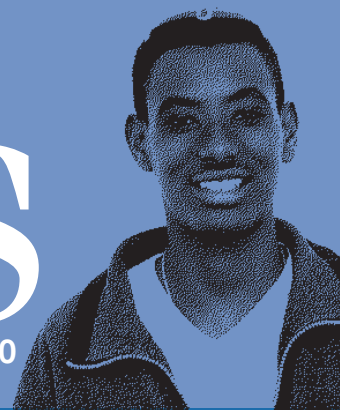




Bridges

SUMMER 2010



THE NACOEJ/EDWARD G. VICTOR HIGH SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM

Talent Runs in the Family

Talented in dance and music, ambitious for careers in architecture and technology, interested in helping children... between the two of them, Tzlil and Etti Leijashel may just conquer the world! What is the cause of their success? Their mother, Rachel Teleh, credits the NACOEJ high school program, saying, "You played an integral role in enabling them to study in a school where they could realize their talents." However, she plays an important role in their achievements too. When we asked her what she would have done without this help, she said that she would have taken on yet another job to pay to keep the girls in *Omanuyot*, Ashkelon's High School for the Arts. "Another job" would be in addition to working in a kindergarten and an after-school program, studying for a degree in special education and handling the challenges of being a single mother.

Tzlil and Etti's experiences show how a high-level education gives them opportunities they would not have otherwise. Etti, the school's first Ethiopian graduate, currently holds a good job in high-tech at a well-known Israeli cell phone company and plans to go to university. Her mother notes that Etti also "held an important post" when she served in the Israeli army, "thanks to her high marks in physics" in high school. Etti later received an award for her work in the army's intelligence division. As a



Rachel and Tzlil spoke at an Ethiopian coffee ceremony for NACOEJ/Young Leadership Mission participants last summer.

pianist and singer, Etti has performed in a benefit concert in Austria and made a recording with her musical group, *Tzeirei Ashkelon* ("Youth of Ashkelon"), in Germany to aid disadvantaged children. It was one of her high school teachers who helped make these connections. Etti's sponsor, award-winning author **Barbara Meislin** of Tiburon, California, says that sponsoring Etti "gave her great joy."

Tzlil, the younger sister, excels in both her studies and dance program at *Omanuyot*. Her sponsor, **Sarah Gross** of New York, is actually a student herself- on the occasion of her Bat Mitzvah, Sarah chose to help another student in need. Tzlil is due to graduate in 2011 and says, "My dream is to be an architect and I want to complete

Tzlil says, "My dream is to be an architect and I want to complete my math and physics studies successfully so I can do just that."

my math and physics studies successfully so I can do just that." She also volunteers as a counselor for *Hashomer Hatzair* (a Zionist youth movement) and participates in a program called "Salam to the World" that brings together Israeli and Bedouin teenagers.

Last year, NACOEJ received a special request from Tzlil's school. Each year, *Omanuyot's* eleventh grade goes to Poland to learn about Jewish communities destroyed in the Holocaust. The trip is considered important for the development of the students' Jewish identity and

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HIGH SCHOOL SPONSORSHIPS HELP STUDENTS ATTEND GOOD LOCAL SCHOOLS

Started over a decade ago, the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program has enabled countless Ethiopian teenagers to stay home and attend high-quality local schools instead of going away to state-subsidized boarding schools, many of which do not provide a high-level education. While basic tuition is covered by the government, schools charge additional compulsory fees that are often beyond the means of Ethiopian immigrant families. The NACOEJ scholarships defray most of the costs of these fees, and as a result, more Ethiopian students are studying at good local schools and taking advantage of all educational and social activities. Ultimately, they earn an education that increases their chances of getting into college, which improves their chances of breaking out of the cycle of poverty.

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.



An Ethiopian Officer in the IDF Inspires High School Students

Our sponsorships help Ethiopian-Israeli students financially, but we also look for ways to inspire them. One way is to have graduates of the NACOEJ/Vidal Sassoon Adopt-A-Student (AAS) College Sponsorship Program speak to high school students about their own educational experiences and successes. This winter, NACOEJ arranged for AAS alumnus, Major Shetu Metakia, to speak to 11th and 12th grade students in Elyashiv Yeshiva in Lod. Metakia spoke first about his escape from Ethiopia as a child of six, making his way to Sudan on foot in 1984. He then described his rise in the Israeli army to his current position, in which he works with civilian industries and volunteer corps to prepare for times of emergency.

Metakia stressed the importance of making the most of national army service and academic studies. He especially encouraged the Ethiopian students, noting that there are now a number of high-ranking Ethiopian-Israelis in the IDF. "You, today's youth, are the high-ranking officers of the future," Metakia told them. Elyashiv arranged to have Metakia speak to both Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian students, which was a source of pride for the Ethiopian students.

