

PRINCIPAL
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STANDING

ALL

David Omasombo and **Chiwer Mayen** redefine what it means to work hard, all the while giving back to the city that shaped them

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Chiwer Mayen '26,
in the foreground,
poses with teammate
David Omasombo '26
in Alumni Gym.

FOR LEWISTON

DAVID OMASOMBO '26

& CHIWER MAYEN '26

have shared many basketball courts across their young lifetimes, including historic Alumni Gym, but the first one stands out in their memories for being the worst, in a technical sense. The surface was uneven, the rims inconsistent, and, most of the time, there were no nets.

“Terrible,” says Mayen. But at Lewiston’s Hillview apartment complex, it was a gathering place for the community, which made it a great place to be introduced to each other and develop a passion for hoops.

“Thirty kids on one court, 30 kids on the other court,” says Mayen, a sociology major.

“Just pack it and play basketball,” adds Omasombo, also a sociology major.

Omasombo would have been around 11 years old and Mayen 12 when their worlds first collided at the Hillview apartments, and both had already been on long journeys just to get to those basketball courts.

Omasombo was born to Congolese parents in a refugee camp in Tanzania. He arrived in the United States in 2010 via Indianapolis, as part of a church asylum program, and then lived in Nashville. Both American cities were tough on the young Omasombo.

“Back home, America is often described as the ‘promised land,’ like in the Bible,” Omasombo says. “But I didn’t know any English and I experienced a lot of bullying. It was hard to make friends as the little African kid in the group who dressed differently and spoke Swahili.” Omasombo spent long hours in Nashville working with his second-grade teacher Tee Hassold, learning English in one-on-one sessions after school.

Mayen was born in Jackson, Mississippi, to parents who had come to America from South Sudan. He lived in a house in Jackson built by Habitat for Humanity until he was in third grade. It was, he remembers, a great home, but not a great area. “The house had bars on the windows, and I mostly stayed inside,” Mayen says. “At the time I didn’t realize why, but it was for my own safety.” That’s when his father, who raised him and his sister

mostly alone, moved the family to North Carolina. They stayed with family friends for about a year. Then Mayen’s father heard about opportunities in Lewiston, where there was a growing South Sudanese community. His family drove north to Maine and eventually moved into the Hillview complex.

In Nashville, Omasombo’s father had also heard about the growing community of African refugees in Maine and felt Lewiston would be a better fit for his family. That kind second grade teacher, Tee Hassold, helped Omasombo’s family raise funds to move north. “All 10 of us drove to Maine in 2012 in a 16-passenger van with all of our belongings,” Omasombo says. “Thanks to my teacher and the generosity of the community, we were able to move to Lewiston. I still keep in touch with Mr. Hassold. He is such an amazing human being.”

He was 10 when he arrived in Lewiston. After his first year at Longley Elementary, the Omasombo family moved to the Hillview apartments, and he enrolled at McMahan Elementary. That’s when the two boys met on the basketball court. The memory is fuzzy but Omasombo is pretty sure about one thing.

“I think my first impression of Chiwer was that he was a giant,” says Omasombo.

Mayen's parents' South Sudanese heritage is in the Dinka tribe, some of the tallest people in the world, and he is no exception. Today he is the tallest player on the Bobcats, standing at 6 feet 9 inches. Omasombo is the shortest player on the team, a full foot shorter than Mayen. But Omasombo had an edge in terms of basketball experience when they met. Growing up in the refugee camp in Tanzania, Omasombo only knew soccer and laughs about how when he first encountered basketball in America he tried to kick the ball through the hoop. Mayen was even newer to basketball. He hadn't really liked sports growing up, but basketball started to grow on him.

"I was so bad at first," Mayen says. "All I could do was pass the ball. In basketball, height is height, but you really need to have other attributes as well, such as strength. But I love the journey of getting better every day."

