



2011

Degrees OF Success

The NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student College Sponsorship Program



Be an Ambassador

We are happy to bring you the fourth issue of *Degrees of Success*, written by Judy Dick, Coordinator of Educational Programs, with the invaluable help of Yehudit Abramson, the Israel Coordinator of the AAS College Sponsorship Program. We are proud of all our students. Please let us know if you have news about your own students that you want to share.

Please pass on our information to friends and family who might be interested in helping students. You are an ambassador for these young men and women, and your endorsement will go a long way. Thank you!

A Model for More Than the Past

When archaeologists at Jerusalem's City of David excavations discovered a 2,000-year-old gold earring from Roman times in 2008, **Selamawit Fiseha** modeled the find, her picture splashed across the press.

Selamawit, whose name means "peace in her time" in Amharic, excavates and photographs finds at the archaeological site, the Givati parking lot excavations outside Jerusalem's Old City walls. To date, six different layers have been uncovered in the area, going as far back as First Temple times. She has done this part-time for the past three years in addition to her



Selamawit lifts a bucket full of earth to be sifted for artifacts.

Photo: Yonatan Pulik

studies, receiving college credit for the work. Selamawit, sponsored by Alaska-based **Rachel and Barney Gottstein**, is studying English Literature and Archaeology in the Master's program at Hebrew University. As an undergraduate, at the same school, she studied history with the support of **Leo and Doris Dreyfuss** of Hartsdale, NY.

Selamawit immigrated to Israel from Ethiopia in 1989 with her mother and brother when she was ten. Her father disappeared in 1983 while attempting to escape via Sudan. "The fact that some of my sponsors had to adapt to a new life and culture in the United States after fleeing Europe is something I can identify with," says Selamawit. "They provide me with great emotional support in my studies."

Her passion for the past guides her work. After she completes her Master's degree, Selamawit wants to research the history of Ethiopian Jewry. She has already recorded and translated the histories of six Ethiopian-Jewish families who immigrated to Israel via Sudan, hoping to create a finished product for audiences in Israel

continued on page 2

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AAS Sponsorships Encourage Students to Develop Their Potential

Since 1987, the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) College Sponsorship Program has given Ethiopian-Israeli students the financial support they need to make it through college. While the first three years of college tuition are covered by the Israeli government for many Ethiopian students, all must pay for their own living expenses, including rent, food, transportation, textbooks and other educational materials. Very few Ethiopian-Israeli families can help. In too many cases, the financial burden forces Ethiopian students to drop out and take unskilled jobs. AAS scholarships provide them with a modest monthly living stipend that makes it possible for them to stay in school and earn a degree. Ultimately, this education provides them with a profession and helps them break out of poverty.

AAS Students, Wellspring of Creativity

The creative work of our Ethiopian-Israeli students is showing up everywhere. From dance and theater to design and engineering, the fruits of their labor are making an impact on Israeli society and achieving worldwide recognition.



The Beta Dance Troupe.

TAKING A BREAK TO DANCE

Several of our Ethiopian students at Haifa

University are dancers in the Beta Dance Troupe. Two of these dancers, **Israela Tadela** (sponsored by **Elaine Schwartz** of Glen Cove, New York) and **Mazal Damoza** (sponsored by **Barney and Rachel Gottstein** of Anchorage, Alaska) explain why they love being a part of the group:

"Our dances are based on Ethiopian dance combined with modern elements. This is the main reason we wanted to take part in this. This is the perfect way to feel that we are part of our culture and at the same time we represent it in an interesting way that can touch people around the world."

The students love the break it gives them from their hectic school schedules, and the chance it offers to express their artistic talent. The troupe toured the United States last fall, and one member, AAS student **Hanni David**, was even able to finally meet her sponsors,

Dr. Paul and Dorothy Wachter of Hillsborough, California.

YOSSI ZELKA

Graduating from the Technion this winter was a major milestone for Yossi Zelka. It was the culmination of many years of hard work. The first in his family to graduate college, Yossi is grateful to his parents, who themselves did not have the same opportunities, for encouraging him.

In order to graduate, Yossi had to complete a final project. He explains that he had to "plan, manage, and execute the construction of a 23-story residential building," guided by an experienced supervisor. Yossi was in a program that allowed him to defer army service until after he earned a degree.

Now he is a civil engineer for the Israeli army. His sponsor, **Esther Rosenbaum** of Palm Beach Gardens, Florida, was delighted to hear about his success.

