A Foege Fellow at Emory University, Oumer Abdurahman was born in Ijaji, a small town in Western Ethiopia, and later moved to Addis Ababa. Having obtained a Bachelor’s degree in Biology and a Master of Science in Tropical Medicine and Infectious Disease at Addis Ababa University, he joined the Ethiopian Ministry of Health to act as the focal point for multi-drug resistant tuberculosis in Ethiopia. Later, the Ethiopian Ministry of Health asked him to shift to Neglected Tropical Disease (NTD) work because they wanted to bring NTDs to the national level in Ethiopia. For three years, Mr. Oumer was the national director for NTD programs in Ethiopia, focusing on scaling up programs to treat, prevent, and eliminate NTDs, including trachoma, schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminths, podoconiosis, onchocerciasis, and lymphatic filariasis.

Now, Mr. Oumer is a Foege Fellow at Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health. Through the fellowship, he is obtaining a Master in Public Health (MPH) in the Hubert Department of Global Health. According to Mr. Oumer “many leaders in the NTD program and research world are connected to Emory,” which is one of the many reasons he applied for the Foege Fellowship.

The Foege Fellowship is fully funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Each year, 3-4 fellows are selected who are mid-career professionals from developing countries to complete degrees at Rollins. To apply, applicants must be recommended by an Atlanta-based organization, such as Emory, CARE, The Carter Center, or the Task Force for Global Health, Mr. Oumer said.

As the national director for NTD programs in Ethiopia, Mr. Oumer said he had known about Emory because of the university’s involvement with NTD research. He worked with Dr. Matt Freeman, a professor of Environmental Health at Rollins School of Public Health, on several trachoma-related projects in Ethiopia; and also the Mectizan Donation Program, a part of the Task Force, to coordinate Mectizan donations in Ethiopia for NTD control programs. The Task Force later
recommended him for the Foege Fellowship to pursue his MPH at Emory, and he was selected as a successful candidate by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Mr. Oumer said, “you think you know everything, but then you come [to Rollins] and realize you know nothing. It’s beautiful – being able to learn so much.” He added, “[Rollins] is just two buildings, but there is so much knowledge,” Mr. Oumer added.

In discussing challenges that he faced while serving as the national director for NTD programs in Ethiopia, Mr. Oumer said he had limited resources and infrastructure, which made it difficult to get medicines to treat and prevent NTDs to the target communities.

According to Mr. Oumer, another challenge was prioritizing districts by prevalence of NTDs. “You have to prioritize each district by prevalence, and it’s a political game. People think you are giving priority to your own district or region, and you have to show the data to everyone, including the ministers. It was really challenging,” he explained. Mr. Oumer said he experienced many successes as the national director for NTDs program, one of which being trachoma treatment. At the start of his work, there were 11 million people being treated for trachoma. The program expanded to treating 17 million people before he left for Emory, and has now even expanded to more than 40 million.

Despite the challenges in scaling up efforts to prevent and eliminate NTDs in Ethiopia, Mr. Oumer worked tirelessly to bring NTDs to the forefront of public health programming in Ethiopia, and receive grant money from funders, including USAID and the Carter Center. After developing a strategic plan document to present to funders, he and his team received grant money to launch a national prevalence survey to obtain updated data on trachoma, lymphatic filariasis, schistosomiasis, soil-transmitted helminths, and podoconiosis.

As a Foege Fellow at Rollins, Mr. Oumer maintains a connection to his work in Ethiopia through regular communication with the current national director for NTD programs in Ethiopia. He also attends review meetings at the Carter Center for trachoma and onchocerciasis elimination programs that the Carter Center supports in Ethiopia and other countries, as well as conferences around the United States. In 2016, he had the opportunity to attend the NTD NGO Network’s conference in Washington, DC, as well as the American Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene’s conference in 2015 and 2016, in Philadelphia and Atlanta, respectively.

Being a Foege Fellow at Emory has allowed Mr. Oumer to obtain his MPH and stay actively involved in NTD research and programming. Mr. Oumer completed his degree in May 2017, and will be starting a PhD in Infectious Diseases, with a focus on trachoma control and prevention, at the London School of Tropical Medicine and Hygiene.

“You think you know everything, but then come [to Rollins] and realize you know nothing. It’s beautiful – being able to learn so much.” – Oumer Abdurahman

Oumer Abdurahman at Emory University with President Jimmy Carter. (Photo: Oumer Abdurahman)