The duo didn't share the court in an organized setting until they attended Lewiston High School and started playing on the junior varsity team. They both made varsity the next year and, under the leadership of then head coach Ronnie Turner, helped lead Lewiston boys basketball to one of their best seasons in recent memory. "I was tough on them, but Chiwer was great about taking my coaching to heart, and David would text me to open the gym for extra shots at night after games, and then again in the early morning," says Turner. "He would be working on his game at 5 a.m."

"Ronnie was the perfect role model that we needed to hear from," Omasombo says. "He had grown up in Lewiston and knew what we were going through."

Turner, whose mother, Tonya Bailey, is the director of Bates' Student Center for Belonging and Community, also had a sense, a belief, about where this hardworking pair with so much behind them might go next. Men's basketball head coach Jon Furbush '05 hired Turner as an assistant coach in 2021,





and Turner made sure to alert him to the duo. “I had never had any players from Lewiston High School so I am grateful to Ronnie for helping me get in front of those guys,” Furbush says. “I remember watching both of them play and thinking to myself, ‘Maybe we have something here.’”

Mayen played one post-grad season at The Woodstock Academy in Connecticut, so he and Omasombo both enrolled at Bates in fall 2022. They are the first Lewiston High School alumni to play men’s basketball at Bates in five decades, since Bruce Campbell ’76.

Not that Bates was a completely new environment for either of them when they arrived, as Omasombo and Mayen often snuck into Alumni Gym as kids to get shots up. They’d play pick-up with Bates students. “Alumni Gym is where I threw down my first real dunk,” Mayen says. But when they first met, the notion of Bates as a future alma mater was far from their minds.

Now, Omasombo and Mayen are preparing to graduate in May, after making the most (and then some) of their time at Bates. After four years steeped in academics, basketball, internships, community service, jobs, and further friendship, Omasombo and Mayen are well-aware of the example they set for future generations. Mayen was raised

by an immigrant father, trying to care for his son and daughter on his own. Omasombo spent the first eight years of his life in the refugee camp before moving to America. “I didn’t have the privilege or opportunity to go to school and there were very few resources,” Omasombo says. “All we had was family. But that kept us alive.”

What might not seem possible is possible. It’s been done. Here they are.

And yet, when you look at what both of them do in the Lewiston community on top of their athletic and academic pursuits at Bates, it definitely *seems* impossible for anyone to achieve as much as they do. There just don’t seem to be enough hours in the day.

“They redefine the meaning of hard work,” Furbush says. “Some people think they’re working hard, but if they actually spent some time with either of those guys they would quickly realize, ‘Oh, I am not maximizing my day.’”

For starters, both serve as substitute teachers in the Lewiston Public Schools.

“I’ve really enjoyed my time with the students and seeing my old teachers,” Mayen says. “I try to put myself in the kids’ shoes and try to have an impact on their psyche in a positive way.”

Mayen enjoys working with elementary school kids, while Omasombo has worked more with the middle and high schoolers. It’s not always easy, given the challenges in the aftermath of the pandemic, particularly behavioral issues. “I think it helps that the teachers can point to us as examples of people from the Lewiston Public Schools who are doing well. You don’t have to misbehave or fall into the wrong crowd,” Omasombo says.

Omasombo remembers what it felt like when he was in high school. Violence in the community was a problem. So when he was a senior at LHS, Omasombo and a friend of his started an after-school club where young men

could discuss issues impacting their lives and how to address them.

“Our goal was not to fix everything. We just wanted to give the boys in our community something we didn’t have growing up,” Omasombo says. “We talked about leadership and not following the crowd. Most importantly, we focused on staying away from potentially dangerous situations that could alter people’s lives forever.”

In addition to working in the heart of the city, Omasombo is an organic farmer. His dad, whose first name is Omasombo, grew up farming with his father in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The elder Omasombo was able to secure a parcel of land in Lisbon designated for refugees and started OK Community Farm. “My dad is an inspiration, getting up at 4 a.m. every day to work on the farm and support our family,”

Omasombo says. “We sell our vegetables down by Kennedy Park. I really look forward to the days that I can go to the farm and help out, working side-by-side with my dad.”

