me here in the first place.

I was still working multiple jobs—that necessity didn't disappear—but now I could actually plan a path forward through higher education rather than simply hoping to accumulate enough money to take a single class here and there. I enrolled in an associate degree program in automotive technology at a Los Angeles community college, continuing to work full-time while attending classes. The schedule was brutal,

but it was sustainable in a way that my previous existence had not been. I could see progress now, measured in credits earned and knowledge gained, rather than just days survived.

The community college classrooms were filled with people like me—working adults with dreams bigger than their current circumstances, immigrants and first-generation Americans, people who understood that education was not a luxury but a lifeline. My classmates came from Mexico, Central America, Asia, the Middle East, and beyond. We shared a hunger for advancement and a willingness to sacrifice sleep, social life, and immediate comfort for long-term opportunity. These were my people, even if we came from different countries and spoke different languages at home.

But California, for all the opportunities it had provided, was not where I needed to be. My dream had always been specific: to work for General Motors. And General Motors was in Michigan. If I was serious about this goal—and I was—then I needed to position myself closer to the automotive industry's epicenter. It was a calculated risk. California had become familiar. I had established a routine, found steady work, and built some connections. Moving to Michigan meant starting over again in many ways, trading the known for the unknown. But staying in California out of comfort would have meant abandoning the very specificity of the dream that had sustained me through the hardest times.

So I moved to Michigan.

The transition was jarring. Michigan's winters were unlike anything I had experienced in Ethiopia or California. The cold penetrated to the bone. Snow and ice transformed simple tasks

into challenges. But I hadn't come for the weather. I enrolled at a technical college, pursuing an associate degree in heavy equipment technology, then continued for a bachelor's degree in engineering technology. All of this while working full-time, a pattern that had become the defining rhythm of my life: work, study, sleep too little, repeat.

The town where I attended school was small—only about twelve thousand people—the kind of place where everyone knew everyone else's business, where newcomers stood out, where an Ethiopian student working multiple jobs while pursuing an engineering degree was decidedly unusual. I kept my head down, focused on my studies, worked my shifts, sent money home when I could, and tried not to think too much about how isolated I felt.

And then I met her.

I was a junior when she showed up on campus. She was enrolled in the pharmacy school program, another student grinding through demanding coursework while juggling the responsibilities and pressures that come with being far from home. We were introduced through mutual acquaintances in the small Ethiopian community scattered across Michigan's college towns. The coincidence was remarkable: we were both from Addis Ababa, from neighborhoods only twenty to thirty minutes apart, and we had traveled thousands of miles to meet in a small Michigan town that neither of us had heard of before coming to America.

We shared a language, shared cultural references, shared the particular burden of straddling two worlds—maintaining connection to Ethiopia and our families while building lives in

America. She understood without explanation why I sent money home every month, even when I could barely afford groceries. She understood the guilt of pursuing personal advancement while family members struggled. She understood the constant cultural translation required to navigate American institutions and social norms. She understood because she was living the same experience.

We dated through my final years of undergraduate study. The relationship deepened not just through romance but through genuine partnership—two people who recognized in each other a commitment to both personal achievement and family obligation, who shared faith traditions and cultural values, who could be fully themselves without constant explanation or apology.

We married in 1996. The wedding took place in Addis Ababa through a traditional Ethiopian Orthodox Church ceremony, bringing together family members from both sides who had supported us through the long journey to this moment. It was a homecoming of sorts—returning to Ethiopia not as the young man who had left with nothing but dreams and desperation, but as someone who was building a life, who had found a partner, who could show that the sacrifice and struggle had been worth something.

Our religion is Greek Orthodox. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church has unique liturgical practices, a wider biblical canon, and strong ties to Old Testament traditions, such as circumcision and observance of the Sabbath. Historically, it was closely linked to the Coptic Orthodox Church of Egypt, which appointed its patriarchs until the twentieth century.

The Ethiopian Orthodox Church provides community benefits through social and moral development, offering education and social services, and fostering stronger community bonds through shared identity, cultural preservation, and interfaith harmony. It provides community-wide support such as health services, environmental protection programs, and platforms for economic and social activities.

For those of us in the diaspora, the church serves as a vital institution for passing down cultural heritage and traditions, helping to maintain a connection to Ethiopian roots. The church helps with trauma, loneliness, losing a job—times when no one around you is there to support you, which can be very difficult. Back in Ethiopia, if you have no job, you live with your family without any worry. If you get sick, there's always someone taking care of you. In the States, you are on your own. The church partners with organizations to offer trauma recovery programs, addressing both physical and emotional needs, particularly for children and families who have experienced violence. Our community living in the States numbers over a million. Some do not know how to get access for health issues, and they are very traditional in showing their emotions. The church is a great place to find peace.

My wife and I always attend church. Specifically, my wife participates actively in church activities. When I have difficult times in life, I always go to church for help from God. We are here for a short time. We should help the weak ones feel great. Having all the material possessions does not make you happy. When you go to Heaven, God does not ask you how much money you have, but instead whether you helped your brothers and sisters who needed help.

We settled into married life in Michigan. She completed her pharmacy degree while I continued working and studying. We were blessed with two children: our daughter Lydia and our son Nathaniel. Suddenly, the equation of my life included not just my own dreams and my extended family's needs, but the immediate responsibilities of fatherhood. Every decision now affected four people directly and dozens more indirectly.

But rather than derailing my educational trajectory, marriage and family somehow focused it. I had concrete reasons now beyond personal ambition to succeed. I had people depending on me, not just in Ethiopia but in my own household. The abstract dream of working for General Motors became connected to providing stability for my children, creating opportunities they wouldn't have otherwise, and modeling persistence and achievement.

I completed my bachelor's degree in engineering technology, then pushed forward to a master's degree in computer information systems—all while working full-time and raising a family. The time management required was extraordinary. I calculated that if I could carve out three hours for study after the children went to bed, if I could use lunch breaks at work for reading, if I could sacrifice weekends and holidays to coursework, then I could accumulate the credits necessary for the degree. It was not a sustainable pace indefinitely, but it didn't need to be indefinite—it just needed to be long enough to reach the goal.

My wife was my partner in this in ways that extended far beyond emotional support. She managed the household when I was buried in textbooks. She took on more than her share of

childcare responsibilities during exam periods. She worked her own demanding job while facilitating my educational advancement. She believed in the dream even when I doubted, even when the obstacles seemed overwhelming, even when the sacrifices felt too great.

Eventually, I earned my doctorate degree—a milestone that would have seemed utterly impossible to that eighteen-year-old boy who had arrived in America with limited English and empty pockets. From night school in communist Ethiopia to a doctoral degree in America, the educational arc represented not just personal achievement but a vindication of every sacrifice my parents had made, every dollar sent home that I couldn't afford to send, every hour of sleep surrendered to study.

But the education wasn't finished. When I finally achieved my goal of working at General Motors—a story for the next chapter—and was promoted to first-line supervisor, I attended Harvard Executive School. From cutting grass at a theological institution to studying at Harvard, the journey encompassed extremes that still sometimes seemed surreal even as I lived them.

Through it all, my wife remained the constant. Thirty years of marriage now, three decades of partnership through poverty and progress, through cultural displacement and gradually finding home, through raising children who would grow up with opportunities neither of us had imagined. She gave me not just love but stability, not just companionship but a piece of Ethiopia that traveled with me, a reminder of where I came from, even as I pushed forward to where I was going.

Meeting her in that small Michigan town was not part of my plan. I had come to Michigan for General Motors, for the

engineering degree, for the career trajectory. But some of life's greatest blessings arrive unplanned, unexpected, precisely when you need them, even if you don't yet know you need them. She was that blessing for me. And together, we would navigate not just the completion of my education but the far more complex challenge that awaited: learning to succeed not just technically but culturally in corporate America.



## *Chapter 04: Breaking into GM and Confronting Corporate Reality*

My dream since I was young was to work on GM products. I used to buy old car magazines to read about old Chevys and Cadillac Eldorados. They had powerful engines, and muscle cars dominated in the 1960s and early 1970s. When I was young, I had a chance to replace the brake pads or shoes on a 1972 Oldsmobile Cutlass 2-door with a 350 Rocket V8 and 3-speed transmission.

GM was an iconic company—GM's market share in 1960 was 45.7%, which was higher than any other automaker. General Motors was the largest automaker in the world for 77 years, from 1933 until 2008. In the 1960s, Ethiopian military forces also received substantial US military aid, making Ethiopia the highest recipient of such aid in Africa during that period. We worked on M35 2.5-ton cargo trucks—120 horsepower, very

dependable—and I had the opportunity to repair them when I was doing my internship at RIMME.

Achieving my dream job was a profound journey marked by relief, vindication, and purpose, but also anxiety and imposter syndrome. The milestone affected my well-being, self-worth, and relationships beyond just the professional sphere. Anxiety and stress—even positive change is inherently stressful. I was feeling overwhelmed adjusting to the new routine, people, and responsibilities, which caused anxiety and sadness.

When I was telling my young friends my dream was to go to the States to study automotive engineering and work for GM, they did not take me seriously. Even some of my family members in the States advised me to go to vocational school instead. But I persisted.

When I got hired in 1995, I worked for EDS (Electronic Data Systems), which was a GM subsidiary from 1984 to 1996. GM had acquired EDS to modernize its computer systems, but the integration was challenged due to culture clashes between the two companies. I worked with EDS in technical support for the team and transferred to the car division. Even though I had a master's degree in computer information systems, my heart was always with cars.

My first job was with Buick Motor Division. Getting the position with Buick was very difficult in the hiring process. The interview and assessment were conducted by upper management, and it was a small division—they wanted the best of the best. I was able to get the job over other people who did the interview. It was very challenging, with hard invisible

barriers—cultural and psychological obstacles that impede professional growth.

Walking through those GM doors for the first time as an employee rather than a dreamer felt surreal. This was the company I had obsessed over since childhood, the company whose vehicles I had studied in worn magazines back in Ethiopia, the company that had represented everything America could offer. I carried with me the hopes of that boy working at RIMME who had dared to dream impossibly big, who had told people he would work for General Motors and been met with skepticism and discouragement.

The emotional significance of that moment cannot be overstated. Years of poverty, years of working multiple minimum-wage jobs, years of night classes and exhausting schedules, years of sacrifice and delayed gratification—all of it had been in service of reaching this point. I had proven everyone wrong who said it couldn't be done, who said someone with my background and my accent had no business aspiring to corporate engineering positions at America's most iconic automaker.

