

## **On their own**

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Ruth Eglash, THE JERUSALEM POST

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When Grace Rodnitzki, Director of International Relations at the Ethiopian National Project (ENP), got word that private donors at the Jewish Federation of the Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania were planning to set up a scholarship fund specifically to ease the financial burden of Ethiopian-Israeli medical or dental students, she immediately set about finding suitable candidates.

"We did a thorough search, called universities around the country and even put announcements in the media," says Rodnitzki. To her dismay, instead of having dozens of potential candidates vying for the \$100,000 offered by the Master-Yanoff Health Education Scholarship, she discovered that there are currently only four medical students of Ethiopian descent in the whole country.

"There are no Ethiopian dental students here either," she adds.

It might seem surprising that nearly 22 years since the first large group of Ethiopian Jews arrived in Israel on Operation Moses and 15 years this week since 14,000 arrived on Operation Solomon, individual successes in the 100,000-strong community are still few and far between.

In fact, far from the second generation striving for success and improving upon the status of their immigrant parents, the pendulum seems to have swung in the opposite direction.

"Today's children have lost hope and see no promise in their future," says Nigist Mengesha, Director-General of the ENP, an Ethiopian-led initiative funded by the Israeli government and donations from global Jewry. "We have to rebuild that hope and show them that they can succeed. If they have no strong feelings for the future then nothing else really matters."

Mengesha and other Ethiopian-Israeli leaders are adamant that this hope has to come from within the community itself.

"We no longer believe that initiatives from outside are working," she continues. "We have to address our own problems. If the community does not take responsibility for itself then it cannot look to anyone else for help."

According to statistics gathered by the ENP, more than 70 percent of Ethiopian families in Israel live below the poverty line and some 40% of working-age families (22-64) have no breadwinner in the family. In education, the data are even more disturbing: 25% of Ethiopian youths do not even complete high school and a shocking 75% of junior high school students perform below the national average.

"This year," says Rodnitzki, "only 17% of Ethiopian Israelis are doing well enough in their high school matriculation exams to get a place in university."

"It is a vicious cycle," she continues, "schools do not have the resources to help Ethiopian students succeed in their matriculation exams. Even if they do pass their exams, their grades are not good enough to get into university and from there to the elite professions."

If there are no Ethiopian doctors, dentists, lawyers or teachers, who will give the community's younger generation hope for the future?

"We did a mapping of the community in the realms of education and employment to determine where the greatest needs are today," says Rodnitzki. "We discovered that the needs are not being met of youth aged 13-18. So over the past year and a half we launched a massive initiative to tackle those issues - helping youth at risk, improving school performance and turning that number around from 17% to 71%."

ELIAS Teke, 20, one of the four medical students who qualified for the scholarship, is ambivalent about his personal success, though he does acknowledge that by becoming one of the few Ethiopian-Israeli doctors in the country he is a positive role model for others in his community.

"I always wanted to be a doctor, to help people in general," says Teke, who came to Israel as part of Operation Solomon. "It has been difficult to get to where I am but not impossible. If you believe you can succeed then you can."

Twenty-nine year old Yafit Tadela, a student of communication at Rehovot's Sapir College, is a little more cognizant of her role as a leader in the community. In addition to trying to better herself through education, Tadela is one of hundreds of Ethiopian-Israeli counselors who work part-time throughout the country with Ethiopian youth at risk at numerous outreach centers run in cooperation with the ENP.

"Our club is open to anyone who wants to come in," says Tadela. "The rules are basic - that they must not damage the property - apart from that we encourage them to learn social skills through friendship games, take art classes and learn new things. They come to us and tell us what they are interested in."

"Centers such as this one cater to low socio-economic families," explains outreach center director Nega Wondemeh, who oversees similar centers in Lod, Rehovot, Netanya, Kiryat Gat and at the Central Bus station in Tel Aviv, as well as this one in Rehovot.

"Most Ethiopian parents here do not sign their children up for extracurricular activities, usually for financial reasons, and at these centers the children do not have to pay.

"This club belongs to the youth; they decorate it and clean it. It is theirs and no one else's," continues Wondemeh as he shows me around the center, pointing out the gym where the young girls in the neighborhood hold an exercise class twice a week and the fully equipped computer room where the teens can do their homework.

"Some of them are even designing a Web site for the club," says Tadela.

THE CLUB is housed in a small Eshkol Payis community center in Rehovot's Milken district and caters to between 40-50 youths on any given night. Tadela estimates that roughly 120 families - most of whom came to Israel on Operation Solomon - live in the neighborhood. However, she said many of the local teens bring their friends from the surrounding neighborhoods. Most of them were born in Israel.

On Sunday and Wednesday evenings, Tadela and her fellow counselors scout the neighborhood searching for bored youth and encouraging them to find something constructive to do or join their ranks. The rest of the week, the club operates from 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. daily.

