

REMARKS FOR 10th ANNUAL ESAI SUMMIT

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THE ROLE OF ETHIOPIANS IN THE DIASPORA IN ENSURING THE WELL-BEING OF ETHIOPIA

I would like to thank members of the Ethiopian Students Association International for inviting me to be a part of your 10th Annual Summit. Congratulations on your organization's success. It speaks well of young leadership and the sharing of brotherhood amongst Ethiopian students in North America. I wish there had been an organization like this one when I was a student in Canada some 15 years ago and was just beginning my journey as an immigrant.

The challenges for Ethiopian students, or, for that matter, any African immigrant, are many. There are educational challenges, financial challenges, and cultural challenges. Some of us have a very poor support system and very little mentorship. So, it is very important to have an organization like the ESAI. The support and positive energy you offer can mean a lot for a lone immigrant student who is new to this country. I have been very impressed looking at your website and seeing the serious conversations you are having. You have a wonderful platform within which Ethiopian students can network, learn, offer mutual support, and connect back to Ethiopia -- physically, intellectually and spiritually. These community-building practices will serve you well in your career and professional growth.

I am honoured to be here to share some of my experiences as an Ethiopian student, a practicing medical professional in Canada, and someone who has reconnected back to Ethiopia.

BACKGROUND EXPERIENCES IN CANADA

Perhaps I should start by giving you some personal background. I am an emergency medicine physician by training. After immigrating to Canada I worked very hard, aimed for excellence, and secured post-graduate training at the University of British Columbia. I then started work as an emergency physician, mentor, and teacher of medicine.

Everyone here has seen “ER” on television, right? That show is a very close approximation of what we do in the emergency room. For those who may not know, emergency medicine deals with acute medical problems -- life-threatening conditions like asthma, heart attacks, trauma from car accidents and natural disasters.

I know you are aware that motor vehicle accidents are one of the most common causes of unnecessary deaths in Ethiopia. A person badly injured in a car crash in Addis can die at the scene of the accident because there is no way to safely transport that person to a hospital. There is no 911 there.

In Canada, on the other hand, a person who has a heart attack has an 80-90% chance of surviving. This is because Canada has an excellent emergency medicine infrastructure. It is an infrastructure that starts outside the hospital. In Canada, there are people trained to do CPR. People can dial 911 and an emergency team will speed them to the nearest hospital where emergency physicians will take care of them. People in North America don't usually die from car crashes, heart attacks, trauma, or acute respiratory diseases like asthma. The life span in North America, therefore, is about 81 years compared to our country where it is about 55.

That's the difference emergency medicine – my specialty – can make in a society, and I'll talk more about how this specialty is developing in Ethiopia in a moment.

After I finished my residency, I felt that I needed to stretch my imagination. I needed to understand the way this country works. I needed to learn about people in rural communities, larger communities and the cities. And, fortunately, I was able to do that. I was able to travel across the vast expanse of Canada and see that Canada does not really look like a country, but more like a continent. It takes you about six to eight hours to travel from one end of the country to the other. It's a big place.

As an emergency physician, I have worked in many different geographical and cultural settings. I worked in the northern Arctic where temperatures are -40 ; I looked after patients in the Aboriginal communities; and learned a lot from their culture. I learned about the challenges of caring for people in remote communities and in colder climates, where hypothermia can lower a persons' body temperature to below 20 degrees. And it was fascinating to work on Cape Breton Island, a part of Nova Scotia that had been populated earlier by African Americans who were loyal to the British during the American War of Independence and fled to Canada. Cape Breton today, is a treasured tourist destination with spectacular scenery and many historic sites. I also worked in Vancouver where the Olympics were just held; and where the Paralympics Games are underway.

Among the lessons I took away from these travels was the extraordinary opportunity that awaits young people like yourselves in this country. When you travel outside Toronto and Ontario, you encounter other worlds. While working in the northern Arctic, in Yellowknife, the capital of the Northwest Territories, I saw patients from around the world who had come to Yellowknife to mine the diamonds and other minerals that lay below the earth's crust in northern Canada. This is just one example of the opportunity that awaits people – even immigrants – who have imagination.

