

Eritrean American: 'I stay busy, pay the rent'

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down in the streets by the Ethiopian army. Abraham's three brothers eventually were all killed.

"There is a spirit in Eritrea that we will never be put down, even if poor," Abraham says. Eritreans bounce back, pitch in, and work hard.

It's a nostalgia, if not a romanticism, that many residents of the unusually diverse Curran House hold dear for their own native, war-torn countries that are often still in conflicts.

What makes Abraham's story unusual, however, is his criminal record, stint in a deportation center, and successful rehabilitation and recovery.

About 20 different nationalities live in the modern, 67-unit, truly affordable apartment building that TNDC built in the middle of the Tenderloin in 2005. A pioneer in affordable family housing, Curran House has the most diversity at a single address anywhere in the neighborhood, which is also the city's poorest.

Abraham's best friend, Kesete Abaha, a 53-year-old Oakland truck driver who left Eritrea in 1987, calls him "a nice guy, an honest guy. He likes to talk about the history of Eritrea. I like him. But he had a very tough time."

ERRATUM

In this story, The Extra states it was forbidden in Eritrea to have a satellite dish. A U.S. State Department report said the government does allow them, they're able to pick up major U.S. networks, and they are spreading throughout the country.

Since settling in San Francisco 28 years ago, Abraham made mistakes he paid for early on. Then his financial highs and lows seemed to stabilize in 2007 when a friend suggested he drive for Yellow Cab. Working five days a week he made decent money. But now he drives just twice a week, a casualty of the squeeze from Uber and Lyft.

"I've had better jobs," he says. "But being unemployed for a while changed my mood. I stay busy, pay the rent. It's better than nothing. Be your own boss. I like that."

Sundays, he may go to Christian churches in Oakland (Eritrea is about equal parts Christian and Muslim). Or he's in his third-floor room watching the

Eritrean television channel. There's just one, government-controlled, as are the two radio networks.

At Curran House, he is yet another resident who is openly friendly, gets along, goes his own way — and has no friends there.

"No friends come to my house," Abraham says of his small studio. There's a bed, chair and a stool, a towel spread for his kitchen tablecloth, and on shelving a commemorative plate of President Obama and pictures of Abraham's family. An Ethiopian man lives in Curran House, too. "I say hi. He's a nice guy." If a Filipino celebration is downstairs, he says, and everyone is speaking Tagalog, he'll say hello and walk on by.

Abraham doesn't linger in the neighborhood, either. "I never go anywhere in the Tenderloin. And I go straight to my room to sleep. I have no problem. Curran House is good. No bad people. Many nationalities. I have no problem with that."

Eritrea is the core of his universe, the heartland of his social orbit. To hang out, he'll hop in his 2005 Lexus, which a cousin chipped in for the down payment, and drive out to the Fillmore Coffee Shop at Fillmore and Eddy that is owned by an Eritrean.

