

Eritrean American realizes his dream living in Tenderloin

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 4

He asked for and got another lawyer, Brendan P. Conroy. By that time, Abraham had already spent 2½ months in jail. “Don’t panic, keep the faith, he tell me,” Conroy said that with a costly city trial he’d lose. Instead, he’d meet with the first lawyer and the judge and try to forge a better agreement. He succeeded.

(Conroy is now a San Francisco Superior Court judge appointed by Gov. Jerry Brown in December 2012 to fill a retirement vacancy.)

Abraham got three months, minus time served. He was out in two weeks, so grateful, but pinned to three years probation and a felon forever. Abraham, 26 years later, still keeps Conroy’s now limp and frayed business card in his wallet.

“I don’t want immigration to come and get me, I tell Conroy. It was (already) the worst time of my life. But I never forget him.”

BEEF OVER WALKMAN

On a TL street in another wrong-place-wrong-time incident more than a year later, Abraham was in an argument over the price of a Walkman another man was selling. They had agreed on \$20, Abraham said, and now the man wanted \$30, and was yelling when a motorcycle cop stopped to check it out and ran their IDs.

Finding that Abraham was a felon, the cop handcuffed him and hauled both men into jail. In court, Abraham told the hearing judge that he had witnesses to vouch for the \$20 agreement. He produced them, and “the judge threw the case out.” But viewing the heavy convictions, the judge says “he’s revoking my probation.” Devastated, Abraham was taken to San Quentin in handcuffs to serve two years.

“Amazing,” he says, still stunned.

In San Quentin, he stayed at “the ranch,” a dormitory-style prison for low-end criminals. He learned to operate a forklift and made \$1.06 a day. His time was shortened to six months. At a halfway house on Indiana Street in San Francisco, he had to choose a job and create the mandatory bank account. He said he worked in a Goodwill store.

With 1½ months to go, two immigration officials came to the halfway house and told Abraham there had been a mistake. “They take me back to San Quentin,” he said. “I was sad, very sad.”

He was released after six months. But immigration officers were at the gate waiting to take him into custody. That detention lasted 22 more months, into

1994. He was bused to a detention center in Yuba City, from which he was shuttled back and forth to the federal Immigration Court at 630 Sansome St. where eventually a judge told him, “You’re excluded from the U.S.” and ordered that he be returned to Athens where his U.N. passport was issued.

He was taken to the Oakland airport and put on a plane “with many Latins,” thinking he was being deported. But the flight was surprisingly short. The plane landed in Kern County where a deputy sheriff was waiting.

“They didn’t tell me this,” Abraham says. “But I was so happy not to be deported. I was talking to God,” cementing his good fortune and laughing through tears.

Still, he languished in the Mesa Verde Detention Facility for months wondering why authorities were ignoring him, and started thinking that maybe he’d never get out.

“This taxed my mind, oh Lord. But there are so many knowledgeable people in custody. And I go to the library every day, 9 to 11 a.m.”

An “L.A. homeboy” schooled him, encouraged him to write letters to a phalanx of top officials. So Abraham created a nine-page letter describing his case and the “fabricated charges,” asking why he couldn’t get bailed out. He mailed it to 10 in all, starting with President Bill Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno and also to Amnesty International and the International Red Cross in Switzerland.

One replied.

“A week later I get letter from Red Cross,” he said. “They say they appreciate my letter and will help me any way they can. They will work for me, be my right hand.”

Abraham says his jailers read all correspondence and, perhaps it was just coincidence, but a week later immigration officials met with him. He says they told him it cost \$63 a day to keep him there, and that he could get bailed out for \$5,000.

REHAB HOUSE IN BAYVIEW

It was good to finally get noticed, but the price stunned Abraham. Where could he touch money like that? A few weeks later, he said, the cost was knocked down to \$1,000.

A minister, Bishop George Lee, had regularly visited the San Francisco jail when Abraham was there. He told inmates about support available at his storefront Shiloh Full Gospel Church on Third Street with its rehab house on the



FESTIVAL POSTER

The Eritrean Community Center in Oakland, one of the oldest Eritrean community centers in the United States, hosts an annual festival that draws 5,000 people from around the U.S. It features music, food, sports and seminars.

second floor. Lee started it in 1988 and reportedly helped hundreds of people. Abraham called him.

Lee and three others from his congregation came up with \$1,000 and freed Abraham. He had restrictions, though. He couldn’t leave the country. He had to enter a drug program. He had to report to Immigration monthly, a condition eventually reduced to once a year, and pay \$380 a year to the Immigration and Naturalization Service for work authorization. And when the INS released Abraham in 1995, he went to live at Shiloh, staying there for 18 months. He had gotten a job at the San Francisco shipyard, Pier 70. He joined the Machinists Union, Local 1414 in San Mateo, making \$22.50 an hour. “Good money. Overtime, big checks.”

But Lee, who had extended other help to Abraham, such as once furnishing out-of-town transportation to visit a relative, has been lost. His church burned down in 2011, displacing 23 men. The Extra couldn’t locate him in the Bayview.

INS sent Abraham to a six-month program at Walden House where he was required to have a job. His heart raced when he saw that on its job list was dismantling retired ships for scrap at the old S.F. Naval Shipyard. He was a shoo-in because of his range of work on ships on the Red Sea. When his success was announced before 120 people at a Walden House meeting, he said they all stood and applauded.

“They loved me.”

Eventually, the dock work dried up and he was just getting sporadic work. He ended up at the Dalt Hotel, an SRO at 34 Turk St. The bathroom down the hall became difficult. Abraham had a medical condition that had him traipsing to it four times a night. He told Monique, the social worker, about it, and with a phone call she found the one studio with a bathroom left at Curran House. Abraham, grateful still for the prize, moved in. That year, 2007, he became a Yellow Cab driver.

‘A VERY HARD WORKER’

Late on a June afternoon, the sun low and golden in the Fillmore District, Abraham walks up to the Fillmore cafe and shakes hands with an Eritrean man at an outside table, goes inside, shakes another hand and continues to the back where three men sit over their coffee. They all greet him, me, too, and we sit. The closest, Alem Gihere, first met Abraham 42 years ago in the sweltering Port of Sudan where he worked on the pier and Abraham on an Italian ship.

What can you say about Abraham? I ask Alem. He peers over his glasses and says, “A very hard worker.”

They’ll all go to the community festival in Oakland, Kesete Abraha and Mathios Joannes, also, a gathering of the Eritrean diaspora with songs and dancing and East African culinary excellence. And from scores of vendors they’ll pick over T-shirts, CDs, DVDs and traditional attire. It’s not to be missed. ■

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