

From a Village with No Clean Drinking Water to AGD Fellowship Dr. Fesehatsion T. Gebrehiwot's Journey of Resilience and Purpose

In a personal story that starts humbly, spans two continents and includes a drastic career change, 2026 AGD Fellowship candidate Fesehatsion T. Gebrehiwot, DDS, shares why he decided to become a dentist and the motivation and determination that keeps him on this path.



Fesehatsion T. Gebrehiwot, DDS

I was born in a small rural village in Eritrea, East Africa, as the fifth of nine children in a place where life taught lessons early, and survival shaped every decision. We had no electricity, no clean drinking water, and no luxuries beyond the simple blessings of family and community. Our days began at sunrise and ended with the dim glow of kerosene lamps.

In the 1980s, a devastating drought swept across East Africa in what became known globally as the famine

in Ethiopia and neighboring countries. Livestock died, wells dried up, and farmers harvested nothing. Hunger became a familiar visitor. Every family felt the weight of uncertainty, including mine.

Yet, even in hardship, my father saw possibility. He believed education was the only inheritance he could give us that no drought, war or amount of poverty could take away. So, he made a courageous decision: My older brother and I would attend school. There was just one challenge — there was no school in our village. The nearest one was seven kilometers away.

And so, as young boys, we walked the 14-kilometer round trip every day. Before the long trek to school, we helped with farming chores: plowing fields, tending animals, picking dried wood for fire and walking another 2–3 kilometers to fetch water from the nearest well. Then we walked the long dusty road to school, returning home and then working until sunset.

This was our life, day after day — hard, exhausting and often uncertain. But it built something in me I would come to rely on years later — resilience.

At age 20, life took a dramatic turn when I won the U.S. Diversity Visa Program lottery. I left home excited by the possibility but also terrified by the unknown. I arrived in America alone — timid, shy, unsure and deeply homesick. Coming from a large family surrounded by siblings, cousins, uncles and aunties, the silence of my new life felt overwhelming.

I worked hard to adjust, eventually graduating with a degree in engineering from Arizona State University. At the time, my English



The home where Dr. Gebrehiwot grew up.

and communication skills were limited, and engineering felt like a safer choice — a field where I didn't have to speak much or feel self-conscious about my ability to communicate.

After graduation, I accepted a position with Motorola. Holding my first paycheck felt surreal — a moment of pride and validation. I believed I had fulfilled the American dream. Soon after, I scheduled my first dental visit in the United States, expecting a routine appointment. Instead, it became a defining moment. I had heavy calculus, bleeding gums and multiple carious lesions. I walked in unaware of my oral health and walked out with a new awareness — and a deeper reflection. I thought of my father, my hero, who had endured tooth pain in silence because dentistry simply did not exist in our village. That experience planted a question in my heart: What would it take for me to become a dentist?

At the time, I was working full time at Motorola and enrolled in a master's program in engineering. But I couldn't ignore the pull toward dentistry. I researched prerequisites, asked colleagues for advice and decided to take a single biology class "just to see."

That one course changed my entire direction. I eventually started dental school at age 32. It was incredibly challenging — there were days when I questioned my decision and days when people openly told me I was crazy to leave engineering for something so uncertain. But I reminded myself: I came to this country with nothing. I lose nothing by trying for something greater.

Every exam — the Dental Admission Test, Dental Boards Parts I and II — felt overwhelming, but I pushed through each one with determination.

In 2018, I opened a dental practice from scratch in a Dallas, Texas-area community where I had no connections. By then, I had grown comfortable being uncomfortable. I had a deep desire to build a practice rooted in excellence, compassion and meaningful patient care.



Dr. Gebrehiwot at his graduation from the Kois Center.

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At this point in my journey, I knew I needed mentors. Dentistry is too vast and too demanding to navigate alone. So, I sought out the best. Before long, I was averaging more than 300 hours of continuing education annually. I trained at the Dawson Academy, the Resnik Implant Institute and the Kois Center, and I completed programs with Drs. Pat Allen and John Nosti. These world-class mentors shaped my clinical philosophy and elevated the standard of care I aim to deliver.

Through these experiences, I discovered that lifelong learning wasn't just part of my profession — it was part of my identity. This commitment naturally led me to pursue the AGD Fellowship award — which I hope to receive this summer at AGD2026 — and eventually AGD Mastership. These goals make sense: They align perfectly with my belief that my patients deserve the very best version of me.

Today, living my best reality means serving patients with empathy, guiding those who fear the dental chair and inspiring young dentists — especially immigrants and first-generation students — to believe in the power of their stories. It means honoring the sacrifices of my parents, the challenges of my past and every blessing of opportunity that shaped my journey.

From a village with no electricity to becoming a leader in modern dentistry, my story is a testament to what is possible when determination meets opportunity. Sometimes, all it takes is a glimpse of a dream. The rest is courage. ♦



Dr. Gebrehiwot and his daughter EriBella.



Dr. Gebrehiwot at a 10K race in 2025.