Major Shetu Metakia speaks to students in Elyashiv Yeshiva High School. Photo: Kassahun Wondie

Great Gains – Great Goals

This year has seen some good news about Ethiopian-Israeli high school students: Their drop-out rate has fallen dramatically and their national test scores have risen. Last fall, the Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel published a report that showed that the drop-out rate for Ethiopian high school students in the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years was actually lower than that of other Israelis. Just a few years ago the Ethiopian drop-out rate was at more than three times the rate of the general population. The new report also found that an increasing number of Ethiopian students are earning *bagrut* (national matriculation) diplomas at a level that enables them to be accepted into universities and colleges.

The NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program plays a significant part in helping Ethiopian students achieve this success. Our scholarships enable Ethiopian youngsters to attend good local high schools which give them the support they need to excel. Shalom Markowicz, the director of Elyashiv Yeshiva High School of Lod, which has a large number of Ethiopian students, explains that "Year after year, our success rate [on the matriculation exams] is significantly higher and often doubles that of most schools in Ramle and Lod" because the school develops a personalized program for each student. Where do the NACOEJ

sponsorships come in? He writes that the scholarships help the school "invest in our students above and beyond what is typical in other schools."

More good news comes from Rehovot, where NACOEJ has given scholarships to

hundreds of high school students, including more than 300 in this year alone. New figures show that 90% of Rehovot's Ethiopian high school age students now attend local schools, compared to 90% going away to boarding schools ten years ago. Additionally, last year, 60% of Ethiopian high school students in the city received full *bagrut* diplomas, higher than the national average of 55%.

However, these gains are not enough. Last year, only 36% of Ethiopian teenagers nationwide earned *bagrut* diplomas, still significantly below the Israeli average. Ethiopian students must still overcome many obstacles in order to succeed, including dealing with their families' struggles. A large number come from immigrant households and many have parents who are either unemployed or who work at subsistence-level jobs.

What do we learn from all of this? All the data, the good news and the bad, points to the importance of programs like the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program that give Ethiopian students the extra support they need for their education. Young Ethiopians are eager to catch up with and even surpass their peers, but they still need our help at this crucial juncture. NACOEJ sponsors can feel proud of their impressive contribution to the Ethiopian community in Israel!

One NACOEJ-sponsored student from Rehovot, whose father is unemployed and whose mother works as a cleaner, describes her family's challenges:

"I really want to do well at school, get a degree at university and succeed in life. Everything is for mom... It is hard for me to see her cleaning. She does everything for us so that we will have food to eat at home. She is always telling me to study... and apply myself so that I won't end up a cleaner like her. She says that I am lucky to have all of the opportunities that I do and that she would have died to have just a third of what I do... I want to succeed for her ... and of course I will do everything I can to realize this."

A Deeper Involvement

An educator by profession, New Jersey native Diana Yacobi was drawn to an article about our high school sponsorship program in one of NACOEJ's *Lifeline* newsletters. Last May, she decided to get involved by sponsoring ten students and was matched to a group of seventh and eighth graders in the AMIT School in Kiryat Malachi.

Diana's scholarships cover basic school fees and enable the school to offer enrichment activities, such as special lectures. A recent lecture about addiction prevention was well-received by students. Another special activity was the school's annual field trip to the southernmost tip of Israel, an experience that most of the Ethiopian students would never have been able to afford otherwise.

These students are also benefiting academically. Four of Diana's ten students study in the school's highest track, two of whom are aiming to be doctors or lawyers. Another, Adisso Tebebal, has been identified as an exceptional student and participates in advanced study programs. In seventh grade, he took first place in the Jewish Knowledge (*Musagim Bayahadut*) contest at the regional level.

But Diana's involvement with her students does not end with the scholarships. She has travelled to Kiryat Malachi twice in the past year to meet her students and has discovered that they especially enjoy practicing their English on her. Always the educator, she shares books (in English and Hebrew) with them, to encourage their interest in reading. Diana is already thinking about her next trip!



NACOEJ staff member Leah Barkai and Diana Yacobi (second and third from left) with Diana's students, who fill the room!

Photo: Kassahun Wondie

Talent Runs in the Family *Continued from Page 1*

the whole class participates. However, the cost of the trip was beyond the capabilities of Tzlil's family. NACOEJ does not usually make special arrangements but when we learned that Tzlil would be the only student left behind, we arranged a contribution from a "special needs" fund to enable her to go.

Looking back on the eight-day trip, Tzlil wrote us:

"The trip to Poland was the most special experience I have ever had. ...I received this wonderful opportunity to learn more about my roots and the history of my people, the Jewish people."

"My feeling of attachment to Israel and my love for it only got stronger. When we were aboard the plane on the way back and I saw Israel from above ... I felt that I was returning to a warm and loving home."



High School Student Wins Ethiopian Heritage Competition



Bezuayo, which means "I saw many new things" in Amharic, is Mazal Avig's Ethiopian name. Bezuayo is a reference to her parents' new life in Israel – Mazal is the seventh child in her family but the first to be born in Israel and Mazal has turned out to be a girl who seeks out new experiences herself. For example, Mazal made the difficult choice to switch to the Oren Ginsburg High School last year so that she could take special physics, biology and computer courses.