"When our doors first opened, youth violence and vandalism was on the rise in this neighborhood and there was a growing number of Ethiopian students dropping out of school," says Wondemeh. Those issues were addressed immediately and the clubhouse has attracted many of the troubled youths.

"Many of the families live in cramped apartments and when the children come home from school, the parents tell them to go outside and play. They do not offer them guidance or help with their homework and that is where we come in," he says.

The programs are led 50% by Ethiopian-Israeli counselors, who have a similar background to the youths, and 50% by local professionals.

One of the best ways to reach youths who have fallen out of the educational system, observes ENP director Mengesha, is by telling them, "I also went through what you are going through, my parents also came by foot to Israel and my parents also have financial struggles but look at me, it is still possible to break down the barriers and succeed."

Another of the center's counselors, Aginto Reto, points out that one of the biggest advantages of having Ethiopian-Israeli counselors is that "we can speak Amharic and Hebrew, therefore we can communicate with the kids - most of whom speak Hebrew - and with the parents."

"Many of the Ethiopian-born parents do not understand what their children want," explains Wondemeh. "Their children are very Israeli and speak mostly Hebrew; they do not know much about traditional Ethiopian customs. Many of the parents want to keep

Ethiopian traditions such as respect for elders. This is an area of great confusion and conflict for the children."

Tadela adds: "There is a growing cultural gap between parents from Ethiopia and their Israeli-born children."

"Many of these youth know nothing about their community's history or culture," says Wondemech. "That is one thing that we can give to them at the center. We can tell them about what life was like in Ethiopia. We want them to be proud of their parents and their history. We can also give them the tools to explain to their parents what they want from life. It is very hard for the parents to be role models to their children."

WONDEMECH and Tadela speak enthusiastically about the importance of role models and the handful of Ethiopian-Israelis who have broken out of the immigrant mold, turned their lives around and become successful professionals.

Wondemech, himself a teacher before immigrating in 1994, proudly speaks of his brother, the first Ethiopian-Israeli doctor. He jokes, somewhat bitterly, about the Israeli lady who sees an Ethiopian doctor at the clinic and asks him when the doctor is expected to arrive.

"People put all Ethiopians into one basket, they believe that they all came from the villages and that we cannot be educated. It is not true," says Wondemech.

Tadela recalls hearing somewhere about an Ethiopian-Israeli woman in Hadera qualifying as a dentist.

"There is also a science teacher in Mazkeret Batya," she says.

"We want to give the children role models," says Wondemech. "One question I always like to ask the youth is 'What do you want to be when you grow up.' Most of them answer 'nothing.' I want to prompt them into thinking about possibilities for the future and try to send the message that one has to believe in one's own ability in order to succeed."

Both Wondemech and Tadela agree with Mengesha that the fate of the Ethiopian community lies within its own hands.

"Until now, the Ethiopian people have always been content to sit on the sidelines and let others decide what to do with their children. Now we want to decide for ourselves the future of our children," says Wondemech. "At the center we also provide advice to parents and encourage them to get involved with the school and their children's education. We tell them to ask questions, get to know their child's school principal and to speak to the teachers about their child's progress."

Mengesha, a social worker by trade who came to Israel in 1984 as part of Operation Moses, says it is impossible to measure the success of the Ethiopian immigrants with that of other communities.

"The difference between Ethiopian immigrants and immigrants from the West is that so many things here are a completely new experience for them," she explains. "Many of the Ethiopians who came did not even know how to write in their own language. They had no education, no professions; most had never even sent their children to school before. Our progress is different to that of other immigrants."

She also adds that they have been forced to build their social networks up from scratch.

"In Ethiopia, people lived in the villages and had a social network of family and friends that would help with any problem. The lifestyle in Israel is very different. Families and friends have been dispersed throughout the country, they are no longer living in one house or in one village together.

"In Ethiopia, the strong people helped the weaker people to survive, but here everyone is weak. No one is in a position to give financial assistance to anyone else. All we do now is talk about the status that we have lost by coming here... it is very difficult."

Rodnitzki is hopeful that with the ENP now in active business, things are looking up for the Ethiopian-Israeli community.

"With Operation Promise [the new project to bring the remaining Ethiopian Jews to Israel] now in action, we hope to get further funds for absorption, which will enable us to encourage those on the brink of dropping out of the education system to go back to school, we can work with adults and parents to make a difference in the community and give residents who want to volunteer in the community the tools they need. We really are a finger on the pulse of the Ethiopian-Israeli community and we want to change it from within," says Rodnitzki.

"If you ask me if we are succeeding 100%, we are very far from that," says Mengesha. "But the beginning is getting these organizations working and then slowly, slowly we can have successes."

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