

masthead

[Home](#) • [Calendar](#) • [People](#) • **March 4, 2004 • Volume 12 Number 12**
[Forum](#) • [Archive](#)

Helina Teklehaimanot '05, the 2004 Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship winner, at right, was joined by her sister, Wudassie '03, at the Feb. 17 scholarship banquet. (Photo by Suzanne Camarata)

Parents an 'Inspiration' for MLK Winner

War and separation only strengthened bonds of Teklehaimanot's family

By Stephen Gawlik
Staff Writer

They could not make it to Boston College last week to see her moment of glory, but Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Scholarship winner Helina Teklehaimanot '05 knew her parents were supporting her from afar. The few hundred miles separating them were meaningless compared to the distance they had already covered together.

"After everything we have been through," said Teklehaimanot, "they are my inspiration."

Teklehaimanot's family came to the United States from Ethiopia, but the bittersweet story of their immigration took a full nine years to fully develop. Along the way, she had to endure a long separation from her father while adjusting to a new country, and culture, that was not always hospitable.

So when Teklehaimanot received the MLK award at the annual Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Banquet, held Feb. 17 in the Lyons Hall Welch Dining Room, she readily gave her parents full credit for making her achievement possible.

"They gave up so much," she told the audience. "In everything I do I keep their sacrifice in mind."

The Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship award, which provides 75 percent of senior year tuition, is presented each year at Boston College to a junior who reflects King's philosophy in his or her life and work. Each candidate submits an essay on the impact of King's ideals on his or her life. Finalists are evaluated on academic performance and their extra-curricular and service activities.

Teklehaimanot and the other 2004 scholarship candidates, Makaine Lozandieu, Shenora Plenty, and Rakiya Watts, were honored at the Feb. 17 banquet. Rev. Allen Dwight Callahan, a Baptist minister and former BC Theology faculty member now teaching at Seminario Teologico Batista do Nordeste in Brazil, was the featured speaker. University President William P. Leahy, SJ, and the 2003 MLK Scholarship winner Roderick Carey also offered remarks.

Helina's mother, Salelesh Abebe, first came to the United States in 1990 to earn a doctoral degree in public health at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, leaving her two daughters and husband, Teklehaimanot WoldeMichael, back in Ethiopia. [It is customary in Ethiopian tradition for the children to take on their father's first name as their last name and for females to keep their maiden names even after marriage.]

But when Ethiopia's long-running civil war flared anew shortly thereafter, Helina and her sister Wudassie - who graduated from BC last year - went to join their mother. It was not expected to be a long stay.

Circumstances changed, however, as the aftermath from the conflict in Ethiopia continued to simmer, exacerbated by the effects of widespread drought and famine. Helina and her mother and sister were able to extend their stay in the US. Due to a variety of complications, her father was unable to join his family, a separation that wound up lasting nine years.

"We talked on the phone and eventually were able to e-mail him, but we didn't see him for a very long time," said Helina.

Her father absent, Helina took a large measure of inspiration from her mother, Salelesh, who often had to confront prejudice as a single African mother with two daughters and a distinctive accent.

"It always got me so angry to see people disrespect my mother," said Helina. "But she always taught me to how to deal with it - and not to let it bother me.

"When you don't have the traditional nuclear family like everyone else, it starts to have an effect on you as you internalize some of it."

For this and other reasons, Helina said, she had a hard time adapting to some aspects of life in the US.

"My mother and sister were the only people who understood our situation," she said. "So we were very close."

Eventually Salelesh completed her doctorate and was able to work in the public health field for the state of Maryland. In the summer of 1999, the family was finally reunited when Helina's father was able to leave Ethiopia and move to the US.

Although they had sent photos of each other back and forth, Helina recalls that she didn't immediately recognize her father upon seeing him for the first time in nearly a decade.

"When I saw him it was surreal. But I know it was very difficult for him, too. The last time he saw us we were very young."

With Wudassie preparing to head to Boston College that fall, the family spent as much time as possible together catching up during the summer.

"We were always together, very tight knit," Helina said.

That feeling of closeness has stayed true for Helina, even when she followed her sister two years later to BC.

A political science major in the College of Arts and Sciences, Helina hopes to study political science in graduate school. She is particularly interested in exploring the direct impact of government policies on people's lives.

Helina serves as director of the Black Student Forum public relations committee and also chairs the group's political and academic affairs committee. She is a member of the Jenks Leadership Program and works as a tutor at the Gardner Elementary School in Brighton.

"Kids teach you patience," laughed Helina, who spends two afternoons per week at Gardner. "After I've had a difficult day they help keep it all in perspective." •

[top of page](#)