TEHILA YESHAYAHU-ADGHE

has made a name for herself in Israeli theater. The Ethiopian-Israeli actress has starred in several acclaimed productions and also performs

in a solo show, *On Her Own*. She also helped found the Hullegeb Ethiopian-Israeli Theater Company, based in Jerusalem. And last winter, Tehila performed in a series of shows in California.

Tehila also leads theater workshops for children at Israeli schools to build their confidence. "Empowering youth is a mission for me," she says. "I tell them that if they want to succeed, they have to be focused and persevere. Once you have experienced success, it's no longer a difficulty, but a challenge."



Yossi Zelka's building plan for the Yona Towers residential complex, Givat Shmuel.

Tehila studied acting at the Hadassah Academic College in Jerusalem, with the support of an AAS scholarship from

Charlotte Friend of St. Paul, Minnesota. "Realizing your potential as a person makes you feel better about yourself," she says. "NACOEJ was an anchor in my life that helped me to do this."

Tehila in *On Her Own*. Photo: Eyal Landesman.



Congrats To:

- **Asher Teka Ashgaree (Kenneth S. Kaiserman)** on representing the Wingate Institute in college track competitions and placing third in two events in the Israeli national university championships.
- **Merav Gedamu (Barney and Rachel Gottstein)** on completing a Ph.D in Biology and Computers at Bar-Ilan University.
- **Alumnus Germao Mengistu (Alan and Jane Cornell)** on being appointed editor-in-chief of Yediot Negat, a newspaper reporting on stories related to the Ethiopian community in Israel.
- **Eldad Tarake (Mark and Peachy Levy)** on winning the Marina Foren Scholarship at the Shenkar College of Engineering and Design and a certificate of excellence for his class projects in the course, Design for Special Needs.

continued from page 1

and abroad. "Ethiopian-Jewish history is Jewish history," she says proudly, and points to the need for it to be taught to the wider Jewish community.

"Jewish history is at the very core of NACOEJ's Adopt-A-Student program," says Selamawit. "Both create a sense of belonging that is helpful for integrating into Israeli society and the wider Jewish world."

Taking It to a Higher Level

In two years, the number of AAS graduates who have returned to school to pursue advanced degrees has almost doubled. We offer a returning student's original sponsor the chance to help at the next stage of the student's educational career, and many have been overjoyed to take this opportunity.

Here are just a couple of accounts of reunited sponsors and students:

Nancy Bunnin, from Brookline, Massachusetts, saw **Fana Ashenef Tzazu** through her undergraduate studies at Bar-Ilan University. She celebrated Fana's academic accomplishments and countless volunteer projects. And when Fana got married shortly after graduating, Nancy sent her a gift. But then the sponsor and student lost touch. Last fall, Fana resurfaced. She is back at Bar-Ilan for a Master's degree in social work. As soon as Nancy heard that she needed a sponsor, she jumped at the chance to support her again. Both were happy to catch up. Nancy was thrilled to hear about Fana's two daughters and

her work with the Ethiopian community at the Fidel Association for Education and Social Integration of Ethiopian Jews in Israel as well as at a violence-prevention center.

Nancy encourages Fana's dreams of earning a second degree and opening her own clinic. The two met for the first time this winter when Nancy visited Israel. Nancy marveled at how Fana manages it all and described Fana as "possessing outer and inner beauty." She can't wait to see Fana again on her next visit to Israel.

Janet Heettner agreed to sponsor **Daniel Basufkcad**

in addition to her two other students. Daniel has dreamed of getting a Master's degree ever since he began studying at the Technion. His excellent high school grades in math and science earned him the chance to delay his army service until after he earned his college degree. So he studied structural and mechanical engineering first and then served in the IDF as a military engineer. Now he is back

at the Technion, enrolled in a Master's program in civil engineering, sponsored by **Janet Heettner** and **Peter Silverman** of New York, NY.

Just the Facts

Did you know that in the 2010-2011 school year...

- AAS sponsorships helped support **411** students in **6** universities and **24** academic colleges, including **8** nursing schools and **7** engineering schools.
- Students' fields of study included law, psychology, engineering, physics, optometry, medicine, education, computer science, dentistry, nursing, social work, accounting, speech therapy, architecture, film, and political science.
- **106** of our students earned their degrees.
- **37** students studied for advanced degrees; **6** completed their Master's degrees, **1** completed a Ph.D.

Our Sponsor in Be'er Sheva

One of the few college sponsors who live in Israel, **Barbara Carter** has made it her duty to lend an extra hand to help the AAS Program. Carter lives in Be'er Sheva, where Ben-Gurion University is located. We give **45** students there stipends. Keeping up with one's studies at Ben-Gurion, one of Israel's best universities, can be a challenge. So in addition to sponsoring three students, Barbara helps other students by working with them to improve their English.