ENAHPA AND SOME TEAM MEMERS

During my years in Canada, I met many people who demonstrated great commitment and love for Ethiopia, and they inspired me. I was privileged, for example, to become a founding member of an organization called, **ENAHPA**, the Ethiopian North American Health Professionals Association. It was established about ten years ago by a group of physicians, nurses and pharmacists who are committed to doing whatever they can to build a health care infrastructure in Ethiopia.

What does ENAHPA do? ENAHPA organizes volunteer medical delegations to travel to Ethiopia to perform free medical and surgical procedures; conduct training programs for Ethiopian health care professionals; and provide educational materials and lifesaving medical equipment, instruments and supplies to hospitals and other institutions. And, through collaboration with international partners, ENAHPA is currently providing leadership on the development of emergency medicine capacity in Ethiopia

ENHAPA's mission, simply put, is to help health care providers in Ethiopia to have the knowledge, technology and support to better serve our people. Our long-term goal is to help institutionalize our programs so that Ethiopians can develop their own capacity to train and teach.

ENAHPA is very close to my heart and I love to talk about it. One thing I like about discussing ENAHPA in Canada is the opportunity it gives me to tell Canadians about the real Ethiopia. The interesting thing is that not too many people in Canada know much about Ethiopia; if they do it's about famine and conflict, but when I talk about ENAHPA, I can tell them about our culture and history, and invite them to help us to transfer knowledge to Ethiopia. Talking about ENAHPA allows me to launch an alternative story about committed Ethiopians who have come together to address our healthcare infrastructure.

Someone who exemplifies what ENAHPA is all about -- its leadership and imagination, and the desire to make a difference -- is **Dr. Tesfaye Mekonnen**, an Ethiopian physician. He was practicing medicine in Addis Ababa in the early '90s when he envisioned the development of emergency medicine infrastructure in Ethiopia.

I was referred to him by a friend, and we have been working together ever since -- having conversations on the Internet, by email, and phone. It has been a highlight of my life to see how he, in Addis Ababa and I, in North America, can advocate for emergency medicine.

After we began these conversations, we found that we had the same vision and that our ideas matched. We now have been working together for the past seven or eight years. What is interesting is that I have never met him! That's what technology can do, right? Recently, I contacted him as he was moving to Atlanta to take a senior position with the Centers for Disease Control. I still hope to meet him one day.

Dr. Tesfaye was the first to say that Ethiopia needed an emergency medicine infrastructure to treat people who are dying from injuries and heart attacks. These are preventable causes of death affecting people in their 30s, 40s and 50s – in the prime of their lives. He had the vision. He was the first to start the training programs; and he was the first to publish a paper on the need for emergency medicine. Through the years, he has worked tirelessly at the grass roots level, trying to make a difference. The partnership that developed first between the two of us and now through ENAHPA, I am glad to say, means that there is going to be a more formalized training program at Addis Ababa University Medical School.

I have learned a lot from Dr. Tesfaye. What he taught me is that we have people with imagination and leadership who would sacrifice anything to make sure that an innovative program is developed, integrated and executed. I find joy and tremendous

satisfaction from the fact that we now see an emergency medicine infrastructure developing in Ethiopia. Hopefully, in the next few years there will be a 911 service with ambulances zooming through Addis Ababa and other parts of the country enabling us to rapidly address health emergencies and save lives.

Speaking of ambulances, the other story that should be told is about **Kivret**, who has been a practicing nurse at Tikur Anbessa Hospital. He has been working to develop a pre-hospital system with ambulances staffed by trained paramedics. He bought two ambulances from Abu Dhabi, and developed a training program for first responders.

I'm glad to say that ENAHPA found him and he found us, and we're working together to implement some specific programs that will train police in basic first aid and first responder protocols. Of course, the big vision is to develop an infrastructure for the entire country.