Omasombo is entrepreneurial, giving haircuts and starting a pressure-washing business with his girlfriend. Since eighth grade, when he traveled to Texas with his church group to help with hurricane relief, he’s been deeply vested in community service. Being there for others makes him feel closer to God. He jumps at every opportunity to pay forward the assistance he’s gotten through the years. “I know what it feels like to need help, and not know how to ask,” Omasombo says. “I know what it feels like to feel lost and alone, especially as a kid. I had people step into my life when they didn’t have to, so I feel the responsibility to be that for someone else.”

Mayen is a direct support professional, providing caregiving services to people with disabilities, working in a group home in Augusta. There is also a national shortage in this field, so it’s a job that provides Mayen with a lot of



opportunities. As a junior at Bates, he worked overnights, sometimes going directly from basketball games to the group home. He isn't doing that anymore, but still works long hours.

He doesn't mind. "Working as a direct support professional can be hard but it is amazing, eye-opening work," Mayen says. "I love the individuals I work with. One client I work with is a huge fan of *Walker, Texas Ranger*, so we watch that a lot together."

Mayen also connected with the Harward Center for Community Partnerships at Bates, where the mission is "to weave together campus and community for the enrichment of both student learning and public life."

Through Harward's community work-study program, which gives students who receive Federal Work-Study funds the chance to work off-campus and engage with the community, Mayen secured an internship with The Third Place, a network that connects Maine's Black professionals, students, and entrepreneurs to both professional and social opportunities. Mayen collects data on Black professionals in Maine and helps plan various events. It's a job that allows him to work remotely, critical when one is as busy as Mayen is every day at Bates and beyond. "My schedule is very hectic, so it was great to find such a flexible internship through them," Mayen says.

"David and Chiwer are prime examples of what Lewiston is capable of," says Mohamed Awil, associate director of volunteer programs and community partnerships at the Harward Center and leader of the community work-study program. Like Omasombo and Mayen, he is a Lewiston High School alumnus, having graduated in 2014. He coached track and cross country at LHS while Mayen and Omasombo were there as students. "I hope they inspire people to stay in the community," Awil says. "Or come back to help uplift us all. I am excited to see the Bates and Lewiston connection continue to grow."

Mayen is driven by the desire to help his dad and his sister. "My father raised us as a single dad, and I want to give him all the props in the world," Mayen says. "I work so much because I want to provide for him back in South Sudan, and also my sister, who is figuring things out as a young adult in Mobile, Alabama."

Their coach, Furbush, is in awe of Mayen and Omasombo's values. "Chiwer and David are maybe the most unselfish people I've ever met, not just at Bates, but in my life. They rarely put themselves first. They're always thinking, 'How can we give back?'"

After graduation, Omasombo's plan is to go into commercial real estate, while Mayen's goal is to continue playing basketball after college. He's never been to South Sudan and would like to go in the near future and meet members of his extended family. Likewise, Omasombo hopes to one day be able to go to the Congo for the first time. But for now they are making it in America, despite facing obstacles along the way that most people can't imagine.

"This country provides a lot of opportunities," Mayen says. "America is great at times, and it's terrible at times. But the goal is always upward mobility. Struggle and perseverance is a great teacher. You need to go through difficult times to succeed in this world." ●



**“STRUGGLE & PERSEVERANCE are great teachers.
You need to go through difficult times to succeed in this world.”**

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Before they came to Bates, Omasombo and Mayen both played for Lewiston High. Far left, Mayen goes up for a shot. Bottom right, Omasombo pushes through.



GUEST
FOULS
SCORE

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
NCAA TOURNAMENT
1996-1997

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
SWEET SIXTEEN
1997-1998

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
NCAA TOURNAMENT
1998-1999

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
SECOND ROUND
2021-2022

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
SWEET SIXTEEN
2023-2024

WOMEN'S
BASKETBALL
SECOND ROUND
2024-2025