I saw this in action when I joined Yehudit Abramson

on one of her visits to Ben-Gurion. Barbara was already waiting for us. As students came to pick up their stipends, Yehudit made the introductions and told them that Barbara was available to help them with English. Many were delighted.

At this meeting, Barbara met one of her students, **Hewot Ashagre Allelign**, for the first time. The two beamed as they got to know each other, Barbara learning that Hewot's mother had also been an AAS student. Not long afterward, there was a commotion as another of Barbara's students

raced in. Barbara sponsored **Michal Yatmano** during her undergraduate degree and continues as Michal studies for her Master's degree in social work. Barbara cannot give her enough praise, telling us that Michal "would stand out in any group, anywhere in the world."

Soon the busy activity slowed down as the last students trickled in. One last student, **Shay Yalew**, dropped in looking tired, and it soon became clear why. We learned that **Shay** is studying Emergency Medicine and

barely had time to catch up. This last-minute meeting had unexpected results. It turned out that Shay needs help in English, and of course Barbara is happy to help. Yehudit happily made the match. And our day of business at Ben-Gurion University was finally over...



Barbara Carter with Michal Yatmano.



Strengthening a Community from Within

"I manage a community 'cluster' in Be'er Sheva. It is a group of Ethiopian-Israelis who live in a particular neighborhood. They have settled there to empower the community."

Orit Tabay talks animatedly about her work with the Ethiopian community, describing a recent trip for Ethiopian seniors to an Israeli *moshav* (town). The seniors were elated to see the *moshav's* farm, which reminded them of their village life in Ethiopia. In Orit's opinion, trips like these are important because they help Ethiopian immigrants feel more at home in Israel.

Orit, whose family arrived in Israel in 1982, is well



aware of the struggles that Ethiopian immigrants to Israel experience. Her father, who

had been studying to become a *kes* (Ethiopian-Jewish religious leader) in Ethiopia, had his education interrupted when he left. Although Orit's parents encouraged her studies, they were unable

to help her financially. As she wrote to her sponsor, **Edward G. Victor** of Los Angeles, California, "I have the strength... to succeed, but I need your helping hand

in order to ... achieve my dream." Now this dream is a reality. Orit earned an undergraduate degree from Bar-Ilan University and just finished her Master's degree in guidance counseling at the same school.

Two years ago, Orit returned to her hometown of Be'er Sheva with a group of young Ethiopian-Israelis, as a project of the Hinneni organization, who believe in working from within the Ethiopian community. They help Ethiopian immigrants navigate Israeli bureaucracy and work with the local municipality

to ensure that the community receives all the city benefits available to them.

Orit is constantly searching for ways to connect young Ethiopian-Israelis to their rich heritage and bridge the generation gap between different generations. She is full of ideas for the future, hoping to develop Ethiopian young leadership and help local schools teach more about Ethiopian culture. Her energy is contagious. We look forward to hearing more about her projects.



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Since 1982, the North American Conference on Ethiopian Jewry (NACOEJ) has been providing humanitarian and educational aid to the Ethiopian-Jewish community in Ethiopia and Israel. NACOEJ is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

A Mother Inspires

Israel employs 61,000 state employees, 782 of whom are Ethiopian. This year, Prime Minister Netanyahu announced a decision to increase the number of Ethiopian-Israelis in civil service positions, hoping to provide role models for the entire Ethiopian community in Israel. He already

has one in **Kasaey Keren Damoza.**

Kasaey has been dedicated

to public service since high school, when she did volunteer work for a counseling center. After her army service, she returned to the youth center and also worked with Ethiopian immigrants. And while still in college, she became the National Immigration Coordinator in the Ethiopian Youth Integration Division of the Ministry of Immigrant Absorption.

Passionate about her work, Kasaey also places great priority

on education too. She got her Bachelor's degree from Hebrew University (sponsored by **Anne and Burton Greenblatt** of Teaneck, New Jersey) and is now enrolled in a well-regarded Master's Program at Hebrew University's School of Social Work (sponsored by **Alan Sieroty** of Los Angeles, California). Kasaey writes that her mother is the motivating force behind her drive to study. "My mother always reminded my siblings and me that education was most important.

She even showed us the way by completing her own high school diploma."

Currently, Kasaey juggles the demands of graduate school with a prestigious government position. Last winter, she was promoted to a position as the assistant to the Deputy Director of the Ministry of Immigration and Absorption. Kasaey admits that her schedule is challenging but, inspired by her mother's example, she welcomes these unique opportunities.