I should add that many other people have now become a part of the effort to develop this infrastructure – including people at the hospitals, the medical schools, the ministry level, and other stakeholders who are working to develop the program. It is really liberating to see that this is happening in Ethiopia.

Another important ENAHPA member I would like to say a few words about is **Dr. Ingida Asfaw**. He is amazing. He is a cardiovascular surgeon who lives in Michigan and he is the founder and president of our organization. He had a dream to be a doctor and was actually a stowaway on a ship to come to the United States. After he achieved his professional goals, he felt the yearning to give back to his country and that is exactly what he did when he established ENAHPA. Through ENAHPA, Dr. Ingida performed the first cardiovascular open-heart surgery in Ethiopia and has been able to perform other life-saving surgeries as well.

You may not be aware that rheumatic disease is one of the most common causes of valvular problems in Ethiopia. If you don't treat a strep throat infection, you end up destroying your heart. This can happen and it does happen to a lot of kids with this condition, and, in the Ethiopian context, it is a death sentence if not treated. Dr. Ingida Asfaw has done these surgeries, brought donated equipment, and trained medical staff during his annual visits to Ethiopia with ENAHPA volunteers.

Like Dr. Asfaw, ENAHPA team members in Canada are also volunteers. **Dr. Melaku Game**, professor of medicine at the University of Alberta and president of ENAHPA-Canada, ENAHPA's Canadian affiliate, did his medical training as an oncologist in Germany.

Today, he dreams of developing a functioning oncology unit at a hospital in Addis Ababa and training Ethiopian physicians and nurses in oncology care. As you may be aware, cancer is also one of the top killers in Ethiopia. We have poor infrastructure and poor treatment, so you can see there is a lot to be done in that field.

Sharon Ashton, a former banker who now provides her services on a pro bono basis as Executive Director of ENHAPA-Canada, has told me personally that the work she does with ENAHPA is more spiritual, more holistic and more enjoyable than the financial work she did in her career. She plans, runs around, knocks at doors and executes ENAHPA's program on the ground in Addis Ababa. She spends most of her time, at least six to seven months, in Ethiopia.

VOLUNTEERING

At ENHAPA, volunteers are the backbone of everything we do. We recruit our volunteers from the Ethiopian diaspora, Canada, the United States, academic

institutions, health care organizations and more. What all our volunteers have in common is their love for Ethiopia and their desire to make a difference.

This brings me naturally to talking about my own experiences being a volunteer. For me, it is a way of life -- a way of developing a parallel career. I started volunteering when I was in my teens and have been doing so ever since. I recommend it to you today as one of the most satisfying aspects of life. What could be more rewarding than offering yourself to a cause, getting involved in an organization, giving of your time, and sharing your talents? As a volunteer, you build networks of friends and associates, develop the capacity for social trust, and learn about organizational development. You meet great minds as I have done through ENAHPA and my association with other organizations.

One of the organizations for which I served as a volunteer for is the Canadian Network of International Surgery, an organization that is doing work in Ethiopia in surgical education and trauma care. The organization gave me an award for volunteering and I treasure it. Beyond that, though, is the satisfaction that I was able to start a library project that enabled the organization to train physicians to perform life-saving surgery through innovative simulation programs. When I joined the organization, I wanted to learn about how one starts an organization and how one moves from an idea to execution. So, look at what happened there for me as a volunteer – I made a contribution to society, received recognition from my colleagues, and built new skills for myself.

One of the things that I hear from some of my friends, Ethiopians and non-Ethiopians is, “Why should I care, why should I volunteer; I don’t have the time.” Look what happened for me from volunteering! Every bit of knowledge, every connection, every interaction, everything that enhances your psychological, spiritual and intellectual growth is helpful. Please get involved and volunteer for a cause you care about.

ADVOCACY

Going hand-in-hand with volunteering is advocacy. To me, advocacy means being an ambassador for your idea or your cause, having passion for that cause, and getting others to have the same passion.

