

Assefa deGiffe

Interviewed by Joel Perea and Audrey To

My name is Assefa deGiffe. I was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in 1968, so I'm not an elder, but I've had a lot of experiences to share. I came to this country in 2006 because I had a stroke, so some things I don't remember very well. I would like to say 'God bless America' because I am living a happy life here in Boston.

When I was a child, I lived with my mother, Tsegy, and my father, Abebe deGiffe. However, my father lived with us off and on and for short times. So I really lived mostly with my mother. I am the oldest of six children, and my siblings names are Getu, Kasu, Hana, Solomon and Futsum. We moved many times when I was a child, living in different neighborhoods of the city of Addis Ababa. The area where we finally settled was called Zeneberk. There were no apartments or big buildings — it was all small houses.

I liked my neighborhood. People were poor but the important thing was that they were together. It was a community. People often got together to celebrate holy days — those were special. We celebrated national holidays like the new year, Mezkete, Tikemet, etc. These were the main holy days when would always get together.

Both of my parents worked. My mother worked as a homemaker in a foreigner's house, and my father was a very good mechanic. I learned discipline, respect, and other good things, especially from my mother. She had rules to keep me safe, so she would give me a curfew, and if I didn't respect it — if I broke the rule, — she would give me a punishment of not eating my dinner. Or, I might even get *some strikes*. But, that was to keep me safe. She was really a very kind and generous woman.

I went to elementary school through eighth grade at the Abuna Basilios school. It was a

public school for both boys and girls and it was very close to my home. Then I went to high school in Ayertina. In high school I liked languages, so I studied English and my native language, Amharic. In fact, I wanted to be an author when I was young. Even when I was a child, I was writing in Amharic.

When I was young, I used to play football, which is what we call soccer. We used to play in the forests and the hills around my neighborhood. There was no basketball court, so I spent my time playing in the woods. Now I like to watch baseball.

I had many friends, but my best friend when I got to high school was Showel Tessima. He is my best friend from when I was in high school, and he is still my friend today. One time he came to the United States for training, and he came here to Boston to visit me. I was very happy to see him at that time. He came with one of our old friends who lives in Atlanta. His name is Solomon Tapara. I was so happy during their visit. God bless them both.

One time when I was young I *did* have an adventure. It might be funnier if I told you in my language, but I will try to tell it in English. Once upon a time, me and one of my friends, — I don't remember his name — went into the forest and up to the big mountain. Suddenly, I saw a wild hyena near us. That was unusual. So, my friend and I ran away from the hyena. We went across to the other side of the river to get away from him. We were sitting by the edge of the riverbank, when I looked up and he was there watching us from the other side. Now the river was not wide, and we were scared, so we ran all the way back to our village!

When I was 16 in 1984, my mother died of complications from diabetes. She was only 45 years old at the time, so it was very hard. My father worked away from the city, and when this happened, he didn't come back. But we were fortunate that God sent us a very generous Norwegian man named Inar Lunde. He was a great man. He used to help

us in many ways, and in a way, he almost adopted us. He lived in Norway, but he used to come to Ethiopia to visit us, and he helped us with money and bought us clothes. So all of my siblings were in good condition because of his support, and all of them are successful, so I would like to thank this man for his generosity.

Because of my mother dying so young, when I got out of high school I started working right away. I joined SIM. It's a language school that teaches foreigners how to speak Amharic. There were a lot of foreign missionaries in my country, so my job at SIM was to help them to learn my language so when they went out into the countryside, they could communicate with the farmers. These people were relief workers, and I was young and happy to help them. So I worked in the language school for about a year, then after that I joined the Baptist Mission in Ethiopia. As a relief worker I was a team leader, and after I had a little bit of training by American experts, I became an agriculturist. After that, I worked at ICS (International Community School) as a liaison officer for about 9 years until I came here.

I went to college in my country. While I was working at ICS, I was studying business education. But because of the workload and other reasons, I didn't finish college. When I was young I wanted to be an author, but now I'm more interested in being a businessman or a social worker. What really I mean by a 'social worker' is that I want to help people. I was going to Roxbury Community College taking business courses. And now I hope to continue my schooling.

I am a married person. I met my wife, Tigist, at a cafeteria! We were both there having coffee. So, first we became friends, and then in about a year we got married. I have two children with my wife. She had been married before, so she had one daughter already. We have a boy and a girl and my children's names are Natnalale and Mariamawet. My wife and my children are in my home country now, but I hope to see them here one day.

There has been more than one person who inspired me. My mother is one person who really inspired me in my life. She was a very generous person. She didn't live a long life, but I learned many important things from her. She taught my siblings and I to love other people and share what we have, so I can say that she inspired me. Another person that I admired is Inar Lunde, the Norwegian man who helped us after my mother died. He was also a very generous person, and he made a real difference in our lives. There are a lot of people who have inspired and helped me. Dr. Wolfe is the man who brought me to the United States and saved my life after I had a stroke, so I am very grateful to him, and to my brother Solomon, who I admire very much, too.

I had my stroke in Ethiopia. I was at home sleeping, and when I woke up, I felt strange. So they took me to the hospital. They told me later that I was in a coma for two weeks. My brother Solomon was here in the United States, so he connected me with Dr. Wolfe, and he brought me here. Dr. Wolfe paid for all of my expenses and my medical treatment, and I am alive today because of both my brother and Dr. Wolfe, so I am grateful to both of them.

There are a lot of people who have helped me in my life, and that's why I want to help other people too. When I got out of the hospital here, I went to live with my brother in Quincy for a short time. Then eventually I moved here to Amory Street in October of 2007. Another person who has helped me here is Lebeza Alemu. He is my help nowadays, and he supports me in many things. My stroke has changed all of my day-to-day activities, and because of this, I am very slow and need an assistant to help me. This man is a gift from God, and he is always willing to support me. I am a religious person and he is a very religious person, so I like him, and that is why I say he is a gift from God.

So now I am living at Amory Street and I am happy. I like to support the people here as far as I can. I liked my neighbors when I was in Ethiopia, and I like my neighbors here.

I am living alone, but God is always with me, and these people here are good to me too, so I can say thank you to all of them.

The happiest moment of my life was when I received Jesus as my own savior. It might not be understandable, but after that there was a big change in my life and I became happy.

My wife and children are still in Ethiopia. It is my long time prayer that they will be able to join me here. My wife had an interview at the American Embassy in June, but it was not successful because they didn't send all of the documents for my kids. But we are going to try again, and by the help of God, I think we will be successful.