But the celebration was brief. Almost immediately, I discovered that technical skills, while necessary, were insufficient to navigate the complex corporate environment I had entered. I had spent years developing technical competence—I understood automotive systems, I could solve engineering problems, I had the credentials and the knowledge. What I didn't have was any understanding of the unwritten rules that governed corporate success.

I quickly observed how decisions were actually made in meetings—often the real decisions happened before the meeting, in informal conversations and pre-negotiations I wasn't part of. I watched how influence was wielded, how certain people's opinions carried more weight regardless of technical merit, how networks functioned to open doors or keep them closed. I saw how promotions were secured, and it rarely had to do solely with technical excellence. Politics, relationships, visibility, communication style, cultural fluency—these were the currencies that mattered, and I was operating at a deficit in all of them.

My dream was to work in the field with the fixed side of the business, working with the dealers. Even though I was qualified to do the job with my technical background, I applied for seven years and was denied repeatedly. One of the directors told me my language barrier or my communication skills were not good enough to go out to the field. Even people who had no technical degree or were hired more recently had been assigned to the field. The director's excuse not to send me to the field was my communication or language barrier.

The frustration was crushing. I had the technical knowledge. I had the experience. I had the credentials—bachelor's degree, master's degree, eventually a doctorate. But none of that seemed to matter as much as the invisible barriers I faced. Other colleagues with similar or lesser technical abilities advanced more quickly because they understood how to navigate influence and politics, because they spoke without accents, because they looked and sounded like the leadership making decisions.

My other challenge as a new employee was cultural obstacles—negative behaviors like gossip, persistent complaining, and not working as a team. Some people saw you as a failure simply because you were different. Building relationships when you are different was extraordinarily difficult. Not understanding office politics, coming from a different environment, not knowing how to represent or share my ideas with the team—all of these created barriers I hadn't anticipated.

The corporate job was more heartbreak than the challenges in my personal relationships. There was fear and silence. Even though I had many good managers in my career, sometimes you have a bad manager who needs cultural diversity training for a big international corporation, training on how to work with minority immigrants. Some managers stereotyped you because you came from a third-world country. They think we are uncivilized and have never seen an office environment or worked on a computer. Some of my managers falsely assumed my skills, especially my communication ability, rather than evaluating my actual qualifications. They did not consider it valuable that I spoke a different language, even though the company sold many cars all over the world.

One of my managers excessively monitored me and blamed me severely for common mistakes compared to my colleagues. I was also denied many promotions or advancement opportunities because of my language barrier, instead of my qualifications.

The major hurdles for me as an immigrant worker were related to the corporate hierarchy and lack of collaboration. The managers should have been focused on workplace culture, but often they were not.

I realized that being excellent at my job was necessary but insufficient for advancement. I needed to develop new skills in areas I had never anticipated: networking, strategic communication, cultural adaptation, and political navigation. The American business culture that valued speaking up and self-promotion clashed with my Ethiopian upbringing, which emphasized deference and letting work speak for itself. I would need to consciously recalibrate my default behaviors if I wanted to succeed.

The cultural obstacles created constant friction in daily interactions. Communication styles felt indirect and confusing. Social norms around workplace relationships differed dramatically from Ethiopian professional culture. The idea that networking was essential to career advancement felt foreign and uncomfortable. I had been raised to believe that technical excellence and hard work were what mattered, but American corporate culture clearly valued relationship-building and self-promotion in ways I hadn't been prepared for.

I watched colleagues advance who understood these unwritten rules instinctively. They knew how to position themselves in meetings, how to manage up, and how to build visibility. They networked effortlessly, turning casual conversations into professional opportunities. They spoke the cultural language of corporate America fluently because they had grown up immersed in it. For them, these behaviors were natural. For me, they required conscious effort and constant self-monitoring.

The realization was both discouraging and clarifying. Discouraging because I understood that technical mastery alone would not be enough, that I faced obstacles my colleagues didn't

even recognize as obstacles. But clarifying, because at least now I understand what I was up against. The invisible had become visible. And what could be seen could be studied, learned, and eventually mastered.

General Motors had been my dream, and I had achieved it. But achieving the dream was just the beginning. Now I needed to learn how to succeed within it. And that would require developing a completely new set of skills—skills that nobody had taught me, skills that didn't come naturally, skills that would take years to develop. But I had already done impossible things. I had come from poverty in Ethiopia to an engineering position at GM. If I could do that, I could learn to navigate corporate culture.

I would have to. Because turning back was not an option. I had come too far, sacrificed too much, proven too many doubters wrong. This was not the end of the journey. It was a new beginning, a different kind of challenge, but one I would face with the same determination that had brought me this far.

The dream hadn't died. It had just gotten more complicated.



## *Chapter 05: Mastering the Invisible Rules of Corporate Reality*

Understanding that technical excellence was necessary but insufficient for advancement was one thing. Actually doing something about it was another challenge entirely. I had spent my entire life developing technical skills, trusting that competence would be recognized and rewarded. The realization that I needed to master a completely different skill set—cultural intelligence, strategic networking, corporate politics—was both humbling and daunting.

But I had learned long ago that survival sometimes requires doing things that don't come naturally. Just as I had swallowed my pride to cut grass and work fast food while holding a diploma in automotive technology, I would now force myself to participate in social events and relationship-building that felt deeply uncomfortable given my cultural background.

I began studying how successful people at GM communicated. I paid attention to how they presented ideas in meetings—not just what they said, but how they said it, when they chose to speak, and how they positioned their contributions. I observed how they managed up, keeping supervisors informed not just about problems but about successes, making sure their work was visible rather than assuming it would be noticed. I watched how they positioned themselves for opportunities, expressing interest in assignments strategically, building relationships with decision-makers before opportunities arose.

This required conscious effort and constant self-monitoring. My natural inclination was to keep my head down and let my work speak for itself. But in corporate America, work rarely speaks loudly enough on its own. You have to be your own advocate, your own publicist, your own strategist. This felt uncomfortable, almost like bragging, but I came to understand it was simply a different cultural norm—not better or worse than Ethiopian professional culture, just different.

American business culture values speaking up and self-promotion, while my Ethiopian upbringing emphasized deference and letting work speak for itself. I needed to consciously recalibrate my default behaviors. In meetings, I forced myself to contribute even when it felt presumptuous. I learned to frame my ideas clearly and concisely rather than waiting to be asked. I practiced speaking up earlier in discussions rather than waiting until everyone else had spoken—by which time the conversation had often moved on.

The cultural intelligence I needed to develop went far beyond technical skills and language proficiency. I had to learn to decode

unwritten rules that native-born employees absorbed unconsciously from childhood. Simple things that seemed obvious to my American colleagues required conscious thought for me: How much small talk was appropriate before getting down to business? What topics were safe for casual conversation and what was too personal? How direct should you be when disagreeing with a supervisor? What counted as appropriate workplace humor?

These might seem like minor considerations, but they accumulated into significant barriers. Missteps in these areas could damage relationships, create perceptions of being difficult or not fitting in, and close doors to opportunities. And the feedback was rarely direct. Nobody told you that you'd made a cultural error—you just noticed that certain people became less warm, that invitations stopped coming, that your name wasn't mentioned when opportunities arose.

I learned that meetings often functioned as performance stages rather than pure information-sharing sessions. This meant preparation and participation needed to be more strategic than my instincts suggested. Before important meetings, I would prepare talking points, anticipate questions, and think about how to frame contributions for maximum impact. During meetings, I paid attention not just to content but to dynamics—who had influence, whose opinions carried weight, how decisions were actually being made beneath the surface discussions.

The absence of mentors who looked like me or understood my experience meant I was figuring out these unwritten rules largely through observation, trial, error, and occasional painful

missteps. There were no insider guides to explain the subtle signals, to warn me about political landmines, to decode the cultural expectations. I had to learn by watching and by sometimes failing.

But slowly, gradually, through persistent effort, I began to adapt. I forced myself to attend social events even when I would rather have gone home after work. I made small talk even though it felt inefficient. I accepted lunch invitations from colleagues even when I had work to do. I reached out to senior professionals for advice, even though asking felt uncomfortable. I volunteered for high-profile projects that would increase my visibility even though they meant additional work beyond my regular responsibilities.

The breakthrough came when I was promoted to first-line supervisor after attending Harvard Executive School. This was significant not just for me personally but symbolically—it demonstrated that foreign-born employees could advance into leadership despite systemic obstacles. Such progression was statistically rare, and achieving it felt like vindication for all the cultural adaptation and strategic positioning I had forced myself to do.

But the promotion also brought new challenges. As a supervisor, I now had to navigate not just my own career advancement but also manage teams, deal with interpersonal conflicts, and translate between different cultural working styles. I had to learn how to provide feedback in ways that American employees would receive constructively, how to motivate team members, and how to advocate for my team with upper management.

The skills I had developed—cultural intelligence, strategic communication, relationship building—became even more critical in leadership. I had to model professional behavior while maintaining authenticity. I had to code-switch appropriately across different contexts and audiences, being more formal with senior executives, more casual with peers, more supportive with direct reports. I had to balance pushing my team for results with understanding individual circumstances and challenges.

Over my thirty-year career at GM, I achieved multiple promotions and leadership roles. Each advancement was hard-won, requiring not just technical competence but strategic navigation of corporate culture. Each step up the ladder came from proving that barriers, while real and significant, were not insurmountable for those willing to persevere strategically and adapt without abandoning core identity.

I never fully became "American" in my professional demeanor—I maintained elements of Ethiopian culture, my faith, my values. But I learned to operate fluently in American corporate culture when necessary. I learned when to speak up and when to listen, when to push and when to wait, when to be direct and when to be diplomatic. I learned the invisible rules, not by having them explained but by painfully discovering them through experience.

Looking back, I can see that this cultural navigation was every bit as difficult as the technical challenges of my work, perhaps more so. Technical problems have solutions that can be calculated, tested, proven. Cultural challenges are far more ambiguous, context-dependent, subtle. There's no manual for

how to succeed as a foreign-born professional in corporate America—you write your own through trial and error.

But by learning these skills, by forcing myself outside my comfort zone repeatedly, by persisting through missteps and setbacks, I eventually succeeded not despite my background but by integrating it with new cultural competencies. I brought Ethiopian values of hard work, family commitment, and humility together with American professional skills of self-advocacy, strategic networking, and cultural fluency.