I knock on doors all the time to ask individuals and institutions -- the University of Toronto, the University of Alberta -- to support ENAPHA. For example, I came to know about a young mother of three Ethiopian adopted kids when I was working in Nova Scotia. I invited her to become a member of our organization and she said yes. She is now a full member of ENAHPA and has just received a donation of medications for Ethiopia worth \$6,000. She will be traveling there with her kids and with the medication. The amazing thing about this lady is that she is taking her three adopted kids -- ages 7, 9 and 12 -- to Ethiopia so that they can volunteer and give back to their country.

And, more recently, ENAHPA's advocacy for emergency medicine has gone beyond the borders of Ethiopia and North America and led to the formation of the Federation of Africa Medical Association. A few of us from ENAHPA got together and hosted a meeting and invited other African countries to come to Addis Ababa to have a conversation about emergency medicine. We said, "Let's talk about regional solutions. Let's talk about how Ghana is developing its emergency medicine, and how Uganda and South Africa are developing their emergency medicine". ENAHPA has taken some leadership in moving the emergency medicine conversation forward in Ethiopia. So, it gives me great joy to hear that a Department of Emergency Medicine has opened at Tikur Anbessa Hospital, and that the first group of residents will be produced in the country in the next few years.

INSPIRATION

My love for both volunteering and advocating for Ethiopia comes from my family. My family has been a huge inspiration for me. My **father** was a student in Canada in the '50s and did his Ph.D. in philosophy. One thing he always challenged me to do is to always give back. He would always say, "after everything is said and done, life would be empty if you don't reconnect with your roots, your spiritual source", and how right he was. I'm glad to have connected back to Ethiopia through ENAHPA; it has been enormously rewarding.

My **grandmother** is over 100 years old and still strong. She is a deeply spiritual person. I recall her saying that walking will make you healthy. She said that many years ago, even before exercise was the "in" thing when it comes to health and well-being in North America. She represents one of the things that I always emphasize: To be successful one has to look after one's health. The critical thing is exercise. And one has to be very careful about what one eats. A lot of the heart attacks I see are because we have too much fat, too much stress, not enough exercise and many of us have developed Borch, you all know what I'm talking about. My grandmother is an inspiration.

My great-grandfather, **Hiruy Wolde-Selassie**, came from humble beginnings and was not trained in modern education, but was able to inspire a generation of Ethiopian writers. He was a writer, a leader in his own right. He was the first to travel to Japan and challenged Ethiopians to model its development agenda by learning from the Japanese. Fascinating! This was in the 1940s. He was self educated and learned how to speak English by attending night school at the embassies. He was ambitious enough to travel outside Ethiopia, and began writing at a very early age. One of his greatest books is actually on Japan, "Japan, the Rising Sun". In it, he describes Japan, its culture and its determination to succeed. The fact that he was a man who did not attend

Harvard or Princeton, who had great imagination, who was self-taught, and who wrote books, speaks volumes. He, too, is an inspiration.

It's interesting that, when I came to Canada, I met a number of people who are Canadian and had the deepest affection and respect for Ethiopia. One of them, **Robert Thompson**, became an inspiration for me. I'll say a few words about Robert Thompson because I've recently established a Robert Thompson Scholarship Fund. And depending on the level of funds we are able to generate, the scholarship will help one or two Ethiopian students to come to Canada to do some short observation courses in emergency medicine or internal medicine.

Who is Robert Thompson? He was a great Canadian who -- believe it or not -- lived in Ethiopia for 15 years, after the Second World War. The Italians had decimated Ethiopia. The intellectuals were eliminated more or less, and there were really no functioning schools at the time. The infrastructure was destroyed. Thompson was one who loved our country, and was a bridge between Canada and Ethiopia. He took more than 600 teachers to populate and develop schools and teach the first generation of Ethiopian students in the late '40s and '50s. He was actually Deputy Minister of Education for a couple of years. He was called, "Mr. Education" in Ethiopia.

When I met Robert Thompson, he spoke and wrote Amharic very well. He always felt that the country's potential lay in its people. To know someone who loves Ethiopia more than ourselves is truly humbling, so I dedicated this scholarship to him and hope that we can celebrate his life and learn more about him. He was truly a bridge, one who respected Ethiopia and Canada.

