

March 2008



Dear Friends,

I was born in a small country in East Africa, amidst an ongoing war between two countries that lasted three decades. Because of the conflict, there was a continued need for young men and women to serve in the military. Ethiopia and Eritrea were known for using child soldiers, leaving them dead or injured. The government mandated that anyone failing to complete high school would automatically be enrolled into the military. To fulfill the mandate, the educational system became almost impossible to complete, forcing high school dropouts into the military.

With hard work and determination, I managed to make it to the university level. While studying mathematics at the university, I witnessed my high school classmates returning from the front lines of the war with amputated limbs. Troubled, I knew they would be forced back to the front lines unless they successfully completed their schooling.

Resolved to make a difference, I graduated with a major in Mathematics and minor in Education. I completed my two years of mandatory military service by serving as a math and science teacher in one of the military camps. Seeing firsthand the difficulties of the educational system and desperate to save child soldiers from being sent back to the front lines, I started an after-school tutoring program. The success of my tutoring program angered the government, and I was thrown in jail.

My plight was long and arduous. After escaping from jail in Eritrea, I walked to Sudan and was jailed again for not having proper documentation. From Sudan, I worked my way down to South Africa and over to South America. When I finally made it to the United States, I was held in a detention center for immigrants awaiting a decision about asylum in the U.S. Nine months later, I was granted asylum and came to Caritas of Austin in the summer of 2007.

As a client, I was referred to Refugee Social Services where I received case management. Caritas helped me to find refugee health services in the community and apply for Medicaid and food stamps. I was then referred to Caritas' Employment Program. During the assessment of my skills, I shared this story of my journey and my passion for teaching with my case manager. We developed a plan towards self-sufficiency, which included researching teacher certification classes in Austin. With the financial support of Caritas, I began certification classes in January and by September, I will be teaching math once again.

By supporting Caritas you are joining the fight against poverty, hunger and homelessness and making a difference in the lives of those they serve---clients like me. Your contribution will fund a community where there is respect for all, hope for those experiencing poverty and opportunities for self reliance.

Selhadin Zeinu