The journey taught me that success in corporate America requires bilingualism—not just in language but in culture. You need to be fluent in your native culture and values while also developing fluency in American corporate culture. The challenge is maintaining that balance, adapting without abandoning who you are, code-switching without losing authenticity.

It took me years to learn these lessons. Years of discomfort, years of mistakes, years of conscious effort to develop skills that came naturally to colleagues who had grown up in America. But I learned them. And in learning them, I proved something important: that the barriers facing foreign-born professionals in corporate America are real and significant, but they are not insurmountable. With persistence, strategic adaptation, and cultural intelligence, it is possible to succeed.

This knowledge would become central to my mission after retirement—to share these hard-won lessons with other immigrants and foreign-born professionals so they wouldn't have to learn everything through painful trial and error as I had. But first, I still had more years at GM ahead of me, more

challenges to face, more lessons to learn about persistence, faith, and the dual burden that immigrant professionals carry throughout their careers.



## *Chapter 06: The Dual Burden and the Dream Killers*

The immigrant success story often gets told in simplified form: someone comes to America with nothing, works hard, achieves the American Dream, end of story. What gets omitted from that narrative is the constant tension between personal advancement and family obligation—a dual burden that makes every decision more complicated, every success bittersweet, every step forward accompanied by guilt about those left behind.

Throughout my career at GM, even as I was advancing professionally and building financial stability, I was simultaneously managing responsibilities that my American-born colleagues didn't face. I was working my demanding corporate job while also functioning as a critical financial lifeline for family members in Ethiopia. Every promotion, every raise, every bonus was immediately recalculated in terms of what it meant for relatives back home who were struggling with poverty.

The practical reality of this dual burden shaped every aspect of my life. When I received a paycheck, the money was already allocated before it arrived—mortgage, utilities, food, children's expenses, and then money sent to Ethiopia for medical emergencies, school fees, basic living expenses. The mathematics rarely worked out cleanly. There was never quite enough to cover everything comfortably. Someone's needs always went partially unmet.

The choices I faced were agonizing and constant. Buy textbooks for my own education or send money home for a family medical emergency? Invest in professional development that might lead to promotion or help siblings with school fees? Save for my children's college education or support extended family members who had no other options? Every decision meant prioritizing one pressing need over another equally pressing need.

My American-born colleagues could dedicate their full resources to personal and family advancement. When they received bonuses or raises, that money could go entirely toward their own households, their own goals, their own children's futures. They didn't carry the weight of supporting households in two countries, managing expectations from relatives who couldn't fully understand American economic realities, or feeling guilty about having opportunities that family members would never have.

This dual burden extended beyond just financial strain. There was emotional weight too. Phone calls from Ethiopia brought news of struggles I couldn't fully alleviate—relatives getting sick without access to quality healthcare, young people unable to

afford education, aging parents needing support I couldn't provide adequately from thousands of miles away. The guilt was constant and corrosive. I was succeeding by any objective measure, advancing in my career, building a life in America. But that success came at the cost of not being physically present for family members who needed me.

The psychological toll of this dual burden was significant. There was constant stress about money, about obligations, about the impossibility of ever doing enough for everyone who needed help. There was guilt about pursuing education and career advancement while siblings and parents continued struggling. There was frustration about working so hard yet never feeling financially secure because resources were stretched across two continents.

But the external burdens were only part of the challenge. Even more insidious were what I came to think of as the dream killers—the psychological warfare waged by people who insisted that my dreams were unrealistic and destined to fail. Sometimes this came disguised as protective realism, well-meaning advice to lower expectations and accept more modest goals. Other times it was more overtly negative, people who seemed threatened by ambition that exceeded their own or who couldn't imagine success for someone from my background.

The dream-killing started before I even left Ethiopia. When I told people I planned to study in America and work for General Motors, the response was often skepticism bordering on mockery. "That's impossible," they said. "Be realistic. People like us don't work at companies like that." Even the support was

sometimes undermining: "It's good to have dreams, but you need a backup plan for when it doesn't work out."

The dream killing continued when I arrived in America. When I was working minimum wage jobs and struggling with language barriers, multiple people told me I should give up on engineering and be satisfied with technical vocational work. "You're good with your hands," they said. "Why do you need a degree? Just learn a trade and make decent money." Some family members advised me to go to vocational school instead of pursuing automotive engineering. The implication was clear: someone with my background, my accent, my limitations shouldn't aim so high.

Even after I earned my degrees and was working at GM, the dream killing didn't stop entirely. When I talked about wanting to work in the field with dealers, about pursuing promotions, about advancing into leadership, there were always voices suggesting I should be satisfied with what I had achieved, that pushing further would invite disappointment or failure, that people with my background faced natural limits I should accept rather than challenge.

Learning to protect my vision from these dream killers became a critical survival skill. I developed what I think of as selective listening—taking advice seriously from people who had achieved similar goals or who demonstrated genuine support, while politely ignoring negativity from people who had never attempted similar paths or who seemed invested in keeping me at their level rather than supporting my advancement.

This required conscious effort and sometimes difficult decisions about whom to trust, whose advice to weigh seriously, and

whose opinions to disregard. It meant sometimes disappointing people who thought they were helping by encouraging me to "be realistic." It meant maintaining confidence in my vision even when external validation was scarce and criticism was abundant.

The dream killers often didn't understand that their negativity, even when well-intentioned, was corrosive. Each discouraging word, each suggestion to lower expectations, each implication that success was unlikely for someone like me, added psychological weight that had to be actively resisted. For every person who encouraged me, there seemed to be three who suggested moderation, lowered expectations, and acceptance of limitations.

But I learned something important through this experience: the people most confident about what you cannot achieve are often those who never tried to achieve similar things themselves. The mechanic who never attempted engineering school was certain that engineering school was impossible for someone like me. The person working minimum wage who never pursued corporate positions was certain corporate success was unrealistic. The relative in Ethiopia who never left the country was certain that working for General Motors was a fantasy.

Meanwhile, the people who had actually walked difficult paths—who had immigrated and succeeded, who had pursued education against odds, who had advanced despite barriers—these people understood that impossible dreams sometimes come true through persistent effort. Their encouragement, while less frequent, carried more weight because it came from experience rather than assumption.

Maintaining patience during the grinding years of preparation was perhaps the most difficult challenge of all. Working unglamorous jobs without losing sight of bigger goals required daily recommitment to the vision. Sending money home when I needed it for my own advancement required accepting delayed gratification. Persevering through years of applications and rejections before breaking into GM required believing the effort would eventually matter despite abundant evidence to the contrary.

The dual burden and the dream killers created a psychological pressure that caused many talented people to abandon their aspirations. I saw it happen to others—people who started with big dreams but gradually scaled them down under the weight of obligations and negativity, people who accepted limitations they might have overcome, people who let practical considerations completely override ambition.

I came close to that myself during the darkest periods—when money was impossibly tight, when family obligations felt overwhelming, when advancement seemed blocked by barriers I couldn't overcome, when the constant negativity made me question whether I was being foolishly stubborn rather than courageously persistent.

What kept me going was a combination of factors: stubbornness, certainly, but also faith, family support from those who believed in me, and a fundamental refusal to let dream killers define my limits. I had come too far to let external negativity determine my outcome. I had sacrificed too much to accept someone else's ceiling as my own. I had proven too many doubters wrong to start believing them now.

But I never forgot the weight of those years—the financial stress, the emotional toll, the constant guilt, the persistent negativity. And I understood that while I had eventually succeeded, many equally talented people with similar dreams did not, not because they lacked ability but because the dual burden and the dream killers eventually overwhelmed them.

This understanding would shape my mission after retirement: to help others navigate these challenges with better tools, better guidance, and better support than I had. To be for others what I had lacked—someone who understood the specific obstacles facing immigrant professionals, who could provide practical advice rather than vague encouragement, who could validate ambitions while helping people develop realistic strategies for achieving them.

But first, I had thirty years of experience at GM to complete, thirty years of lessons to accumulate, and thirty years of understanding what actually works to navigate corporate America as a foreign-born professional. Those lessons, hard-won and sometimes painful, would become the foundation for the guidance I would eventually share.



## *Chapter 07: Thirty Years of Lessons and the Decision to Share*

Retirement from General Motors after thirty years felt strange—a mixture of relief, satisfaction, pride, and something else I didn't initially have words for. I had achieved the impossible dream that had fueled me since childhood. I had proven everyone wrong who said someone with my background couldn't work for GM. I had advanced into leadership positions that were statistically rare for foreign-born professionals. I had built financial stability that allowed me to support my family both in America and Ethiopia. By any objective measure, I had succeeded.

But as the celebration faded and the reality of retirement settled in, I found myself thinking not about what I had achieved but about what I had learned—and more importantly, about how that knowledge could serve others facing similar challenges.

My career at GM had taught me far more than automotive engineering. It had taught me about corporate navigation as a foreign-born professional in the American corporate environment. It had taught me about cultural intelligence, strategic networking, managing up, building visibility, and navigating politics without compromising integrity. It had taught me which battles to fight and which to let go, when to push and when to wait, how to advocate for yourself without alienating others.

These were hard-won lessons, learned through trial and error, through painful missteps, through years of observation and conscious adaptation. Nobody had handed me a roadmap. There were no mentors who looked like me or understood my specific experience. I had figured it out largely on my own, paying the cost of mistakes and misunderstandings along the way.

But it didn't have to be that way for others. The knowledge I had accumulated over thirty years could be systematized, organized, and shared. My story was not exceptional because of unique talent or intelligence—it was exceptional because I had developed teachable strategies for navigating obstacles that many foreign-born professionals face.

I looked around at America's workforce and saw countless technically skilled immigrants trapped in lower-wage positions, not because they lacked talent or work ethic, but because they lacked guidance on corporate navigation. I saw brilliant engineers working in jobs beneath their capabilities because they didn't understand the unwritten rules of advancement. I saw talented professionals passed over for promotion, not because of

technical deficiencies, but because of cultural barriers they didn't even recognize as barriers.

The tragedy was not a lack of ability but a lack of information, mentorship, and guidance about pathways from technical skill to corporate success. People were failing not because they couldn't do the work but because they didn't know how to position themselves for opportunities, how to communicate value in ways American corporate culture recognized, how to build the networks and visibility that advancement required.

I recognized that my hard-won lessons could serve as a roadmap, but individual mentorship had limits. I could work with a handful of people directly, share guidance one-on-one, and help individuals navigate specific challenges. But that approach would never reach the scale necessary to make a meaningful difference.

