

# The Value of One Life

By Shegitu Kebede

*Drawn from her keynote address at the 2016 Minnesota English Learner Education Conference, Shegitu Kebede shares her experiences and ideas for how all of us can make a difference in our world.*

## Background

My name is Shegitu Kebede. I know first hand what it means to be a refugee and a victim of war. I was in constant peril, lost family members, experienced rape, and lived in the unbearable conditions of a refugee camp. My heart goes out to all who know such hardship.

I came from the war-torn country of Ethiopia. Born into a time of political transition, I lost both my parents and grandmother by the age of five, so my three brothers and I grew up in an orphanage run by Norwegian missionaries and the Lutheran church. Then the political climate worsened, and life changed again for me, my biological brothers, and fellow orphanage siblings. We were especially vulnerable. Several of the boys were plucked without notice from our home and forced to fight in the war. Only years later did I learn that many of those who had been taken away to war, including my own brothers, had passed away.

As war waged on in Ethiopia, and now as a young women just three months pregnant, I fled to Kenya on foot. My family was scattered throughout various countries in Africa, also fighting to stay alive. Some survived, others did not. My son was born in a refugee camp in Kenya where we lived for 3 ½ years before coming to the United States in the early 1990's. I came to this land with two suitcases and a three-year-old son. As they say in my old country "Sometimes you may consider the gold you have in your hand as bronze," in other words, you can be surrounded by everything you need to succeed but still be oblivious to it. I believe that is true too for many of us in this land of unlimited opportunities, and I am a testament to that.

I have owned homes, I have started successful businesses, and I have helped numerous people in this country. I've become a published author and have been invited to talk to many people, including English language educators like you. I will assure you, that it is only in this country that it is possible to achieve what I have achieved with my background. I'm not saying that people don't experience genuine hardship in this country, because they do. But for new Americans who have seen the world through a different lens, I believe there are more opportunities and personal rights in this country than in the most parts of the world. I also believe that as much as rights are given to us, as

Americans, we need to realize that rights come with responsibility. All of my experiences, like witnessing the sacrifices and generosity of the orphanage missionaries, and having experienced the possibilities here in the United States, has left me with an unquenchable desire to help those in need.

## Going Home, Inc

Once in the United States, I began working as a program assistant for [CommonBond Communities](#) (a non-profit nonprofit provider of affordable housing with services) and part of my responsibility was job placement. One of the challenges I recognized was the difficulty facing new immigrant women who had no work experience and thus could not enter the workforce. To bridge that gap, I quit my job and founded a company called *Going Home, Inc.* where I hired single immigrant mothers with no work experience. Most of whom, like me, had left physically abusive husbands and were struggling to support themselves and their children. Most spoke little English, had little money, no job history and had been ostracized by their communities for leaving their husbands.

To support this new business, I acquired cleaning contracts through corporate friends and then was able to hire and train these women in work and life skills. I taught them the cleaning business, computer and email skills, English language, American culture (at least what I understood), citizenship, and sewing and quilting as a form of therapy. I took them shopping, to the doctor, arranged appointments and helped them find clothes for work. From there I would help them write their resumes and was able to offer assistance with job placement; they could use *Going Home, Inc.* as their work reference.

I helped them learn how to use public transportation so they could get better-paying jobs elsewhere and would even help drive them from job to job. With new skills and the ability to support themselves these women were now ready to move on. In the first year I helped a total of 38 women on this journey to independence.

I helped in ways that I would have liked to have been helped; in ways that made sense and were relevant. We built a sense of community as we invested in each other's lives. I strived to help in ways that would help with immediate needs and ultimately foster self-sufficiency and empowerment.

## Homework Center

We soon learned that most of these immigrant moms had several concerns for their children's education. So alongside the cleaning business, I established a *Homework Center*. I rented a small two-room office that I shared with Americorps in a housing cooperative in Minneapolis where we provided after school activities, tutoring and homework-help programs. I gathered an amazing and dedicated group of local college students to volunteer as tutors and mentors.

But it wasn't just about needing homework help. The moms began to tell me that their

children, from elementary students to teenagers, were also having behavioral problems at school. So we looked at the situation of each student closely. Their experiences brought me back to the time when I was in a refugee camp as a teenager; many of them had been through the same things I had been through. They had fled turmoil, witnessed violence, and experienced the traumas of war.

These students had lived in refugee camps anywhere from a few months to a few years, and during that time received little to no formal education. When they arrived in the United States, they faced (and continued to face) several obstacles, from learning the language and culture to serving as translators to their family for financial, medical, legal, and other livelihood services. The pain and weight on the shoulders of these teens was more than most people experience in a lifetime. Yet, this is the experience of many refugee and immigrant students in the context of American classrooms. Understanding this was a breakthrough for the success of the students we served, as well as the educators we worked with, and I believe it is an insight transferrable to the lives of many students in our classrooms. Many English language teachers may have, or will have, students who act out in the classroom. We must recognize the challenging journey some of our students have had before they walk into our classrooms and schools.

## **Helping the refugee student: tutors, teachers, parents**

When they arrived in the U.S., students we were seeing in the Homework Center, like students everywhere, were placed in classes according to their age as opposed to their educational level. In these classes, they were struggling to find ways to cope with being behind other students educationally. We soon learned that the students in our center did not have true behavioral issues, but were misbehaving as a coping mechanism to deal with being called out in front of their peers in the classroom because they could not read or write. These coping mechanisms manifested in different ways, but commonly we saw most of the teens acting out in their classes as a way to avoid being embarrassed in front of their peers.

