

Coming home to boost

[BY BRITTANY HANSON](#)

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For Michael Belay, planning a Motown-style concert was more than a night of good music – it was a way to bring education, health care and clean drinking water to Ethiopia.

The Chapman University community services officer is a cheerful man who is delighted to share his vision of bringing basic services to help his native country. His nonprofit group, Hands Across the Planet to Poor Youth, reflects his personality in its acronym: H.A.P.P.Y.

For the past 14 years, Belay has been on a quest to help children in Ethiopia. At one point, he sold his home for around a half million dollars, using the money to build a school to educate and feed orphans.

Belay said that in Ethiopia, it costs \$1.2 million to build a school – including the cafeteria, auditorium, classroom buildings, furniture, supplies and uniforms for students.

“And it will be there for a lifetime,” Belay said. “Here, that would be, what, \$70 (million) to \$80 million dollars. We could give the school someone's name, like they do here, if they would help.”

So Belay enlisted the university's help to stage a fundraiser featuring a silent auction and The Magic Notes, a doo-wop singing group that played a night of Motown hits in Memorial Hall. He hopes this event and ones to come will raise funds not only for school additions, but for clean water sources and health needs.

“I have the heart of a millionaire, but not the money of one,” Belay said.

Belay said that when he was young in Ethiopia, his sister was pregnant and began to give birth. There was no ambulance to take her to the hospital, he said. Without the needed help, she died while walking along the road.

Decades later, in 2000, he returned to Ethiopia and saw that the situation had not improved. Hardly anything had changed since when he'd left as a young teen, he said. Children went without education because there was nowhere to learn; people went without medical attention because there was no access to it. They drank from polluted rivers.

After his trip, Belay decided he would do everything he could to help the country, especially the young orphan population.

To date, his efforts have yielded school supplies, a small earthen elementary school for orphans, an ambulance and a larger, concrete school – the one for which he sold his home. He says he wants to do more because there are still people in Ethiopia who need help. There are orphans, struggling families and now, new groups of refugees that have fled violence in other countries.

“I believe I have to make some difference,” Belay said. “I'm not going to give up.”

Contact the writer: bhanson@ocregister.com