That's when I decided to write a book—a comprehensive resource that could reach far more people than individual mentorship allowed, that would create a permanent resource for multiple generations of immigrant professionals and disadvantaged youth, that would systematically organize the lessons I had learned over three decades.

I envisioned the book addressing specific challenges: how to build networks when you have none, how to communicate effectively across cultural differences, how to navigate corporate politics without compromising integrity, how to position yourself for advancement, how to manage the dual burden of supporting family while building career, and how to protect your vision from dream killers.

My target audience was deliberately broad. I wanted to reach recent immigrants just starting their American journey, mid-career professionals feeling stuck despite technical competence, high school students needing vocational guidance about pathways to prosperity, and American-born individuals from non-traditional backgrounds who faced similar cultural navigation challenges, even if their obstacles were somewhat different.

But I also wanted to write about technical careers as accessible pathways to prosperity—a message that felt increasingly urgent as I watched talented young people being pushed toward expensive four-year degrees when technical training might serve them better.

During my career, I had recruited technicians for General Motors, offering substantial incentives for skilled workers. I knew from direct experience that automotive technician positions at major manufacturers could provide six-figure incomes without the debt burden of four-year degrees. I understood that two-year manufacturing programs could train technicians and represent accessible pathways for young people who had been told they weren't college material or who couldn't afford prolonged education.

Working as a technician at dealerships like Mercedes or at GM manufacturing facilities could mean earning one hundred fifty thousand dollars or more with weekends free, no rent worries, and strong job security. Yet many immigrants arrived with mechanical aptitude and a passion for working with their hands, but ended up in low-wage auto repair shops because they lacked

information about higher-paying opportunities in corporate settings.

The tragedy was not a lack of talent but a lack of guidance, mentorship, and information about pathways from technical skill to stable middle-class income that could transform lives. I wanted the book to provide detailed practical guidance about two-year programs offered by community colleges and technical schools, about how dealerships for premium brands actively recruit trained technicians with competitive wages and advancement opportunities, and about major manufacturer apprenticeship and training programs that combine education with paid work experience.

I found profound satisfaction in mentoring young people who had been told they weren't smart enough, not college material, not destined for professional success—and helping them discover abilities they didn't know they possessed. I thought of these moments as turning on a light bulb, that transformative instant when someone realizes they have options, abilities, and potential that had been invisible or denied by previous messaging from teachers, family, or society.

I had worked with many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds similar to my own who lacked not talent but guidance, encouragement, and specific information about how to access opportunities available to them. I had helped mentees navigate toward technical training programs, connected them with job opportunities, taught them how to present themselves professionally, and maintained contact as they progressed through their careers.

Watching kids I mentored finish college, secure good jobs, build stable lives, and sometimes mentor others in turn created a ripple effect that multiplied impact far beyond individual cases. I recognized that my unique combination of technical expertise, corporate experience, and immigrant journey positioned me to serve as a bridge for others, which had become central to my sense of purpose in my later career.

But while individual mentorship was deeply meaningful, a book could systematically organize and share these lessons with unlimited numbers of people across time and geography. The book would serve as the mentor, the network, the insider guide that many immigrants and disadvantaged individuals lack, providing specific, actionable advice rather than vague encouragement to work hard and dream big.

I envisioned the book's success measured not by sales numbers but by hearing from readers who used the guidance to navigate their own obstacles, achieve their own dreams, and pay it forward by mentoring the next generation.

At the core of the book would be a central conviction: America promises equal opportunity but does not provide equal access to the information and tools required to seize opportunities. Talent is distributed broadly across all populations and backgrounds, but insider knowledge is concentrated among those with privileged access—those who grow up in professional families, attend well-resourced schools, and have networks that open doors automatically.

The playing field is not level, but it can be navigated. The barriers are real and significant, but they are not insurmountable. What's needed is not just encouragement but

specific, actionable guidance based on real experience. Dream big, absolutely—but also understand concretely what that dream will require, what obstacles you'll face, what strategies work for overcoming them.

I thought about my own journey—from poverty in Ethiopia to General Motors, from night school under communist rule to Harvard Executive School, from cutting grass for room and board to leading teams in corporate America. If I could make that journey, then surely my hard-won knowledge could help others chart their own paths.

The decision to write this book represented a shift from personal achievement to collective uplift, from accumulating credentials to sharing knowledge, from focusing on my own advancement to creating pathways for others. It was a way of honoring the sacrifices my parents made, the opportunities America provided despite its barriers, the mentors and supporters who helped me along the way, even if they were few and far between.

Retirement didn't mean stopping work—it meant starting different work. Work focused on legacy rather than paycheck, on impact rather than advancement, on ensuring that dreams like mine remain possible for the next generation of immigrants and disadvantaged youth who dare to aim impossibly high.

The lessons were there, accumulated over thirty years. Now it was time to organize them, systematize them, and share them as widely as possible. The next chapters of this book would lay out that guidance—practical, specific, tested through experience, offered with the hope that others wouldn't have to learn everything through painful trial and error as I had.

This was the work ahead. This was the legacy I wanted to leave. This was how individual success could be transformed into collective opportunity. And this was why, after thirty years at General Motors, I sat down to write a book that I wished had existed when I first arrived in America with nothing but dreams and determination.



## *Chapter 08: Technical Careers as Pathways to Prosperity*

One of the most important lessons I want to share—particularly with young people, with immigrants, with anyone told they're not college material—is that there are multiple pathways to prosperity in America, and a traditional four-year college degree is not the only route or even necessarily the best route for everyone.

I learned this truth directly during my years at General Motors when I was recruiting technicians. I would offer substantial incentives for skilled workers—signing bonuses, relocation assistance, competitive starting salaries—because GM desperately needed trained automotive technicians and was willing to pay well to get them.

What struck me was how many people had no idea these opportunities existed. They knew about low-wage positions at independent repair shops, but they didn't know that automotive technician positions at major manufacturers could provide six-figure incomes without the debt burden of a four-year degree. They didn't understand that two-year manufacturing programs could open doors to careers that many people with bachelor's degrees would envy.

Let me be specific about what I'm talking about. A trained automotive technician working at a GM manufacturing facility or at a dealership for a premium brand like Mercedes, BMW, or Lexus can easily earn between one hundred and one hundred fifty thousand dollars per year or more, especially with overtime. These positions typically come with full benefits—health insurance, retirement plans, and paid vacation. Many work regular schedules with weekends free. The work is challenging and requires real skill, but it doesn't require four years of college and the debt that often accompanies it.

Compare that to many jobs requiring bachelor's degrees—positions that might start at thirty-five or forty thousand dollars per year, leaving graduates struggling to pay student loans while living paycheck to paycheck. I'm not saying four-year degrees are worthless—obviously, my own educational path included multiple degrees. But I am saying that for many people, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, technical training can provide faster entry into middle-class stability with less debt.

The pathway typically works like this: Students complete a two-year program at a community college or technical school that

provides hands-on automotive training. These programs combine classroom instruction with practical experience, teaching everything from diagnostics to advanced repair techniques to the computerized systems that dominate modern vehicles. The cost is dramatically lower than four-year universities—often one-tenth or less the total expense.

Upon completing the program, graduates can pursue several pathways. Many dealerships for premium brands actively recruit trained technicians, offering competitive wages, benefits, regular schedules, and opportunities for advancement into master technician or shop supervisor roles. The work environment is professional, the equipment is state-of-the-art, and the career trajectory can lead to substantial income without requiring any additional formal education beyond certifications.

Alternatively, major manufacturers like GM have apprenticeship and training programs that combine education with paid work experience, creating pipelines from technical training directly into high-wage manufacturing positions with career advancement potential. I participated in recruiting for these programs and saw firsthand how they transformed lives—taking young people from uncertain futures and positioning them for stable, well-paying careers.

The tragedy I witnessed repeatedly was talented people with mechanical aptitude and passion for working with their hands ending up in low-wage auto repair shops, not because they lacked ability, but because they lacked information about better opportunities. Many immigrants arrive in America with excellent technical skills—they can tear down and rebuild engines, diagnose complex problems, and work with their hands

skillfully. But without guidance, they end up working for small independent shops that pay fifteen or twenty dollars per hour with no benefits, when they could be earning three or four times that amount in corporate settings.

The barrier isn't ability—it's information and guidance. It's knowing these opportunities exist, understanding how to access training programs, learning how to present yourself professionally to corporate recruiters, navigating the hiring process, and understanding what employers are looking for beyond just technical skill.

This is where mentorship becomes critical. When I mentored young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds or immigrant families, I would often ask about their interests and aptitudes rather than assuming everyone should pursue a traditional college. If someone showed mechanical inclination, enjoyed problem-solving with their hands, and had spatial reasoning abilities, I would talk to them about technical careers as legitimate, dignified, and prosperous pathways.

I would explain that being a skilled automotive technician is not the same as being a minimum-wage mechanic at a corner garage—that there's a professional career path with good income, job security, advancement opportunities, and pride in mastery of complex systems. I would help them understand that two years of focused technical training could position them better economically than four years of college in fields with poor job prospects.

The response was often transformative—that light bulb moment when someone who had been told they weren't college

material suddenly understood they had valuable options, that technical skill was not less-than but different-than academic ability, that they could build a good life without conforming to a traditional college pathway that might not suit them.

I helped connect these young people to community colleges offering automotive technology programs, introduced them to recruiters from dealerships and manufacturers, advised them on how to present themselves professionally, taught them what to emphasize in interviews, and maintained contact as they progressed through training and into careers.

Watching these young people succeed—finishing technical programs, securing good jobs, buying homes, supporting families, building stable middle-class lives—gave me immense satisfaction. These weren't people who were somehow less capable than those pursuing four-year degrees. They were people with different aptitudes and different pathways to success, who needed guidance to navigate toward opportunities that matched their strengths.

The message I want to emphasize is this: If you love working with your hands, if you have mechanical aptitude, if you're good at problem-solving and troubleshooting, if you enjoy understanding how complex systems work, then technical careers deserve serious consideration. Don't let anyone tell you that these paths are second-class or only for people who can't do better. A skilled technician earns more than many professionals with advanced degrees, has better job security than many white-collar positions, and takes genuine pride in mastery that requires years to develop fully.

But also understand that success in technical careers requires more than just mechanical skill. You need to position yourself for the best opportunities—the corporate dealerships and manufacturing facilities, rather than low-wage independent shops. You need to pursue training and certifications that validate your expertise. You need to present yourself professionally, communicate effectively, and understand workplace culture. Many of the same lessons about corporate navigation apply, even in technical positions.

