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Orange man gives up house to help children

Chapman University to honor its community service officer for his philanthropy.

By **COURTNEY BACALSO**

The Orange County Register

ORANGE – First lady Laura Bush turned down Tilahun "Michael" Belay. So did England's Queen Elizabeth and Prince Charles. Bill Gates, too. Oprah didn't even bother to respond to the Orange resident.

After Belay's solicitation letters for his nonprofit organization were unsuccessful, the 52-year-old father of three sold his own house to build a school in the poor African nation of Ethiopia.

Belay won't be disappointed today. Instead, 2,500 people will be present to honor Chapman University's community service officer with the 23rd annual Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence for public service. This is the fourth time the university has given the award to one of its own. Past recipients include renowned groups such as Habitat for Humanity.

"I am a believer in education – something I have dreamt for myself for my whole life," Belay said. "My dream come true is for my own children to graduate, and my children in Ethiopia as well."

Starting with a hut

The Tilahun Belay School in his hometown of Tembien began in 2000, when the Ethiopian native returned to his homeland for the first time in nearly 30 years.

Moved by the poverty he saw, Belay immediately withdrew his own money from the bank. He built a mud hut to house a school for 150 children. He ground charcoal to make blackboards.

"I promised them I would be back with supplies," Belay said. "I promised them I would give them a school."

With the help of colleagues at Chapman, Belay started the nonprofit Hands Across the Planet to Poor Youth. Colleagues donated what they could, but it wasn't enough. So Belay made a life-changing decision.

Belay sacrificed his dream house in 2004: a three-bedroom home on a half-acre in Corona. He moved his family into a two-bedroom apartment in Orange.

"I had no choice," he said. "These children have nothing. The people are suffering."

Local philanthropists took notice. Orange developer Roger Hobbs donated 100 chairs to replace the wood platform that served as the school's benches. Chapman University donated computers. University Trustee S. Paul Musco paid for the 20-foot container to ship more supplies.

Just last week, Jason Gallagher, manager of a Staples in Santa Ana, donated 240 folders filled with

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school supplies.

"Doesn't it seem like the right thing to do?" Gallagher said. "He sold his own home to build this school. The least I can do is donate school supplies."

Going full circle

Belay's journey has been a long and dangerous one.

At the age of 7, he left his village and moved to Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa, after his father became a judge. Belay was forced into the army at 13.

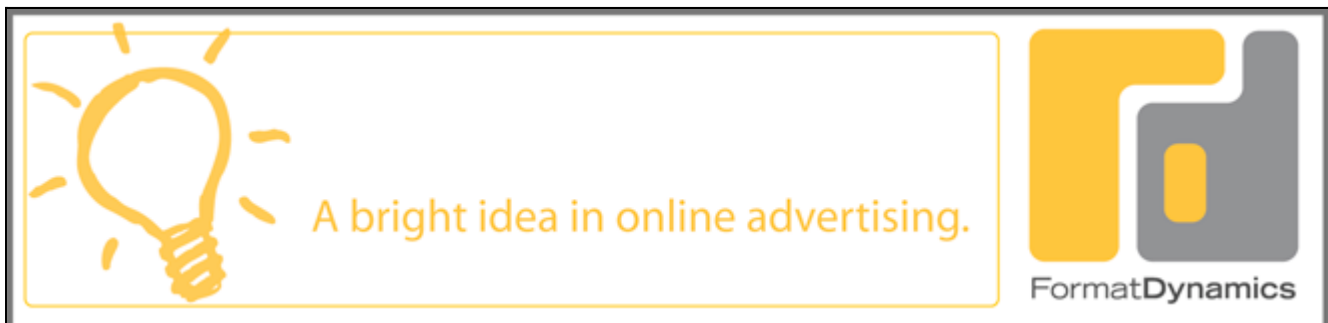
When a civil war broke out, his father told him to leave. In 1975, the young man trekked by foot for three months until he reached Sudan.

A year later his father and 25 others were killed. Insurgents burned their bodies.


In 1981, Belay came to the United States as a political refugee. He settled in San Jose, where he worked in a convalescent home. Years later, he ran an Ethiopian restaurant in Orange County. Then he found a job at Chapman.

"When I went (back to) my birthplace, the city was destroyed by war. Everything was dust," Belay said as he wiped away tears. "I remember it was a beautiful town. The children I found were barefoot and had nothing. But they were eager to learn even as they sat on the dirt under the shade of a tree."

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