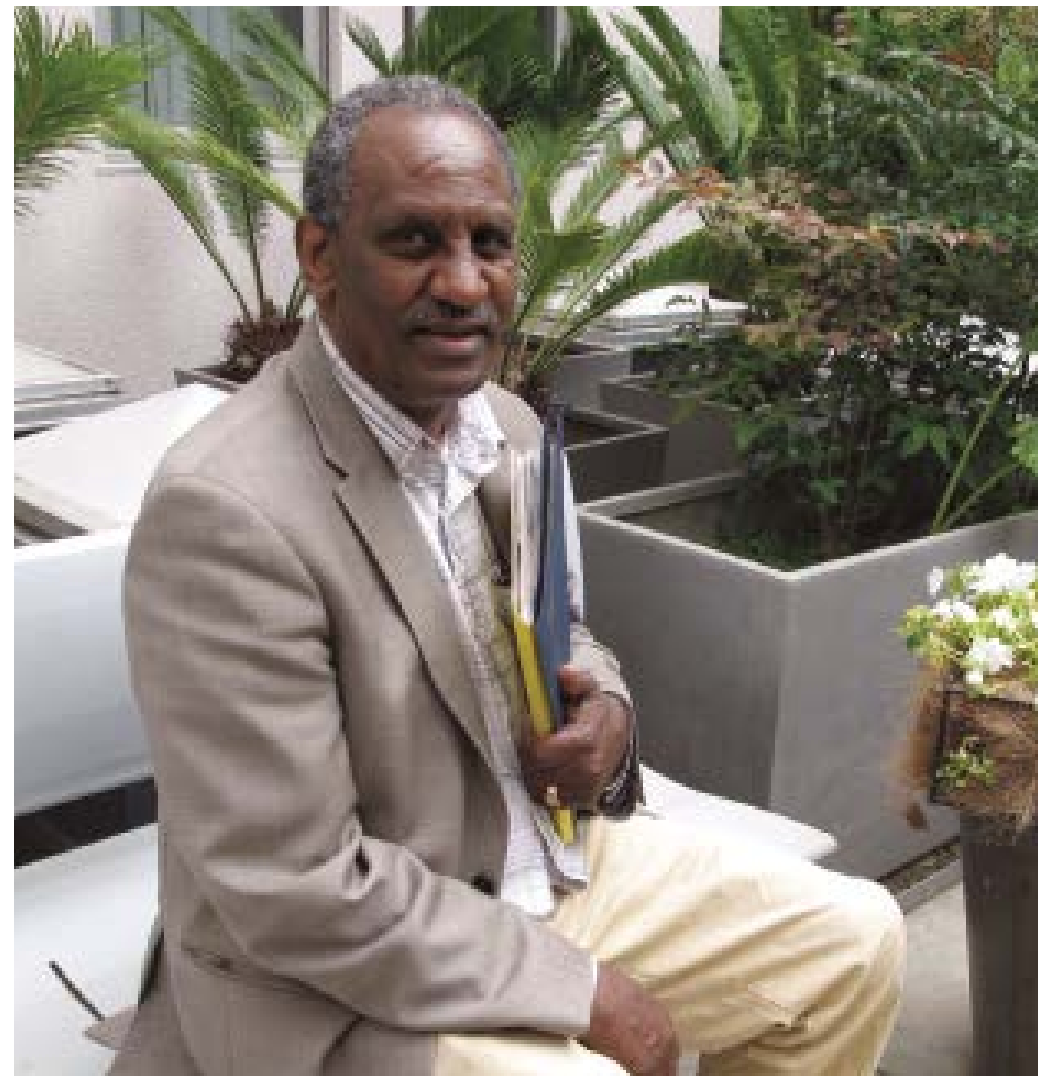
Abraham is among the few Tenderloin residents with a car. He parks it in a nearby lot for \$220 a month.

He also frequents the Eritrean Community Center, just two blocks down Fillmore from the coffee shop, a sparse room the size of a large patio, open at 6 p.m. for a couple of hours on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Countrymen in dark shirts and sport coats sit around the perimeter, their palaver like farm talk around a cracker barrel. For parties, they'll rent a larger room.

It's there that Abraham learned about the Eritrean Community Center at 955 Grand Ave. in Oakland, and soon became a dues-paying regular and avid volunteer.

The community bought the one-story, 18,000-square-foot building two years ago. "Every Eritrean in the Bay Area gave money to buy that house — very important," Abraham emphasizes. "It's like a club." He pays \$10 monthly dues and visits twice a week to hang out, meet people, gossip, help with chores and talk politics. "If I get sick, I need help. I consider them my friends and family."

Working in shifts, Abraham and scores of volunteers this year painted



the exterior yellow. Come Aug. 5-7, it will house the annual three-day Western Eritrean Festival that locals flock to, most speaking Tigrinya, one of Eritrea's nine languages. Countrymen come to Oakland from all over the U.S. and Europe, too, celebrating their culture. More than 5,000 attend.

But in the times of Abraham's desperate hours in the early 1990s, before he connected to a trove of Eritrean compatriots, a range of other people gave him a hand, from defense lawyers, to convicts, to clergy and social workers.

"When I first came to San Francisco, I met the wrong people in the wrong place (in the Tenderloin)."

His downward spiral began in 1990, two years after arriving in San Francisco when he was living in the Jefferson

Hotel at 440 Eddy St. He knocked on his neighbor's door. On the other side of the door were plainclothes cops who'd had his neighbor, who was on probation, under surveillance. As Abraham tells it, he had 14 grams of cocaine on him and a wad of cash.

"They open the door and say I am delivering. They arrest me for having cocaine for sale, manufacturing it and transporting it — three counts. I say, no, I am a user."

His public defender pressured him to take a three- to five-year prison "deal," or the sentence could be longer. Abraham said no. Possession yes, but the other charges "weren't true" and couldn't be proved, he insisted. He wanted a jury trial.

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Abraham Weldeselasia, above left, holds a sheaf of records in the Curran House courtyard. He has pay stubs from his work on Pier 70 and keeps in his wallet the wilted business card of Brendan P. Conroy, now a Superior Court judge, who as a defense attorney helped Abraham get a better deal in his conviction for cocaine. Alem Gihere, above at right, chats about old times with Abraham in the Fillmore Coffee Shop. They met in the 1970s working in the Port of Sudan when Abraham was a young man trying to get to America.



Escape to America — East African teen takes 12 years to realize his dream



ILLUSTRATION: LISE STAMPELI

ABRAHAM Weldeselasia's dream as a teenager in the poor East African country of Eritrea was to stow away on a ship and some way get to the U.S. He failed the first time, not the second, though it took almost a dozen years.