The other critical point is that technical careers shouldn't be viewed as dead ends. Many successful people in the automotive and manufacturing industries started as technicians and advanced into supervision, management, training, or technical specialization. The skills you develop as a technician—problem-solving, attention to detail, understanding complex systems, working under pressure—transfer to many other roles. A technical foundation can be the starting point for diverse career trajectories.

I also want to address something that affects many immigrant families specifically. In many cultures, including Ethiopian culture, there's a strong emphasis on professional degrees—doctor, lawyer, engineer. Parents push children toward universities and traditional professional paths, sometimes dismissing technical careers as beneath family aspirations. This cultural pressure can lead young people to pursue paths that don't match their aptitudes or interests, accumulating debt for degrees that don't lead to good employment.

I understand this pressure—I felt it myself. But we need to be realistic and strategic. If your child has mechanical aptitude but

struggles with academic subjects, pushing them toward a four-year university might lead to failure and debt. But supporting them toward technical training could lead to a prosperous career where they excel and enjoy. Sometimes, the most loving thing parents can do is help children find paths that match their actual strengths rather than conforming to cultural expectations about prestigious careers.

This doesn't mean abandoning ambition or settling for less. It means being smart about pathways to prosperity, understanding that there are multiple routes up the mountain, and helping young people find the routes that match their abilities and interests rather than forcing everyone up the same path regardless of whether it suits them.

For immigrants specifically, technical careers can provide faster entry into stable middle-class income while maintaining flexibility to pursue additional education later if desired. Starting as a technician doesn't prevent later advancement—it provides financial foundation while developing valuable skills. Many successful people I know started in technical positions and later pursued degrees while working, building on practical experience with formal education.

The fundamental message is this: America offers opportunities for prosperity through technical expertise, not just through traditional academic degrees. But you need to be strategic about accessing the best opportunities, not settling for the first available position. You need guidance, mentorship, and information about pathways from technical skill to substantial income. And you need to understand that technical mastery is a

legitimate form of intelligence and expertise deserving of respect and offering genuine pathways to prosperity.

Suppose I can help young people understand these truths, connect them with opportunities, and provide guidance for navigating technical career paths successfully. In that case, I will have accomplished something important—turning on light bulbs, opening doors, creating pathways to prosperity for people who might otherwise struggle unnecessarily because they lack information and guidance rather than ability.



## *Chapter 09: Turning on Light Bulbs for the Next Generation*

There's a moment I've witnessed dozens of times over the years, and it never gets old. It's the moment when someone who has been told they're not good enough—not smart enough, not college material, not destined for success—suddenly realizes that those messages were lies. Their face changes. Their posture shifts. You can literally see possibility dawn in their eyes. I call this "turning on the light bulb," and it's become one of the most meaningful aspects of my life's work.

The metaphor is simple but powerful. Many young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, walk around in darkness—not because they lack ability but because nobody has shown them they have options. They've internalized messages from teachers who wrote them off, from family members who projected their own limitations, from a society

that sorts people into categories based on circumstances rather than potential. The light is there, waiting to be switched on. They just need someone to show them where the switch is.

I've worked with many young people over the years who fit this pattern. Kids from immigrant families were expected to take over family businesses rather than pursue education. Students who struggled in traditional academic settings but had brilliant spatial reasoning or mechanical aptitude that nobody recognized as valuable intelligence. Young adults are working dead-end jobs because they didn't know better opportunities existed or didn't believe they could access them.

What they lacked was not talent. They lacked guidance, encouragement, and specific information about how to access opportunities that were theoretically available but practically invisible to them.

Let me tell you about some of these young people, without using their real names but capturing the essence of their stories.

There was a young man I'll call Daniel, son of Ethiopian immigrants, working at his family's small business while dreaming of something more, but not knowing what that something could be. His parents wanted him to take over the business—it was practical, it was secure, it was what they knew. But Daniel was mechanically brilliant. He could look at a broken machine and understand intuitively what was wrong. He had spatial reasoning that let him visualize how systems fit together. But he was struggling in traditional academics and had convinced himself he wasn't smart.

I met him through church connections and started talking to him about automotive technology programs. At first, he was skeptical—wasn't that just being a mechanic? Didn't that mean he'd failed at real education? I explained the difference between low-wage repair shops and professional technician positions at major manufacturers or premium dealerships. I showed him salary ranges, described career paths, and connected him with people working in these roles.

The light bulb turned on when he realized that his mechanical intuition wasn't a consolation prize for academic failure—it was valuable intelligence that could lead to a prosperous career. He enrolled in a two-year automotive technology program, excelled because the hands-on learning matched his aptitudes, and within three years of completing the program was earning more than many of his peers who had pursued four-year degrees. Last I heard, he had advanced to senior technician at a premium dealership and was being groomed for shop supervisor.

Then there was a young woman I'll call Sarah, daughter of immigrants from East Africa, who had been tracked into vocational programs in high school because teachers assumed she wasn't capable of college-level work. She had internalized this message, believing she was destined for low-wage service work. But when I talked with her, I discovered she had excellent organizational skills, attention to detail, and people skills that could translate to many professional contexts.

I encouraged her to consider community college, helped her navigate the financial aid process that her parents didn't understand, connected her with scholarship opportunities, and, most importantly, challenged the narrative that she wasn't

college material. She was terrified at first—convinced she would fail, that the teachers had been right about her limitations. But with support and encouragement, she enrolled. She struggled initially with academic writing and test-taking, but she persevered. She completed an associate degree in business administration, transferred to a four-year university, and eventually earned her bachelor's degree. She now works in corporate human resources, earning a solid middle-class income and providing stability for her family.

The pattern repeated across dozens of young people I worked with over the years. The specifics varied—different backgrounds, different aptitudes, different obstacles—but the core dynamic was similar: talented people who had been given limiting messages about their capabilities, who needed someone to see their potential and help them develop pathways to realize it.

What struck me repeatedly was how little it took to make a profound difference. I wasn't providing money (though I sometimes helped with small amounts for application fees or supplies). I wasn't pulling strings or using powerful connections to open doors. What I provided was information, encouragement, guidance, and belief.

I provided information about opportunities they didn't know existed—technical training programs, financial aid, scholarships, career paths, salary expectations, and hiring processes.

I provided encouragement when they doubted themselves—challenging negative messages they'd internalized, helping them

recognize their own capabilities, and celebrating small wins that built confidence.

I provided guidance about navigation—how to present yourself professionally, what to emphasize in applications or interviews, how to succeed in educational programs, how to build networks, and how to advance in careers once you get started.

And I provided belief—someone who genuinely thought they could succeed, who saw potential they couldn't yet see in themselves, who refused to accept that circumstances or background determined destiny.

Sometimes the impact was immediate and obvious—someone enrolling in a program, securing a job, making a life change. Other times, the impact was more subtle and delayed. Seeds planted in conversations might not germinate for months or years, but eventually, they would reach out to tell me they had made a change, pursued an opportunity, succeeded in something they hadn't thought possible.

The ripple effects multiplied the impact. Young people I mentored would sometimes go on to mentor others in turn, paying forward the guidance and belief they had received. Parents whose children succeeded would tell other parents, spreading awareness of opportunities. Successful students would return to their communities with new knowledge and new possibilities visible to others who had known them.

I came to understand that my unique combination of experiences positioned me to be particularly effective as a mentor and guide. I had technical expertise from decades in automotive engineering. I had corporate experience navigating

GM's culture and politics. I had an immigrant experience, understanding the specific challenges of straddling two cultures. I had experienced poverty and understood the practical barriers facing disadvantaged families. I had faith traditions that connected with many families I worked with. I spoke multiple languages—literal linguistic fluency and cultural fluency.

This combination let me serve as a bridge—translating between cultures, connecting technical opportunities with families that didn't know they existed, providing both practical guidance and cultural credibility, understanding barriers from lived experience rather than abstract sympathy.

But as impactful as individual mentorship was, I recognized its limitations. I could only work with so many people directly. Time and energy were finite. And the need was vast—thousands of young people in my community alone who could benefit from guidance, millions across America facing similar obstacles.

That's when I understood that writing this book was essential. The book could systematize and scale what I had been doing one-on-one. It could reach people I would never meet personally. It could provide guidance across time and geography in ways individual mentorship couldn't. It could serve as the mentor, the network, the insider guide for people who lacked those resources.

The book would need to do what effective mentorship does: provide specific information, offer encouragement without platitudes, give concrete guidance about navigation, and communicate a genuine belief that success is possible for people from non-traditional backgrounds.

It would need to turn on light bulbs—helping readers recognize capabilities they didn't know they had, see opportunities they didn't know existed, understand that barriers, while real, are not insurmountable, believe that they can succeed not despite their backgrounds but by strategically leveraging their unique strengths while developing new skills.

The measure of success for this book, like the measure of success for my mentoring, would not be praise or recognition. It would be hearing from readers who used the guidance to make changes in their lives—who pursued opportunities they hadn't known existed, who developed strategies for navigating obstacles, who achieved goals they had thought impossible, who then mentored others and extended the ripple effect.

Every person who succeeds represents not just individual achievement but potential for collective uplift. Every light bulb turned on can illuminate paths for others. Every person who makes it through can reach back to help the next person. This is how change happens—not through single exceptional individuals who escape difficult circumstances but through systematic knowledge-sharing that makes pathways visible and navigable for increasing numbers of people.

I think back to my own journey—all the times I struggled in darkness, all the times I wished for guidance that didn't exist, all the times I made mistakes that could have been avoided with better information. I can't go back and help the younger version of myself. But I can help young people facing similar challenges today. I can be for them what I lacked—someone who understands, who cares, who provides concrete help rather than vague encouragement.

Turning on light bulbs for the next generation has become my mission, my purpose, my way of honoring the sacrifices made for me and paying forward the opportunities I received. The satisfactions of corporate success pale in comparison to the satisfaction of watching someone realize their potential, pursue their dreams, and succeed against odds.

This is the work that matters. This is the legacy worth leaving. This is how individual success transforms into collective opportunity. And this is why, even in retirement, I remain committed to mentoring, to writing, to sharing knowledge as widely as possible.

The light bulbs are waiting to be turned on. The potential is there, vast and largely untapped. What's needed is information, guidance, encouragement, and belief. That's what I can provide. That's what this book aims to provide. And that's how we create a future where talent from all backgrounds has a genuine opportunity to flourish.



