



Karim Abouelnaga with his mother, Mahassen Elkattan

The American Dream Put on Hold

Adel Abouelnaga and his wife, Mahassen, came to the United States from Egypt in search of a better life. An entrepreneur to his core, Adel worked long hours selling souvenirs at street fairs. Eventually, he opened his own shop at a prime location in midtown Manhattan. The couple was living their American dream: a successful business, five boys ranging in age from 16 to 1, and a comfortable apartment they owned.

Their life, however, was about to change. Adel was diagnosed with lymphoma. He died nine months later. The store was the family's sole source of income, but Mahassen couldn't run it and raise five boys on her own. She was forced to close the business, and sold off the inventory to pay for the funeral.

With no life insurance to help the family make a transition, life became a struggle. The family sold their

home and moved into a small two-bedroom apartment. The three oldest brothers share a small room dominated by their three beds; Mahassen and the two youngest children sleep in one bed in the other.

The older brothers are the family's primary breadwinners. When not in school, they work to support their mother and younger siblings. When she's not home cooking, cleaning and managing the household finances, Mahassen works part-time in a public school.

It's been three years since Adel died, and the family is doing better. Moez, 19, attends a city university and plans to start his own business. Karim, 18, maintained a 4.0 GPA in high school and attends college on scholarships he earned. Monzer, 17, a high-school senior, has his sights set on an opera career.

"We were forced to grow up sooner than most kids," Karim says. "But we're going to make it."

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