Mazal's thirst for knowledge was recognized by her counselor in Yavne's Young Leadership Program, who asked her to represent the group in the city's annual Ethiopian Heritage Competition. Mazal prepared by studying a book on Ethiopian-Jewish life, but her family clearly plays the biggest role in her appreciation of her Ethiopian heritage. She says that her family regularly gets together to recount stories of their life in Ethiopia and their dreams to come to Israel. It is not surprising that Mazal and a friend took first place in the competition held last November.

Mazal feels that winning the contest has given her self-confidence to pursue other goals. She plans to have a profession that will enable her to afford to open a shelter for homeless children. She is also inspired by her sponsor, **Harriet Silber** of Atlantic Beach, NY, to whom she writes, "I have never known anyone willing to give without expectation of anything in return. I am sure that with your donation, you have enabled me and other children like me to learn in a better and more efficient manner." For now, this tenth grader will continue to study and to volunteer as a counselor for younger children. So far, her hard work has brought her good *Mazal*, or "luck" in Hebrew!

Headline and photo from the *Yavnaton*, a local Israeli newspaper.

Helping at Home – and Helping Others

Ethiopian high school students in our program work hard to make the most of their education. However, many come from large families with one or two unemployed parents. This often means that high school students take on many responsibilities at home, including working part-time jobs to help out the family. Your sponsorships relieve them of some of their financial pressures, so they can focus on studies and volunteer activities. The three profiles below represent the dedication of many of the students in the high school program.



YAACOV TEMENU,

although only in eighth grade in the ORT Rehovot School, is already serious about his future. In seventh grade he made sure to attend an after-school program in order to improve his study skills. Yaacov is one of ten children in his family and lives in Rehovot. He feels that the sponsorship he receives from the **Kenneth A. Lattman Foundation, Inc.**, based in Coral Gables, Florida, benefits his whole family because it helps his parents with school fees.

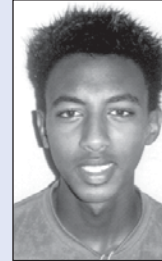
Yaacov is also serious about helping others. Last summer, a presentation on the dangers of alcohol abuse made such an impact on him that he helped start a group, "Youth Against Alcohol and Drugs". He is now also an official spokesperson for the "Say No to Drugs and Yes to Life" program. In his downtime, Yaacov squeezes in some hobbies – playing soccer and computer games.



ISRAELA SABAHT

graduated this June and will soon begin army service. In 12th grade, a typical week for Israela included extra hours of study at a local center for Ethiopian students, helping out at home, assisting senior citizens in her community and babysitting for free for financially-strapped mothers. She also kept busy during vacation – last summer she worked as a waitress and was a Scouts camp counselor.

Israela is sponsored by a group coordinated by **Joseph Smiga and Linda Feinberg** of Manchester, New Hampshire. The group supported her through all six years of secondary school at the Alon Ginsburg School in Yavne. In a letter thanking her loyal sponsors, she described how the scholarship helped her get extra tutoring and take part in social activities at school. Still looking out for others, Israela asks that other Ethiopian students be given sponsorships so that they can have an equally good experience in school.



DAVID SWANECH

hopes to be recruited into a combat unit in the Israeli army so that he can "give back to his country." He also plans to attend university. He has been working towards these goals by attending summer school and being a participant in a program that helps teenagers develop their computer skills and qualify for better posts in the army. Part of the project involves having the participants run a computer lab in a local community center. David also worked every day after school in an event hall, waiting tables and helping in the kitchen.

After six years at the Alon Ginsburg School in Yavne, David is looking forward to the next stage of his life, and profusely thanks his sponsor, **Jacob Samkoff** of Washington Township, New Jersey, for his support throughout high school.

JUST THE FACTS

Did you know that in the 2009-2010 school year...

- **994** students were sponsored in the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program.
- **53** schools in Israel participated in the program in **18** cities in Israel.
- **150** of our students graduated high school.
- More than **100** students on our waiting list did not receive sponsorships. **WE NEED MORE SPONSORS!**

Be An Ambassador

We are happy to bring you the fifth issue of "Bridges", written by Judy Dick, Coordinator of Educational Programs, with the invaluable help of Leah Barkai, the Israel Coordinator of the NACOEJ/Edward G. Victor High School Sponsorship Program. Let us know if you have news about your own students to share!

Please pass this newsletter on to friends and family who might also be interested in supporting high school students. You are an ambassador for these wonderful boys and girls, and your endorsement will go a long way toward enabling more Ethiopian teens to get the education they need in Israel. Thank you! Please feel free to call Judy Dick at 212-233-5200, ext. 230 or e-mail highschool@nacoelj.org.



**NORTH AMERICAN CONFERENCE ON ETHIOPIAN JEWRY
NACOEJ/EDWARD G. VICTOR HIGH SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP PROGRAM**

255 West 36th St. • Suite 701 • New York, NY 10018 • 212-233-5200 Ext 230 • Fax: 212-233-5243
E-mail: highschool@nacoelj.org • Web: www.nacoelj.org