## *Chapter 10: Practical Strategies for Corporate Navigation*

All the inspiration and encouragement in the world won't help if you don't have concrete strategies for navigating corporate America successfully. This chapter provides specific, actionable guidance based on three decades of experience—the kind of insider knowledge that children of professionals absorb unconsciously growing up, but that immigrants and first-generation professionals often lack entirely.

### **Effective Communication in American Business Culture**

American business culture values directness, clarity, and assertiveness in ways that can feel uncomfortable if you come from cultures that emphasize deference, indirectness, or collective harmony. Understanding this difference is critical.

In many cultures, including Ethiopian culture, interrupting someone or speaking before senior people have spoken would be considered disrespectful. But in American meetings, waiting too long to contribute can make you invisible. The person who speaks first often frames the discussion. The person who speaks most forcefully often carries disproportionate influence regardless of whether their ideas are technically superior.

This means you need to learn to speak up in meetings even when it feels presumptuous. Practice contributing early rather than waiting to be called on. Prepare talking points before important meetings so you're ready to participate when opportunities arise. Learn to frame your ideas clearly and concisely—American business culture has limited patience for lengthy preambles or excessive qualifications.

Self-promotion is particularly challenging for many immigrants. In Ethiopian culture, humility is valued, and self-promotion can be seen as arrogant or disrespectful. But in American corporate culture, if you don't advocate for yourself, often nobody else will. Your supervisor is managing multiple people and cannot track everyone's accomplishments in detail. Making your work visible is your responsibility.

This doesn't mean bragging or being obnoxious. It means finding appropriate ways to communicate your contributions. Send periodic updates to your supervisor about projects you've completed. In meetings, reference work you've done when relevant to discussions. When you solve difficult problems, make sure the right people know about it. Frame these communications as information-sharing rather than boasting,

but don't let excellent work go unnoticed because you're waiting for someone else to notice.

### **Building Networks Intentionally**

In many cultures, networking feels transactional and inauthentic—using people for personal gain. But in American corporate culture, networking is simply how relationships and opportunities develop. The goal is building genuine professional relationships, not manipulating people, but you must be intentional about it.

Start by attending social events even when you'd rather go home. Company picnics, holiday parties, happy hours, volunteer activities—these are where relationship-building happens. Yes, it can feel like wasted time when you could be working or spending time with family. But careers often advance based on who knows your capabilities, and these informal settings are where people get to know you as a person rather than just a function.

Engage in relationship-building conversations even when they feel inefficient. Americans do small talk—about weather, sports, weekend plans, families—as a way of establishing rapport. This can feel pointless if you're from cultures that get directly to business. But refusing to engage in small talk marks you as standoffish or difficult. Learn to do it competently, even if it never feels entirely natural.

Maintain contact with colleagues even after you or they change positions. The person you worked with five years ago might now be in a position to hire, promote, or recommend you. LinkedIn and similar platforms make this easier—stay connected, engage

occasionally with their posts, and maintain visibility without being intrusive.

Be strategic about building relationships with decision-makers. Identify people whose support could advance your career—managers in areas you want to move into, senior leaders who influence promotions, and respected individuals whose endorsement carries weight. Find appropriate ways to interact with them—volunteer for projects they oversee, ask thoughtful questions in meetings they attend, seek advice on professional development.

But also build relationships horizontally with peers. They may not have power now, but they might later. And they can be sources of information, support, and advocacy even without formal authority.

### **Managing Cultural Differences**

Developing awareness of how your cultural background shapes communication preferences, work styles, and professional expectations is foundational. What feels normal to you may seem foreign or wrong to American colleagues, and vice versa. Neither is objectively better—they're different cultural norms that you need to navigate.

For example, many cultures view workplace relationships more formally than American culture does. Using first names with supervisors, casual dress on certain days, joking relationships with managers—these might feel inappropriately familiar. But in many American workplaces, excessive formality can actually hurt relationships by making you seem distant or difficult to work with.

Conversely, American directness in giving criticism can feel shockingly blunt if you're from cultures that soften negative feedback extensively. Understanding this difference helps you not take constructive criticism as a personal attack and also helps you frame your own feedback in ways American colleagues will receive appropriately.

The key is developing cultural versatility—the ability to code-switch between cultural norms depending on context. You don't have to abandon your own cultural identity, but you need to be able to operate fluently in American corporate culture when professional situations require it.

This might mean being more direct in meetings than feels natural, more assertive about your accomplishments than seems humble, and more casual in workplace relationships than feels respectful. Over time, you develop intuition for when to lean into American norms and when you can maintain your own cultural preferences without professional cost.

### **Seeking Mentorship Proactively**

When you lack insider guides, seeking mentorship becomes critical. But this requires proactive outreach that many people find uncomfortable.

Identify potential mentors strategically. Look for people who have achieved what you want to achieve, who have navigated similar obstacles, and who have demonstrated a willingness to develop others. They don't have to be from your same background—sometimes the best mentors are those who have different experiences but a genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion.

Approach potential mentors respectfully but directly. Don't ask vaguely if they'll be your mentor—that's intimidating and unclear. Instead, ask for specific guidance on specific issues. "I'm trying to develop my presentation skills and noticed you're particularly effective in meetings. Would you be willing to give me feedback on an upcoming presentation?" Specific requests are easier to say yes to and demonstrate that you value their particular expertise.

Demonstrate coachability. When mentors give you advice, implement it and report back on results. Show that their investment of time produces results. Nothing kills mentorship faster than someone who asks for advice and then ignores it. Even if advice doesn't work perfectly, demonstrating that you tried builds credibility.

Build genuine relationships rather than purely transactional advice-seeking. Show interest in mentors as people, not just as sources of professional guidance. Share your own insights and experiences. Look for ways to add value to them even though the power dynamic is unequal—maybe you have expertise they need, maybe you can connect them with someone, maybe you can help with a project.

Recognize that formal mentorship programs are helpful, but informal mentorship is often more valuable. The person who informally takes interest in your development, who gives you honest feedback in private, who advocates for you in rooms you're not in—that relationship is gold. Cultivate those relationships intentionally.

### **Showing Leadership Potential**

Leadership potential in American corporate culture is demonstrated through specific behaviors that may not be valued the same way in other cultures.

Volunteer for high-profile projects even if they mean extra work. Visibility matters enormously for advancement. The person who leads a high-visibility project that succeeds becomes known to senior leaders who influence promotion decisions. The person doing excellent work on low-visibility projects remains unknown regardless of competence.

Present ideas articulately and advocate for them. Leaders are expected to have opinions and defend them, not just execute others' decisions. This can feel uncomfortable if you're from cultures that emphasize deference to hierarchy. But American corporate culture wants to see that you can think strategically and influence others through persuasion.

Take calculated risks rather than always playing it safe. Obviously, don't be reckless, but leaders are expected to show initiative, try new approaches, and push boundaries appropriately. The person who never makes mistakes may be reliable, but won't be seen as someone who can drive innovation or handle ambiguous situations.

Show strategic thinking that extends beyond technical execution. Anyone can complete assigned tasks. Leaders think about how their work fits into broader organizational goals, anticipate problems before they occur, and propose solutions proactively rather than just executing directions.

Demonstrate ability to work across organizational boundaries. The person who can navigate different departments, build

coalitions, and get things done despite not having direct authority—that's who organizations promote into leadership. Technical expertise alone won't get you there.

### **Balancing Authenticity with Adaptation**

Perhaps the most difficult navigation is maintaining your cultural identity while developing professional versatility. Complete assimilation isn't necessary or even desirable, but complete resistance to adaptation will limit your success.

Think of it as code-switching—a skill many bilingual people develop naturally. You can speak one language at home and another at work without either being inauthentic. Similarly, you can maintain Ethiopian cultural practices, values, and identity while also operating fluently in American corporate culture when professionally necessary.

The key is knowing when each is appropriate. In professional contexts where American norms dominate, lean into cultural versatility. In personal contexts or cultural celebrations, maintain your traditions fully. Don't let corporate culture erase who you are, but don't let cultural rigidity prevent professional advancement.

Some things are worth maintaining regardless of professional cost—integrity, core values, religious practices, and family commitments. Other things can be adapted without compromising who you are—communication styles, small talk competence, networking comfort, and self-promotion within bounds.

The goal is not to become American or abandon your heritage. The goal is to become genuinely bicultural—fluent in both Ethiopian and American cultures, able to navigate both, maintaining integrity while developing versatility.

### **Managing Up Effectively**

Managing up—actively managing your relationship with supervisors rather than passively completing assigned tasks—represents a foreign concept in many cultures but is essential in American corporate success.

This means keeping your supervisor informed not just about problems but about progress and successes. Most supervisors are managing multiple people and cannot track everyone closely. If you don't keep them informed about your accomplishments, they literally may not know what you're doing.

Ask questions that help you understand priorities and expectations clearly. American supervisors often give less directive guidance than supervisors in hierarchical cultures, expecting employees to figure things out independently. But that doesn't mean you can't ask clarifying questions—it means you need to ask smart questions that demonstrate initiative rather than waiting passively for detailed instructions.

Anticipate what your supervisor needs before they have to ask. If you can solve problems before they become visible to your supervisor, you become invaluable. If you understand their goals and challenges and actively help them succeed, you become someone they want to promote because they trust you.

Provide solutions, not just problems. When you identify an issue, think through potential solutions before raising it. American corporate culture rewards problem-solvers over problem-identifiers. Coming with "Here's an issue and here are three possible solutions I've thought through" positions you very differently than "Here's a problem, what should we do?"

These strategies don't guarantee success—there are no guarantees, and systemic barriers remain real. But these approaches significantly improve your odds of navigating corporate America successfully as a foreign-born professional. They represent lessons I learned painfully over thirty years, and sharing them is my way of helping others navigate with less pain and more success than I experienced.

The strategies work because they're based on understanding how American corporate culture actually functions rather than how we wish it functioned. They're practical, specific, tested through experience, and teachable to anyone willing to learn. That's what I wished I had known when I started at GM. That's what this book aims to provide.



## *Chapter 11: Patience, Persistence, and Faith as Superpowers*

Throughout this book, I've discussed practical strategies—networking, communication, cultural adaptation, and career navigation. These are important, and mastering them matters. But underlying all of them, sustaining me through the hardest periods, were three qualities that I came to think of as superpowers: patience, persistence, and faith.

These aren't sexy. They won't get you promoted next month. They don't impress people at parties. But over the long arc of a career, of a life, of an impossible journey from poverty in Ethiopia to leadership at General Motors, these qualities proved more determinative of success than talent, intelligence, or luck.

