

Karim Degal's Story



My name is Karim. I am 19 years old turning 20 this year. I was born in Ethiopia and I contracted polio when I was 2 years old. I have a brother who was a year older than me, but I was the only one in the family to get it. I was not treated differently as a kid, by my family or the general community, because of my disability. During the mid 1980's when I was born, the majority of kids contracted polio. Most of the children were more severe than me.

I was born in a bush and we lived with my grandma. There were 5,000 or 6,000 people in the community. My family was poor because my parents worked on a farm. I remember back when I was in grade 3 or 4, most of the kids were walking with sticks or had some sort of special shoes. However, I was walking in normal shoes but because my legs are different lengths, I tended to wear out shoes very quickly. I needed new shoes at least every six months.

The good thing about it was the community support. If I was walking around the village and I got tired, a friend or some long distance cousin would piggyback me all the way home. I sort of liked that. But I think my brother was a bit jealous because he had to walk. I couldn't run like other kids. I couldn't play soccer like the other kids. I couldn't climb trees. And most of the games we played to entertain ourselves such as chasing each other and rolling tyres was a bit tough for me. I was often just laying back and watching. That's probably why I tend to talk a lot. If I found an adult who was doing nothing, I would probably sit there and ask them what they are doing.

Treatment in Ethiopia was being offered by the Cubans, who were providing aid in the area at the time. I had the option of being sent to Cuba for treatment but Mum was hesitant to let me go. She said it would be better if I stayed with the family and that I would be supported regardless of what happens. If the condition got worse, then she believed that God had chosen this way. She was religious so we just had to live with that.

My parents came to Australia as refugees and applied for my brother and me to be brought over from Ethiopia. But before I could go, I had to go to the capital city for medical tests, which was pretty far away. Taking a bus there was expensive. I had to travel to the hospital about 5 times and every single time I went in, they did exactly the same thing - they tapped me on the knee, asked a whole lot of questions, and said I could go back home. Being a third world country, the system is crazy. You had to be rich, you got bribes or you worked for the government. It was only after I left that I started getting treatment for my polio.

So I arrived here in 1994 and went to the Royal Children Hospital. That's where I met Dr Mark O'Sullivan who pretty much did all my surgery and treated me. He did my first surgery when I was in Grade 6, in 1996. In the two year gap I was constantly reviewed by a panel of doctors. I would go into the surgery and would spend the whole day there. This meant Mum had to take the day off from work and that made it a bit difficult as my uncle was studying at the time. Our family structure was very close and everyone supported one another. So if someone had the time, then they would be the one to take me to hospital that day. I remember my uncle getting fines as he parked in the wrong places. Nobody was working because everybody was studying and it was pretty hard to pay off the fines. I remember my family writing letters explaining that because I'd had polio, I had to stay at the hospital for the whole day and couldn't be left on my own because I would be scared by not being able to speak English and being surrounded by a whole lot of white people. On top of that, I was being approached by men who just wanted to touch my leg constantly and tell me to walk and run and do all kinds of strenuous activity.

Before I had surgery, we had several meetings with Dr O'Sullivan who explained to my parents what he was going to do. He explained that he would cut my leg up and break the bone and stretch it out and I would be required to wear these frames constantly. I was pretty down. I was thinking, God, they are going to stretch my bone out – how is that going to work? The drama really started when I left the hospital and I had to physically turn the screws in my leg about a quarter of a millimeter a day by four times a day, so that by the end of a day it was stretched a millimeter. I was freaked out. I couldn't do it for the first couple of days because I was that scared. Then I went back to the hospital and they were worried that the bone might have actually frozen back together again. They said I might have to go back and have another surgery again and cut it again. But I had another X-ray and they said it would be OK but I would have to intensify the turning and do it 8 times a day.

I missed out on quite a bit of school but everyone at the schools I attended - Kensington Primary, Flemington Primary and Debney Park Secondary College - were really supportive and encouraging. They really went out of their way to get me involved in everything, including sports and other physical activities. In Ethiopia I felt like I couldn't do it, and there wasn't that encouragement to get out there and be yourself, to get out there and do it. Studying at Flemington Primary school probably like made me realize that if I put my mind to it, I could do anything. There was nothing stopping me and I shouldn't let Polio become a barrier. I just have to go through it and see what happens. The kids used to ask me why I was limping. Not many of them had heard of Polio before. It was so bizarre because I had to explain to them what it was, when I did not know myself fully what was happening to me. They asked how long I'd had it for and I'd say for as long as I can remember. They asked if I was going to get better. I was not really sure what was going to happen afterwards. Was I going to walk with less limp? Was I going to be able to run now? Was I going to be able to play football? I didn't know. However, I am now able to do more than I could. Before I would walk 500 meters, then I would have to sit down. Now I can walk for miles. I can walk and walk and walk. I get tired because my body is just worn out but it wasn't like it was because of Polio.

I started doing hip hop (a music and dance style) in primary school. I was very musical. I like music and I've liked performing ever since I was a kid. In Grade 6 we had this system where we collected house points and at the end of the week we assembled and read out points to see who was house of the week. Me and a friend of mine decided we would make it a bit entertaining and between us we decided to do it in rap (words spoken to music). That was how it started but I'm still doing it now. I got involved in a show called "Base Anger" through the Footscray Arts Centre. We were playing to sell out crowds and it was publicized everywhere in the media. At that time, I was a mini star! This was a starting point to thinking that I had talent and that I could do this. It led me to writing and producing my own rap instead of using other people's. In Year 10 I got involved in a mentor program and was introduced to a juvenile justice centre and asked to instruct them in hip hop. I now take it to schools and into the community.

My parents told me that I wasn't really going to be able to make a regular income from working in "the arts". I thought I should start concentrating a bit more on school. My parents wanted me to do well because they didn't have the opportunity. At Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE I'm studying Advanced Dip of Bus Marketing. It will allow me to be with people and earn a great salary. I can be out there meeting people, giving presentations and being an entertainer. Maybe I can market my own music. I'm ethnic, I'm young, I'm culturally diverse, I speak 3 languages, and I've been through all these difficulties and overcome them. I bombed out of year 12 but I'm doing something with my life. My parents would have been happier if I'd been able to go to university but I've met a whole lot of great people and everyone is here through choice. I'll probably go university next year to try to increase my salary potential, and there's nothing stopping me, so why not?

There are lots of people who don't understand what polio is and don't understand why I limp. But they do understand that I'm as smart as they are, as capable as they are, can achieve the same things that

they can achieve - but not physically. I think I just really just wanted to prove that wrong. In my social circle, I don't think there's anyone with a disability. In the Ethiopian community*, I've only spotted one or two people who have had Polio and are around my age. We are very similar to the Somalians in cultural values, but we don't speak the same language and are from different tribes. Africans can be very tribal, however, I don't believe in racism.

I would probably like to access a chat room to talk to people my age. Regarding a polio support group, I have the attitude it's good to associate with people that have experienced the same thing as you. From my point of view, when I play basketball, I would like to play with people who have the same ability and not feel someone making allowances for me – a level playing field.

**(there are approximately 7,000 people originally from Ethiopia living in Australia.)*