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NEWS FROM AFAR!

An Interview with Jonathan Star *the* Headmaster, Founder, and Managing Director of Abaarso school of science and technology

By WardheerNews

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Editors note: *No country has achieved economic growth without investing in education. Educating children, particularly through primary to high school prepares them for higher learning and adulthood. It's also one of the most effective ways to spur development. Jonathan Star -an American financier found Abaarso school of science and technology in Somaliland. "with the goal of setting up a great school. Jonathan and his staff of foreigners did not know the local customs, did not speak the language, and were not professional educators." when they first undertook Abaarso school. Fast-forward to the present time, Abaarso sends some of its students to some of the best schools in the world including Harvard, MIT, Georgetown and Carnegie Melon. In Somalia education was always revered. Even through song, education was encouraged. There is a Somali song " Macalinku Waa" that says: " An educator is the Brain of the world, it's he who unveils the potential to explore, invent and create. He is the apparatus to spring awe and wonder to the world. He inspires knowledge that leads to fulfillment and growth." WDN brings you this exclusive interview with Jonathan Star, the Headmaster, Founder, Managing Director of Abaarso. Abdelkarim A. Hassan and Adan Makina have collaborated the interview for WardheerNews.com.*

WardheerNews (WDN): Mr. Jonathanr Starr, we are delighted to welcome you to WardheerNews.com, however, before we delve into the bulk of the interview, could you please share with us a brief background history about yourself ?

Jonathan Starr: Thank you, I'm happy to be doing this interview. I am an American who graduated from Emory University and was awarded Summa Cum Laude (highest honors) in Economics and Phi Beta Kappa. Following college, I had a career in finance that peaked when I founded and led Flagg Street Capital, a private investment firm based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. During that time I also sat on the board of directors of a publicly traded US

company. In 2008 I began working on the plans for [Abaarso School](#) and I moved to Somaliland in 2009 to start Abaarso's operations and head the school.

WDN: What inspired you to come up with the idea of establishing a school in Somalia, and specifically, what attracted you to Somaliland?

Jonathan: My interest in Somaliland originally came from my uncle, Billeh Osman, who is from Erigavo. While Billeh has lived in the US since I was young, he often spoke of his home country. Eventually I decided it was time to see what Somaliland was all about. My visit in 2008 was a powerful experience; before I left I had committed to launch a school. I



felt it was a wonderful opportunity to make a special contribution to the world. Now, having completed our 6th year, I am immensely proud of what our students and staff have accomplished.

WDN: How has the community reacted to the school, and what are the challenges you confronted while establishing the Abaarso school of science and technology?

Jonathan: The first several years we faced tremendous challenges that had nothing to do with building or running the school. The challenges came from a few bad people who decided to spread nasty rumors about me, our foreign teachers, and even Abaarso's students. Since the local population had very little experience with foreigners, many people believed the stories they heard without bothering to check the facts.

Fortunately, the local population eventually came to understand that Abaarso was doing a great service to society and that those spreading these rumors were doing so for their own selfish motivations. They learned that I had donated a half million dollars of my personal wealth, and was working 90 hours each week without any pay, for nothing more than the good of the school and its students. They saw that the teachers were working long days and only receiving volunteer salaries. Mostly, they saw that their children were getting a world-class education, not only academically, but also in how to be good people. They learned that Abaarso taught values consistent with the religion and culture. For example, Abaarso's policies on cheating are as tough as anywhere in the world because we are focused on teaching ethics. Similarly, we place a high value on charity, including taking care of orphans. Abaarso students volunteer teach at the Hargeisa Orphanage 3 days per week and operate a school for the local children in Abaarso Village 5 days per week.

Now, with the truth known, Abaarso enjoys strong support from Somalis in the local village, across Somaliland, and around the world. The Ministry of Education just gave an award to the school and one of our students, and we have a Board of Trustees that includes many of the most respected Somali men and women in the country. In addition, Somalis in the US are opening their homes to our students currently studying in America.

WDN: What kind of curriculum do you use in Abaarso, and are there any schools (international sister schools) that help you with the curriculum and other needed resources?

Jonathan: Abaarso is based on an American curriculum of kindergarten through 12th grade. I stress that our curriculum is K-12 because even though the school is 7-12, we make sure to start with the core fundamentals of primary school. Abaarso is currently in the process of gaining accreditation from the New England Association of Schools and Colleges, one of the American accreditation bodies. At this time we are a “candidate” school for accreditation and we are going through a lengthy process to meet their standards. As part of this process, we hosted a visitor from the association who gave us a tremendous amount of useful feedback in a detailed report about how we can improve across all aspects of the school.



In terms of our relationships with other schools, we enjoy excellent connections to numerous US boarding schools as well as several top schools in Africa. In fact, I just came back from a conference hosted by the African Leadership Academy that included several excellent African institutions.

WDN: What measures do you take to ensure disadvantaged children are accepted and are not left out at Abaarso?