### **Patience as a Superpower**

We live in a culture obsessed with speed. Fast results, rapid advancement, instant gratification. But meaningful achievement almost always requires time measured in years or decades rather than months. Patience—the ability to maintain focus on long-term goals while grinding through years of unglamorous work, tolerance for delayed gratification while watching others advance more quickly—this was the foundation of everything I achieved.

Consider my educational trajectory. From starting ESL classes in California to completing my doctorate degree spanned more than fifteen years of part-time study while working full-time and eventually raising a family. Fifteen years. During that time, I watched colleagues who started at similar points advance faster because they weren't balancing education with full-time work. I watched American-born peers zoom past me because they didn't carry the dual burden of supporting a family in two countries.

Patience meant accepting that my timeline would be different, longer, harder. It meant not giving up because results came slowly. It meant trusting that the effort would eventually matter even when immediate results were invisible.

Or consider my career trajectory at GM. Seven years I applied for field positions before finally breaking through. Seven years of rejection, of watching less qualified people advance, of hearing that my language skills weren't good enough despite having technical expertise that exceeded most. Seven years of frustration that could easily have turned into bitterness or resignation.

Patience meant continuing to apply, continuing to develop skills, and continuing to believe opportunity would eventually come despite abundant evidence to the contrary. It meant not

letting repeated rejection convince me to stop trying. It meant accepting that my path would require more persistence than others' paths required.

Or think about the early years in America—working landscape jobs, fast food, and car detailing while holding a diploma in automotive technology. Those jobs were steps backward professionally from my position in Ethiopia. Pride demanded I refuse such work. Patience meant swallowing that pride, accepting these positions as temporary necessities rather than permanent destinations, maintaining the perspective that they were means to an end rather than the end itself.

This kind of patience is not passive acceptance. It's active maintenance of long-term focus despite short-term difficulties. It's choosing to continue grinding when the grind feels endless. It's trusting the process when results are invisible or delayed. It's accepting that meaningful achievement takes time and that comparing your Chapter 3 to someone else's Chapter 20 is pointless.

The patience required is especially difficult when you're poor, when family members need help now, when peers are advancing while you're stuck, when dream-killers are questioning whether your efforts will ever pay off. Every instinct screams to quit or to find faster routes. Patience means resisting those instincts, maintaining the course, and trusting that persistence over time will eventually overcome obstacles that seem insurmountable in the moment.

### **Persistence as a Superpower**

If patience is the ability to endure over time, persistence is the refusal to accept defeat. It's continuing to apply effort even after rejection, failure, and setback. It's maintaining consistent action toward goals when motivation wanes and obstacles appear insurmountable. It's refusing to interpret temporary defeat as permanent limitation.

Persistence meant applying for that field position every year for seven years despite repeated rejection. It meant not accepting "your language skills aren't good enough" as a permanent limitation, but instead as feedback to address through continued improvement while also continuing to apply.

Persistence meant going to night school semester after semester, year after year, even when exhausted from full-time work, even when family responsibilities demanded attention, even when the finish line seemed impossibly far away. It meant showing up to class tired, studying when others were sleeping, and grinding through assignments when motivation was absent.

Persistence meant continuing to send out applications when I first arrived in America, despite hearing nothing back from most. It meant showing up to minimum wage jobs day after day, even when the work was demoralizing. It meant not giving up on the dream of GM, even when multiple people told me it was unrealistic for someone with my background.

The distinction between patience and persistence is subtle but important. Patience is enduring over time. Persistence is a continuing effort despite obstacles. You need both. Patience without persistence is passive waiting that leads nowhere. Persistence without patience is a frantic activity that burns out before achieving goals.

Together, they create unstoppable forward momentum—slow perhaps, grinding certainly, but ultimately more powerful than talent unaccompanied by these qualities. I watched many talented people fail to achieve their potential, not because they lacked ability, but because they lacked the patience to endure long, difficult journeys or the persistence to overcome repeated obstacles.

Talent gets you started. Intelligence opens some doors. But patience and persistence carry you through the long middle of any significant achievement—the years when progress is invisible, when obstacles multiply, when others doubt, and you start doubting yourself.

The challenge is maintaining persistence without becoming bitter or hardened. Repeated rejection can make you angry, cynical, and defensive. Those reactions are understandable, but they poison relationships and close opportunities. The trick is persisting while maintaining openness, continuing to try while learning from failures, refusing to quit while also being strategic about how you apply effort.

This requires conscious emotional management. When I faced rejection—for field positions, for promotions, in job applications before getting to GM—I had to process the disappointment and frustration without letting it derail my efforts. I developed what I think of as compartmentalization: acknowledge the emotion, give it appropriate space, then refocus on next steps rather than dwelling on setbacks.

Persistence also requires adaptability. Doing the same thing repeatedly despite getting the same negative results isn't persistence—it's stubbornness. True persistence involves

learning from failures, adjusting approaches, developing new skills, but never abandoning the fundamental goal. When my language skills were cited as barriers, I worked on improving them while also continuing to apply, approaching the obstacle from multiple angles simultaneously.

### **Faith as Foundation**

I approach this section carefully because I don't want to preach or suggest my religious beliefs are prerequisites for success. Many successful people have different faiths or no faith. But I also can't tell my story honestly without acknowledging that Orthodox Christian faith played a significant role in sustaining me through challenges.

Faith provided several things that were critical during the hardest periods. It provided a moral framework for decisions—helping me maintain integrity even when cutting corners might have been easier, treating people with dignity even when I was treated poorly, and honoring commitments even when they were costly.

Faith provided stress relief and perspective during overwhelming moments. When multiple responsibilities, financial pressures, and self-doubt threatened to derail my efforts, prayer and religious practice offered ways to process stress, find moments of peace, and maintain hope when circumstances appeared hopeless.

Faith provided community through the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, which was vital for immigrants far from home. The church served as cultural anchor, source of social support, a place where I could be fully Ethiopian without translation or

code-switching, community that understood my experience and values.

The church helped with trauma, loneliness, losing direction—times when no one around you can support you, which is very difficult. Prayer and religious practice provided structure and meaning during periods when I questioned whether the struggle was worth it, whether I had made the right choices, and whether I would ever achieve the goals that justified so much sacrifice.

But I want to be clear: faith was not a substitute for effort. I didn't just pray for success and wait for miracles. Faith sustained me through the effort, provided strength when I felt depleted, offered hope when circumstances were bleak, and gave meaning to suffering that otherwise would have felt pointless. But I still had to do the work—attend the classes, apply for the jobs, develop the skills, navigate the politics, and persist through obstacles.

I also want to acknowledge that faith communities can sometimes be sources of dream-killing, along with support. When I told people at church I planned to work for General Motors, some were encouraging, but others suggested I should be more realistic, accept more modest goals, not aim so high, given my circumstances. Faith communities, like any communities, contain both dream-builders and dream-killers.

The trick is taking from faith what sustains you while not letting religious authority figures or community pressure define your limits. God may work through people, but people are fallible, and their limitations are not God's limitations. When church members told me to lower my expectations, I had to differentiate between wise counsel and limiting beliefs projected onto me.

For me, faith and particularly prayer were most valuable during the dark periods—the first years in America when I was desperately poor, the periods of repeated rejection at GM, the times when I questioned whether the sacrifices would ever justify the costs. During those periods, faith provided something to hold onto when practical circumstances offered little reason for hope.

I would go to church seeking peace, seeking strength to continue, seeking reassurance that the struggle had meaning and purpose beyond immediate circumstances. Sometimes that meant long conversations with priests, sometimes just sitting in the church in silence, sometimes participating in familiar liturgy that connected me to centuries of tradition and to my roots in Ethiopia.

But faith also shaped how I thought about success and purpose. The Orthodox Christian tradition emphasizes that we are here for a short time, that material possessions don't determine worth, and that our obligation is to help those weaker than ourselves. This framework helped me maintain perspective even during periods of professional frustration—remembering that career advancement was important but not ultimate, that success measured in job titles was less significant than success measured in impact on others' lives.

This is why mentoring became so central to my sense of purpose. Faith taught me that having achieved success created an obligation to help others, to use whatever platform or resources I had accumulated for collective benefit, to measure success not just by what I accumulated but by what I contributed.

When you go to Heaven, God does not ask you how much money you have, but instead whether you helped your brothers and sisters who needed help. This belief shaped my priorities in ways that made professional setbacks more bearable—if I was treating people well, maintaining integrity, helping others when possible, then my value didn't depend entirely on corporate advancement.

### **The Superpower Trinity**

Patience, persistence, and faith worked together as interconnected qualities rather than separate traits. Faith sustained patience when the timeline felt impossibly long. Patience enabled persistence by making the long view visible. Persistence demonstrated faith by trusting that effort would eventually matter.

Together, these qualities created what I think of as unstoppable momentum. Not fast momentum—I was never the fastest to advance, never the quickest to achieve milestones. But unstoppable in the sense that obstacles could slow but not stop forward progress, setbacks could delay but not prevent ultimate achievement.

I watched many talented people fall by the wayside, not because they lacked intelligence or skill, but because they lacked the patience to endure long, difficult journeys, persistence to overcome repeated obstacles, or faith to maintain hope when circumstances were bleak. Talent without these sustaining qualities is like a powerful engine without fuel—impressive but ultimately going nowhere.

Conversely, I saw people with modest talents achieve remarkable things through patience, persistence, and faith. They were willing to take longer routes, overcome more obstacles, persist through more setbacks, and maintain effort over longer timelines. Eventually, that perseverance overcame the advantages others had in talent or circumstances.

This is the message I most want to convey to people facing long odds, whether immigrants, first-generation professionals, or anyone from disadvantaged backgrounds: Talent matters, intelligence helps, and circumstances affect outcomes. But patience, persistence, and faith can compensate for deficits in all those areas more reliably than any other qualities.

You can develop these qualities intentionally. Patience is practiced by focusing on long-term goals during short-term difficulties. Persistence is built by continuing effort despite obstacles and learning from failures. Faith—whether religious faith or secular faith in yourself and your path—is strengthened by finding meaning and purpose that transcend immediate circumstances.

These were my superpowers. Not technical brilliance, not exceptional intelligence, not lucky breaks. Patience, persistence, and faith—unglamorous, unsexy, but ultimately more determinative of success than any other factors. If you develop these qualities and apply them consistently over years and decades, you become someone who cannot be stopped, only slowed. And that makes all the difference.