When he came back to Canada, he became one of the founders of the Social Credit Party. He was a distinguished politician and helped in the formation of Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia. He died a few years ago, leaving a legacy of

deep respect for Ethiopia, its history, its culture, its heritage and its people. I was fortunate to have met him and to have associated myself with him, and now to have formed this scholarship in his name.

Robert Thompson wrote two books on Ethiopia, one was called, “The Military History of Ethiopia”, the other was his autobiography where he writes a lot about Ethiopia. One of the treasures Robert Thompson brought from Ethiopia was a small amount of Ethiopian soil. I remember his wife saying that, “When we die we want this Ethiopian soil sprinkled on our graves”. This is profound sentiment, and I was moved by it. So he is one of the Canadian heroes whom I call ‘Lovers of Ethiopia’.

BOOK PROJECT

One of the things I am working on related to all of this, is a book project. The book is on Ethiopians in the diaspora, heroes more or less, and “lovers of Ethiopia.” My book has allowed me to research many Ethiopians. There are many, many who can enlighten us. **Dr. Zeresanay Alemseged**, who is the Director and Curator of the Department of Anthropology at the California Academy of Sciences, and his colleagues, have made incredible discoveries in the Afar section of the Rift Valley that includes the Lucy skeleton and the Ardi skeleton, much older than 4.4 million years.

Dr. Alemseged was recently interviewed about what it means to him as an Ethiopian to make these discoveries, and he jokingly said, “You know what, it means that all mankind started in Ethiopia and that tourism should be enhanced because we can invite all North Americans and say: You are invited to your home; this is where mankind started.”

He also made a statement that was very instructive, and was speaking as a scientist when he said, “One of the big challenges for Africa is just for us to be objective in our

thinking.” Zeray says that a lot of our problems will be solved if we do that, and he’s right.

And then there is the story of **Solomon Assefa**, the MIT-trained Ph.D. in electrical engineering, who with a couple of his fellow students from Africa, co-founded the MIT-Africa Internet Technology Initiative. It is a program that sends MIT students to teach Internet skills to African students and teachers. And, while focusing on the classroom experience, it incorporates community projects and entrepreneurship seminars into the curriculum.

Assefa says that the MIT initiative taught him how to “come up with an idea and initiate it, how to organize, how to create contacts and interact with professors and foundations, how to write proposals.” And, for his effort, Assefa attracted the attention of MIT President emeritus, **Paul Gray**, who mentored Assefa’s team and supported the project financially.

We have much to learn from Assefa’s story; it is a blueprint for harnessing the human imagination to bring something new into the world – whether it is a new consumer product or a new health care infrastructure.

We know the key elements: people in need, committed leadership, organizational focus, and networks of support. I am convinced, based on my work with ENAHPA, my association with committed Ethiopians, my work with Dr. Tesfaye, and the inspiration I received from my family and others, that ideas can be made real in the world.

CONCLUSION

I urge you today to get involved. It’s good for you; it’s good for Ethiopia; and it’s good for the self-esteem and self-worth that will grow within you. And while in this 21st century

world there are opportunities for us to become global citizens, I think the anchor for us as Ethiopians is Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, your contribution will be consequential. And should any five of you in this room today commit to a project in our country, the impact will be huge.

ENAHPA has given me the opportunity to ground myself in Ethiopia and I value that. Ethiopia is an ancient country. It is one of the most humanistic countries I know of, and it has a legacy of independence. We must give back to Ethiopia, and there are many ways to do so. You can become involved in the development of health care, schools, roads, and more. Why shy away? We all gain when Ethiopia succeeds. Why not become a part of this grand conversation to make us a greater people?

Embrace our country and connect with your spiritual source. I'm glad to have reconnected with Ethiopia through ENAHPA by volunteering, stretching my imagination, and being useful. Embrace our country and let it give you the strength and joy it gives me every day.

I think I'll end here so I can answer any questions you may have. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this special event.