Jonathan: The ideals of charity and giving back to your community are core to the principles with which we manage Abaarso. Students are aware that Abaarso was founded through the generosity of others and that they too are expected to give opportunities to those who are more disadvantaged in their own community. This is why teaching at Hargeisa Orphanage and running classes for Abaarso Village students are both so essential to the Abaarso experience.

While Abaarso School needs tuition paying students to survive, each year we take top students from the orphanage at no tuition charge as well as top students from the village at a reduced fee. In addition, many of the top performing government school students in the country study at Abaarso at no charge or a significant discount. If a family can pay then we expect them to contribute all they can, but for those top performers who truly can't afford the fees, we have gone out of our way to make sure they can enter the school.

WDN: Where do you get the school teachers and how do you fund running the school?

Jonathan: Abaarso receives a large number of teacher applicants each year from countries all over the world. From there we go through an intense process to make sure the ones we hire are ready for the substantial challenge ahead of them. Because we teach in English, most of our teachers tend to come from the US, Canada, and UK, however, we have had teachers from numerous other countries. In addition, our Arabic and Islamic classes are taught by an Egyptian teacher.

Abaarso's peer schools around the world run at \$20,000 or more per student per year. Our school runs at under 10% of that cost because the faculty and I essentially donate our time. So, in a way you can consider our largest donors to be our foreign faculty, with their donation not in money but rather in work. We do charge \$1,800 in tuition to local students, which is essentially our operating costs, and expect everyone to do their best to pay that amount. That might mean calling relatives around the world for support, in which case we are hopeful that their relatives can see the great value in an Abaarso education. Fortunately, that seems to be happening as most students are now attaining these funds.

Beyond school fees, we fundraise to help support the costs of running the school, improving the school, and providing financial assistance to those talented students who need it. We have had some generous Somali donors such as MSG, Dahabshiil, and Mustafa Jama, however the vast majority of our fundraising has come from the finance industry, particularly in New York City. In addition to private donors, we were thrilled to receive a grant from American Schools and Hospitals Abroad (ASHA) for the expansion of our facilities. That construction is going on today and should be completed before the end of 2015.

WDN: What are your admission criteria and since the school accepts a limited number of students, how challenging is executing such policies in a country where the need is so great and resources so scarce?

Jonathan: A few years ago we changed our starting year from Grade 9 to Grade 7. Our admissions for Grade 7 starts with an entrance exam that is open to anyone that has completed Grade 6 and meets our age criteria. From there we accept the top students pending their coming up with the necessary fees. As I've mentioned, we make exceptions on fees for top students who truly cannot come up with the money. This of course includes those coming from Hargeisa Orphanage.

This year we only had room for about 10% of those that took our entrance exam. We certainly wish there was a way to serve everyone, but that is unfortunately not realistic with just one (1) school. If we were to accept everyone then we would be sacrificing our quality.

Many people don't know this but Abaarso has students from every region of Somaliland as well as a number of students from Somalia. Students from Mogadishu and Puntland have been welcomed into the community and are treated with the respect they deserve.

WDN: The education sector in Somalia lacks strong oversight which makes it possible for many unregulated mediocre schools to be established for the sole purpose of for-profit. How would you rate the private education sector in Somaliland and what makes Abaarso different?

Jonathan: The data we attain from our own entrance examinations makes clear that there are major quality issues in the local education systems. This shows up both in students' extremely weak fundamentals and their lack of critical thinking skills. What is even more concerning to me is the rampant cheating going on at all levels.



One can think of redeveloping the education system as a 2-step process. Step 1 is getting students to school. With all the government and private schools this is clearly happening in the cities. Step 2 is the quality of education delivered at those schools. With Step 1 complete it is now time to focus here.

In terms of for-profit vs. government schools, the issue really comes down to the quality of people running each specific school. For example, the for-profit Young Muslim's Academy clearly has a positive school culture not found in many other schools. At the same time, the government school Qudac Dheer has produced several of the best students to come through Abaarso. So in the end it comes down to individuals executing on their job and putting the proper love and attention into their school.

From the start Abaarso has been focused on delivering the highest quality of education at a price that Somali families can afford. This focus on quality meant fighting for a high standard not otherwise seen in the country. Establishing a high achieving culture was an extremely difficult task, but now our students are accustomed to it. Students entering Abaarso learn valuable lessons from their older peers, such as how to develop their thinking skills and becoming tenacious while also maintaining one's integrity.

WDN: Abaarso sent some of its students to some of the best schools in the world including Harvard and MIT. Can you share with us some of these milestones and what is particular about Abaarso school in its pursuit of educational excellence?