He wasn't much for school and dropped out in the sixth grade. He had friends 18 and 19 who had completed 12 school years "and could have been teachers," but they "sat all day in cafes smoking cigarettes." Not him. He wanted work. Jobs were scarce, pay low. Current per capita income is \$1,200 annually.

He lived with his parents in Asmara, the 7,600-foot-high capital that was destined for danger in Eritrea's decades long war of independence from the larger, adjacent and equally poor Ethiopia. Abraham's young eyes were on Massawa, a small port on the Red Sea 41 miles east, down the mountainous road that takes a bus an hour and 40 minutes to reach. There, he could land a job on a boat, hide out when it debarked, maybe become a

merchant marine, eventually make it to New York.

"It came into my mind, I can't get rich, I can't get married. I decided to go to Massawa." He was 16. Leaving home was bold. Eritrean family life is close and everyone tries to work. Things are expensive. "Oh, I fell in love when I saw it (Massawa). Beautiful. The seaport. The sea. You could swim there. I wanted to be merchant marine."

At home his parents were alarmed. Family cohesion was torn. Soon his father went to Massawa with a bus ticket for him. "I come to take you home," his father said. "It's shame. Your mother cannot sleep. You don't want to live by yourself and be a street boy."

But Abraham ducked out of the bus station and his father rode home alone. Abraham laughs quietly at it now.

His first stowaway attempt came after he and 25 others had worked for a month day and night unloading a Greek ship filled with American grain, a gift to the starving population. He knew the ship like the back of his hand. When it departed, he and a buddy hid, and after two days, too far to turn back, they figured, they emerged saying they fell asleep but now could work their way going forward.

"Going to America!" Abraham's eyes still light up telling it.

But the ship had actually headed south near the Red Sea port of Assab, and nobody was happy with the two. On shore, a judge sentenced them to 30 days in jail or pay \$30. Luckily, Abraham had a well-to-do cousin living there who paid the fine and offered to find him a job. But he turned it down. Assab weather was too hot. He took a bus home.

"I thought my life would be in Massawa, a contractor working in supply and cleaning ships."

At home, he got a job in a sweater factory. Workers were paid 60 cents for each sweater they made on a machine. Fast ones made 12 a day. After learning the machine, Abraham could make six. "Small pay, but good (steady) money," he says. "I did it for a year." His father wouldn't take any money for his living at home. "But Massawa was still in my head. One day I think I'll get a ship."

Back he went. After six months, his mother came to get him. "The port isn't that big. You can find anyone in half an hour. She said, 'If you don't come back, I will walk into the Red Sea and never come out.' She touch my heart."

So he returned, knowing she wouldn't have done

that but afraid "she like me no more." He took a job in the bakery where both parents worked, delivering 200 kilos of bread a day on a bicycle, not the motorcycle he was promised.

But the war with Ethiopia was heating up. Young men were aggressively conscripted and people were being shot down in Asmara's streets. His father forged a travel document for him. "Go," his father said to him, "I don't want to see you dead at my door." Even so, his three brothers were later killed in the war.

His second stowaway was on an Italian boat with a Panamanian flag, allowing it to hire non-Italians. It got him to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

"So many ships it look like a (floating) city! So I came out of hiding to see if I could get a job. I told them I was here to save my life."

They said he could stay. Then, working on ship, he traveled around northern East Africa earning a seaman's book until stopping in 1977 again in Jeddah. There, he was given the option of staying and working on land. He found an assistant plant operator job in the big desalination plant. After three years, "They want to give me more responsibility," and made him senior operator, which included doing the two-hour plant startup, adjusting flows

and maintaining controls. "Best job ever. They love me."

He had a free furnished apartment, reimbursed transportation, paid vacation and a \$1,500 monthly salary (5,000 reals). He had the job six years. It went sour when a Scottish management company hired a British engineer as Abraham's boss. The plant developed a common problem Abraham knew how to fix without the high cost of shutting the plant down, but the know-it-all engineer wouldn't listen. The upshot was Abraham was fired for insubordination. "I do nothing to this guy."

It was around 1987, a time when a lot of people were leaving Arabia for other jobs in other countries. He went to Athens. After his 12 years of traveling, his passport was used up and he went to the American Embassy saying he was a political refugee who couldn't go back to Eritrea. "If I go back, it is death. I am stateless. I seek to settle in America."

After consideration, the embassy said "the evidence" was there, and he got his wish. He received a passport from the United Nations in Athens. He arrived in New York in 1988, three years before the Ethiopian-Eritrean war ended, came to Oakland, which he didn't like, then went to San Francisco, which he loved at once. ■

— Tom Carter