## *Chapter 12: The Work Ahead and Living the Legacy*

I have told my story—from red soil in Ethiopia to leadership at General Motors, from poverty and language barriers to doctorate degrees and Harvard, from survival mode to mentoring the next generation. This is a success story by any measure, and I'm grateful for the opportunities that allowed it to unfold.

But this book would be incomplete if it ended with a celebration of individual achievement without addressing the work that remains to create genuinely equal opportunity in corporate America and technical fields. My success, while meaningful to me and my family, represents an exception rather than the rule. And exceptions, while inspiring, can obscure the reality that systemic barriers still obstruct most people facing similar challenges.

## **Systemic Issues Requiring Institutional Change**

Individual determination alone cannot solve systemic problems. I succeeded through extraordinary persistence, strategic adaptation, supportive family, and probably some luck. But requiring exceptional qualities for basic opportunity is not genuine equal opportunity—it's filtering that ensures only the most extraordinary individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed while their equally talented but less exceptionally persistent peers fail.

Genuine equal opportunity would mean that people with similar talents and work ethics succeed at similar rates regardless of background. We're nowhere near that reality.

Unconscious bias in hiring and promotion remains pervasive. Studies consistently show that identical resumes with different names—names suggesting different ethnicities or nationalities—receive dramatically different response rates. Foreign-sounding names get fewer callbacks, fewer interviews, and lower salary offers. Accents affect how competence is perceived, regardless of actual ability. Cultural differences in communication styles are interpreted as lacking leadership potential rather than as different communication preferences.

The lack of diversity in leadership creates self-perpetuating cycles. When decision-makers are overwhelmingly from similar backgrounds, they unconsciously prefer candidates who remind them of themselves, who communicate in familiar styles, who fit comfortable cultural patterns. This isn't usually malicious—it's human nature to be most comfortable with familiar patterns. But the result is barriers for people from non-traditional backgrounds, even when explicit discrimination is absent.

The absence of role models and mentors compounds these problems. When foreign-born professionals look at leadership and see nobody who looks like them or shares their experience, it sends a message about who belongs at that level. When they lack access to mentors who understand their specific challenges, they must navigate obstacles without the guidance that privileged peers receive automatically through family connections and cultural proximity to decision-makers.

Information asymmetry advantages those with insider knowledge. Children of professionals grow up absorbing corporate culture, networking norms, and communication styles that others must consciously learn as adults. They have family connections that open doors and provide guidance. They attend schools with better resources and better counseling about career pathways. These advantages are invisible to those who have them but create enormous barriers for those who don't.

### **The Institutional Changes Needed**

Creating genuine equal opportunity requires institutional change beyond individual effort:

**Companies must actively recruit from diverse talent pools** rather than relying on referral networks that replicate existing demographics. They must examine hiring processes for bias, use structured interviews that reduce subjective judgment, provide training to mitigate unconscious bias, measure diversity outcomes and hold leaders accountable for progress.

**Structured mentorship programs** must be created that pair foreign-born professionals and others from non-traditional backgrounds with senior mentors who can provide guidance,

advocacy, and sponsorship. Informal mentorship networks advantage those with cultural proximity to leadership; formal programs can partially compensate.

**Cultural competency training** must go beyond diversity awareness to actually develop skills for working effectively across cultural differences. Leaders need to understand how their own cultural assumptions shape their evaluation of others, learn to recognize valuable contributions that may be communicated differently, and develop the ability to mentor and develop talent that doesn't conform to familiar patterns.

**Alternative pathway programs** must be expanded to identify talent from non-traditional backgrounds and provide supports needed for success. Technical training programs, community college partnerships, and apprenticeships that combine work and education—these create entry points for talented people who lack resources for traditional four-year degrees.

**Evaluation processes** must be examined for cultural bias. How are leadership potential, communication effectiveness, and cultural fit being assessed? Are these criteria actually job-relevant or do they unconsciously privilege certain communication styles and cultural norms? Can we develop more objective measures of competence that reduce subjective cultural bias?

### **Educational Institution Responsibilities**

Educational institutions must also change to create clearer pathways from technical training to high-wage careers:

**Guidance counseling** must provide realistic information about return on investment for different educational choices. Not

everyone belongs in a four-year university, and pushing all students toward that path serves neither students nor society. Technical careers must be presented as legitimate, dignified pathways to prosperity rather than consolation prizes for academic failure.

**Community colleges and technical schools** must forge stronger partnerships with industry to create direct pipelines from training programs to employment. When students complete automotive technology programs, they should have clear pathways to interviews at major dealerships and manufacturers, not just a vague hope of finding jobs.

**Financial aid and scholarship programs** must be expanded specifically for technical training programs. If we want talented young people to pursue these paths, we cannot make them financially prohibitive or significantly disadvantaged compared to four-year degrees.

**Career exploration programs** must expose young people to technical careers early, letting them see what these jobs actually involve, what they pay, what career trajectories look like. Many talented people never consider technical careers because they have no exposure and nobody in their networks works in these fields.

### **Community Responsibilities**

Communities must combat negative messaging that discourages talented young people from pursuing ambitious goals:

**Dream-killing must be actively opposed.** When adults tell young people their goals are unrealistic, they may think they're

being protective or realistic, but often they're projecting their own limitations. Communities must cultivate dream-building—supporting ambitious goals while providing realistic guidance about pathways to achieve them.

**Success stories must be shared** so young people see what's possible. When someone from the community achieves professional success, that person should be celebrated and their pathway analyzed so others can follow. Visibility of success creates models that make success seem achievable rather than impossible.

**Mentorship must be normalized** as an expectation rather than an exception. Successful people from immigrant and disadvantaged communities should feel an obligation to mentor the next generation, to share knowledge, to open doors for others. This creates ripple effects that multiply impact exponentially.

**Information sharing must be systematic** rather than dependent on individual connections. Communities must create mechanisms for sharing knowledge about opportunities, programs, strategies, resources—so that access to critical information doesn't depend on who you happen to know.

### **Personal Reflections on Success and Legacy**

Looking back at my thirty-year career, I feel profound gratitude mixed with complex emotions. I'm grateful for the opportunities I received, for the education that transformed possibilities, for the GM career that exceeded my wildest childhood dreams. I'm proud of what I accomplished—the

technical work, the leadership positions, the financial stability that let me support family in two countries.

But I'm also aware that I was one of the lucky ones. For every immigrant who succeeds in corporate America, how many equally talented people fail not because they lack ability but because they lack information, guidance, support, or simply the exceptional persistence required to overcome systemic barriers?

My success doesn't prove the system works—it proves that exceptional individuals can sometimes overcome systemic obstacles through extraordinary effort. That's different from genuine equal opportunity, where similar talents and work ethics produce similar outcomes regardless of background.

This is why I cannot simply celebrate personal achievement and call it a day. The celebration feels incomplete, almost selfish, if it doesn't translate into collective uplift. What good is climbing the mountain if you don't reach back to help the next person up?

### **Living the Legacy**

Retirement has created an opportunity for a new chapter focused on mentorship, guidance, and legacy. The transition from accumulating credentials to sharing knowledge, from personal advancement to collective uplift, from individual success to systematic change.

This book is part of that work—organizing three decades of lessons into something others can learn from, providing guidance I wished I had received, and making visible the invisible

rules that determine success in corporate America for foreign-born professionals.

But the book is just one part. I continue mentoring young people directly, connecting them with opportunities, teaching them to navigate obstacles, and celebrating their successes. I work with community organizations to create systematic pathways rather than depending on individual connections. I advocate for policy changes that would expand access to technical training and create clearer pipelines from education to employment.

I speak to immigrant groups about corporate navigation, to high school students about technical careers, to churches about supporting community youth, to anyone who will listen about the importance of systematic knowledge-sharing to create genuine equal opportunity.

The ultimate measure of my life's success is not what I achieved but what others achieve using the guidance I provided. Did I light bulbs for enough people? Did I share knowledge that enabled others to navigate obstacles more successfully? Did I contribute to creating pathways that make success more accessible for the next generation?

This is how individual success transforms into collective opportunity—by refusing to hoard knowledge, by actively mentoring others, by using whatever platform or resources you've accumulated to help others climb, by measuring your worth not by what you accumulated but by what you contributed.

### **The Dream Lives On**

The dream that animated my life—that impossible vision of working for General Motors that sustained me through poverty, language barriers, cultural obstacles, repeated rejection—that dream was realized. I achieved it. I proved that sometimes impossible dreams come true through patient, persistent effort sustained by faith.

But now the dream has evolved. It's not about me anymore. It's about ensuring that dreams like mine remain possible for others—for immigrant youth arriving in America with nothing but hope and determination, for disadvantaged students told they're not good enough, for talented technical workers trapped in low-wage positions, for anyone facing obstacles that seem insurmountable.

The dream is that talent from all backgrounds has a genuine opportunity to flourish, that systemic barriers are reduced enough that exceptional persistence is not required for basic opportunity, that the next generation faces fewer obstacles than I faced, and that knowledge and guidance are shared systematically rather than depending on fortunate individual connections.

This is the work ahead. This is the legacy worth leaving. This is how we honor the sacrifices of those who came before us—not by simply succeeding individually but by ensuring that success becomes more accessible to those who come after us.

I climbed a mountain from red soil in Ethiopia to American corporate leadership. It was hard. It took thirty years. It required patience, persistence, and faith beyond what should be necessary. But I made it. And now my work is to make the next

person's climb a little less steep, a little better marked, a little more supported.

That's living the legacy. That's the work that matters. And that's why, even in retirement, I remain committed to mentoring, to writing, to sharing knowledge, to lighting bulbs for the next generation.

The dream lives on—not just in my own story but in every young person who reads this book and realizes that their dreams, however impossible they seem, might be achievable through strategic effort, cultural intelligence, and patient persistence. Every person who succeeds using the guidance I provided extends the legacy. Every light bulb turned on illuminates paths for others.

This is how change happens. This is how opportunity expands. This is how exceptional individual achievement transforms into collective possibility. One person at a time, one generation at a time, one light bulb at a time.

The work continues. The journey goes on. And the dream—that beautiful, impossible, persistent dream—lives forever in everyone who dares to believe that their background does not determine their destination, that barriers can be navigated, that with patience, persistence, and faith, extraordinary things become possible.

That's my story. That's my message. That's my legacy. And I offer it to you, dear reader, with the sincere hope that it helps you navigate your own impossible dreams into reality.



## *Author Bio*

*To be written based on any final reflections Dr. Ashenafie wants  
to add*