Jonathan: At this point Abaarso students have earned scholarships to Harvard, MIT, Amherst, Georgetown, Carnegie Melon, and numerous other great universities. I mention those ones in particular because Harvard is perhaps the most famous university in the world, MIT is the top engineering school, Amherst is often ranked in the top few liberal arts colleges, Georgetown top for foreign service, and Carnegie Melon best in computers. Getting accepted to these schools was quite an achievement for Somali kids growing up in Somaliland without foreign citizenships. In total we now have approximately 60 students continuing their education internationally, the vast majority in the US. Other countries our students are studying in include Japan, China, Germany, Qatar, S. Africa, Kenya, and Costa Rica.

Abaarso's success can mostly be tied to our school culture and our faculty. Our students believe they can change their lives and ultimately improve their country, and that gives them tremendous motivation to improve themselves. They know that short cuts and cheating don't work in Abaarso so they drop those destructive behaviors in favor of tenacity, discipline, and critical thinking. Our faculty then provides them the educational support and guidance that any teenager needs if they are to properly develop their minds.

WDN: How many students are accepted to Abaarso per year and do you plan to expand the number of students admitted to Abaarso?

Jonathan: Our 7th Grade class will take in about 48 students each year. While the demand for Abaarso would enable us to expand to a much larger school, we do not plan to make our grades bigger. The reason is simply one of quality. Abaarso's model is not designed to be running a school for thousands of students.

WDN: Are there any specific programs catered to attract to educate girls and if so what can you share with us on such programs?

Jonathan: For years we had trouble attracting girls to Abaarso, with many times more boys applying than girls. It seemed that parents were afraid to let their girls leave the home. However, the outstanding performance of Abaarso girls has gained a great deal of attention and

showed parents that in fact the school is a wonderful place for their daughters to turn into strong, ethical women. Abaarso girls are now thriving both at Abaarso and around the world, with several even winning awards for their performance at US schools. Accordingly, many parents who were once worried about letting their girls come to Abaarso are now the school's strongest supporters.

In embracing the Somali and Islamic cultures, we have built our girls facilities that allow them to grow while being protected from outsiders and boys. Abaarso girls have their own large walled-off area of campus that is secure from male students. This separate area includes their dormitories, bathrooms, and a sports compound that has private football and basketball courts. Abaarso girls also have their own cafeteria.

We are pleased to report that our new classes have as many girls as they do boys. In fact, the increase in the female student body has led us to build an additional 10-room dormitory within the girls' section of campus as well as 6 new rooms for female staff. In addition, we are pleased that many of the most respected people in the country have trusted Abaarso with their daughters. People like Mohamed Hashi Elmi, Dr. Hussein Bulhan, Eng Rashid Buffalo, Sheikh Mohamed, and many more.

WDN: Do you foresee Abaarso School of Science and technology transforming itself into a higher learning institution such as Abaarso University?

Jonathan: It is good that you ask this question because there is some confusion out there in which people believe we are already running a university. They believe this because there is a university in Hargeisa using the *Abaarso* name as well as a logo with similar colors. We are making no judgments about that university and we wish all educational institutions the best of luck, but we do need to clearly state that we are in no way connected to the funding, management, or operations of that university. One cannot meet with us by going there nor should someone try to talk to them by coming to Abaarso.



While at this time we do not operate a university, it is a matter to which I have given a great deal of consideration. Somaliland already has a lot of universities, so there is no point in starting a new one unless we are confident that we can do something different and better. We are working on doing just that, but at this point I can't say for sure when it will be ready.

WDN: Since you established Abaarso school of science and technology , what are some of the lessons learned?

Jonathan: I could fill a book with the lessons I've learned in establishing Abaarso, mostly because the first four years put us through more injustices than I thought I would see in my entire lifetime. The faculty and I had moved across the world to assist Somali children, and on top of that I had donated a half million dollars. One would think we would be embraced for this or at least left alone to do our work. Unfortunately some unethical individuals instead tried to undermine our efforts. At that time all kinds of hideous things were said and written about us, often from people who'd never even met us and had only heard false rumors. Our students would go home to Hargeisa or Burao and have people who knew nothing but rumors tell them that they are being missionized. If these people knew anything about the school they would have seen that we have a mosque on campus and our teachers sign a contract that this is a Muslim school and they won't teach any other religion. Unfortunately the truth often spreads slowly so those spreading these lies had years in which they were the only real voice. It got so bad that on one website someone wrote, "if we kill a few of them then the rest will go home."

The main lesson I learned was that nothing is more important for success in a foreign country than creating something of clear value that wins the respect of the general population. Unlike those first few years, the Somali people now understand the value Abaarso provides because they've watched their children benefit. We are thrilled that the population is now firmly behind the school and even provides assistance when we need it. While at times we still hear the rumors, the overwhelming roar of Abaarso's supporters quickly drowns them out. With us now working together with the government and population, Abaarso has tremendous potential in the years to come.

WDN: Thank you

Jonathan: Thank you as well. I appreciate this opportunity.

WardheerNews: wardheernews@gmail.com

Abaarso contact: info@abaarsotech.org