The teachers responded as they best knew how, implementing the classroom management methods they had been taught. So these students were often kicked out of their classrooms, put in detention, and expelled. Uncovering the root of the issue, and recognizing that the students were trying to hide the fact that they needed help, the staff and tutors at the Homework Center began working with the students more intensively to support their school work and bring them up to the level of their peers more quickly.

The situation was also difficult for parents who were unfamiliar with the level of parental involvement expected in U.S. schools. From their own experiences in East Africa, the issue a student may have at school is dealt with at school and rarely involved the parent. In addition, the parents were dealing with their own culture shock and adjustment, so as much as they may have wanted to they were not able to be the advocate of their child's education.

Phenomenal breakthroughs occurred when I began speaking with our student's teachers on behalf of their parents. Upon explaining the student's background, the teachers became mindful of our students in the classroom and moved from more punitive classroom management methods to greater empathy and supports. Teachers were now aware of the tutoring and homework help we were offering and saw us as aids in the learning process. Among other things, we held semester-long competitions challenging our students to improve performance in several areas; the incentive was a new pair of sneakers, generously sponsored by a third party. The students' behavior and grades improved greatly and I am thrilled to report that many pair of stylish sneakers were earned!

I am proud that the Homework Center helped many students. In 2006, I received national recognition from [Bridging Refugee Youth and Children's Services](#) in Washington D.C. It was a huge honor. Today those children have graduated from high school, with some even pursuing higher education with a passion to serve the communities they grew up in.

## **Women at the Well**

I've now been working with refugees here in the United States for 15 years. I know what happens when a refugee arrives here. I know there is a limited amount of time for U.S. government assistance toward the resettlement process: three months. Three months to do many things, including find housing, apply and get a job, obtain a driver's license, figure out how to grocery shop, and learn the language and adjust to the culture. But we know that refugees can spend up to twenty-five years warehoused in refugee camps and waiting for an opportunity to begin anew. Could we take advantage of this time? I began to see this as time that should be utilized to prepare refugees for life after resettlement rather than rely on the ninety days we have with them once the refugee arrives here. Now my goal is to help refugees gain the skills necessary to have a smoother transition and be able to support themselves sooner. That is the focus of my current project, [Women at the Well](#).

As part of the mission of Women at the Well, I have been returning to Ethiopia annually to build a school in a refugee camp. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), has given Women at the Well responsibility for a refugee camp in Northern Ethiopia for children without parents. The new school's aim is to provide life skills and cultural assistance to these young refugees before they are placed in their new home. Upon my initial visit, I quickly realized that the conditions of refugee camps are not designed to house people for twenty-five years or more. Additionally, the conditions of refugee camps have drastically worsened since I was a refugee in the 1980s, while the number of years and number of people residing there is increasing. You can learn more about the work at the refugee camp in this [video](#).

## **What can you do?**

I consider our world as a big puzzle, and we all are one piece of that puzzle. No one in

this puzzle is unimportant nor more important: we all have a place and when we all fit in our place, only then we can see the beauty of the puzzle. My hope is we do not neglect the importance of our existence. What can you do make the next person's life worth of living? "We are our brother's keepers," and the Bible tells us to, "Love your neighbor as yourself," in the other words, I need you and you need me.

Your interactions with your students, their parents and your neighbors, family, and friends is an opportunity to make a real, lasting impact in their lives. I encourage you to think practically on how you can help fulfill a need that you notice. I wrote my two children's books, "My African Heritage" and "My American Heritage," because my children were being bullied at their school for being African and were teased with all the misconceptions of what life is like in Africa. I wanted them to be proud of their heritage and to educate their peers on all that 'being American' can look like. Take it from me, if you notice a need, and it lingers on your heart, find a way to fill it. Disregard thoughts that you feel you are not qualified or that you are unimportant. You can use your story, the obstacles and triumphs, as the qualifications to relate and help your students. You are an important piece of the puzzle for your community.

I have devoted my life to making a difference in my community and the world around me. It began with becoming a activist within the East African community in South Minneapolis, sharing my story and advocating for immigrants and refugees, and it has grown to have a world-wide impact. I won't lie to you and say that the road was always easy. But through it all, I have found that the obstacles often present more opportunities to do good.

Sometimes people ask me, "How can I make a difference? I don't have anything." You can smile for your neighbor, classmate, student, or coworkers. Give a hug to someone who is heartbroken. Volunteer to baby-sit for a struggling single mom in your neighborhood. Cook a meal for a college student who is away from home. Rake leaves or shovel the snow for your elder in your community. Visit new Americans who are missing their family at holiday time. Make a difference in your home and your community. Maybe you have ability to write, poetry, drama fiction encouraging stories, drawing, making documentaries, writing songs, teaching, organizing, decorating, overseeing, or encouraging people. We all have a gift that with your time can be used for helping others. Whatever you can do, do it to make a difference. That is the "Value of one life," your life, go and do it!

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Shegitu Kebede was born in Ethiopia, spent time in a refugee camp in Kenya, then resettled in the United States as a refugee. She has overcome multiple obstacles to become a successful entrepreneur, published author, motivational speaker, and is the recipient of multiple awards honoring her community work. Currently, Ms. Kebede is the

founder and president of Women International at the Well and co-owner of Flamingo Restaurant in St Paul, Minnesota. More at [Ms. Kebede's website](#).