

McClatchy People

Personal and professional accomplishments of employees

Corporate Employee Brings Water, Hope to Ethiopian Villagers

In McClatchy's corporate Finance Department, they call him King Seifu.

That's the good-natured nickname given to **Seifu Ibssa**, a financial systems analyst for The McClatchy Company whose "kingdom" encompasses the PeopleSoft financial network.

In the remote Ethiopian village where he was born, however, Ibssa is treated as if he were king. Upon his visits, he is welcomed as a returning hero by the thousand or so residents. Lambs are slaughtered and feasted upon in his honor. He is given a white horse to ride during his stays.

"When you are away from the village for a long time – and especially if you are living in the Western world – they think you are just the most precious person, the most educated person," he said. "They think you are the richest person in the whole world and, comparatively, you are. You are like a king, literally, because you can afford to buy anything in that part of the world."

Ibssa, 47, is more than the hometown boy made good. He has become his village's benefactor. He has initiated a number of humanitarian efforts to lift his native village and the surrounding community out of poverty and suffering.

Ibssa was born in Kerebigne, a tiny mountain hamlet within the surrounding village of Acheber. Acheber sits 10,000 feet above sea level in the mountains of southern Ethiopia. Kerebigne is only accessible by donkey, horseback or a 45-minute hike from Acheber.

Since 2005, the area has been



Above: Seifu Ibssa tests the faucets on the water storage tank he and his Sacramento friends constructed in the remote Ethiopian village where Ibssa was born.

Right: Before construction of the well last October, villagers such as this young boy gathered their water from this mud hole, which they shared with livestock and hyenas.

Photographs courtesy of Seifu Ibssa

the focus of Ibssa's relief efforts. He has provided medical supplies and purchased a maternity bed for the health clinic.

He's bought classroom desks and benches to relieve schoolchildren from sitting on sticks on the ground. He's paid for a new building wing at the local high school and has secured land and the government's OK to start construction of a kindergarten and after-school center. He has recruited Sacramento churches and missionaries to the cause, raising about \$15,000.

"My dream is big. I want to transform that village," he said. "I want to train the children. I



want to focus on the next generation. I look forward to my retirement days so that I can go back to my roots and help my villagers."

No gift was bigger than the supply of safe drinking water Ibssa and his Sacramento friends

provided last fall.

Ibssa raised money for the construction of a well and water storage tank to supply the villagers and their livestock with reliable – and separate – sources of clean drinking water. Ibssa spent three weeks of his





Top: Ibssa provided classroom desks to these schoolchildren, who previously sat on sticks on the ground.

Above: Ibssa's native village is set high in the mountains of southern Ethiopia.

vacation in Ethiopia last year overseeing the construction.

"People are just very, very grateful for what we've done to help them," he said. "You have to remember that this is just a forgotten village. It's never been looked after by any government entity or any nongovernmental organization. Nobody ever goes there."

Ibssa began returning to his

birthplace in 1992. That's when the political situation in Ethiopia stabilized enough to allow him to visit his father and other relatives there.

He fled Ethiopia and its brutal Marxist government in 1982, making his home in California ever since.

Acheber's remote mountain setting had largely insulated it from Ethiopia's chronic

problems – devastating cycles of drought and famine, environmental degradation, over population, a history of civil war and oppressive military regimes.

Villagers still live the way they might have centuries ago, tending to their livestock and farming wheat and barley. The village even had its own water supply provided by two natural springs and a nearby river.

Ibssa fondly remembers his childhood there. He worked as a shepherd until he was 10. That's when his father, a relatively well-to-do farmer and landowner, sent him to Addis Ababa, the capital, to get a formal education.

"At the age of 10, I didn't even know what a car looked like," Ibssa said. "All I knew were horses and donkeys, cows and goats."

In Addis Ababa, Ibssa worked his way through school, ultimately earning a university accounting degree. He started a career as an accountant until he found an opportunity to leave the country and its military regime in 1982.

"Anybody who had a chance to run away and leave the country would run," Ibssa said. "It was just a horrible time. There was no freedom. I needed a visa to go from the capital to where I was born 130 kilometers away. That's not how I wanted to live."

In California, Ibssa immersed himself in his new country, taking English and U.S. history classes at night and working entry-level accounting jobs during the day. He married, started a family and went back to college to get a business administration degree from San José State University. A job offer in 1994 took him to Sacramento, where he gained computer and PeopleSoft experience. He joined The McClatchy Company in 1999 to help install and oversee the PeopleSoft financial applications.

His job is to make sure those systems work and to help

finance employees throughout McClatchy with questions and problems.

"That's what I do best – helping people," he said. "It goes with my character."

In February 2005, Ibssa accompanied a Sacramento church group to Ethiopia on a humanitarian mission, serving as a translator and guide. At the end of the trip, Ibssa invited the church members to his village as his guests.

To his shock and dismay, Ibssa discovered that Ethiopia's widespread suffering had finally caught up to Acheber and Kerebigne. The local elementary school and health clinic were in bad shape, and water was in short supply. The two underground springs had dried up from neglect and overuse. The mud hole that remained was being shared by villagers and livestock during the day and by hyenas at night.

"I was just devastated," he said. "I came back just depressed. I was depressed for about two months."

That depression eventually turned into action. Ibssa started asking friends and relatives for donations to help improve the situation. He gave Power Point presentations at his church. He formed a relief organization called Ethiopian Village Outreach complete with a board of directors, brochures and a website.

"I am so thankful to my American friends who have joined me on the board and have given so much," Ibssa said. "They are very, very generous."

Ibssa's relief work doesn't surprise his McClatchy co-workers who know him best.

"Seifu is a prince of a guy. He's just one of the real precious people in the world," said **Ted Norris**, a fixed asset accountant in McClatchy's corporate Finance Department. "He's still really drawn to Ethiopia and feels a need to share his good fortune and blessings with his countrymen as much as he can."