



## The Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp

# *The Gift of Belonging*

By Elizabeth Scheld Glynn

When my husband and I decided to adopt a child from Ethiopia, one of the tantalizing aspects of the adventure was the promise of bringing a new culture into our lives. As we waded through the endless adoption paperwork and counted the days for a referral and a court date, we took advantage of the wait to explore the culture through books, food, music and coffee. We fell in love with Ethiopia as we fell in love with our new daughter, Mati. By the time we picked her up in Addis on Christmas Eve 2007, we were looking forward to blending American and Ethiopian cultures in our home.

Except that Mati was having none of it. Mati came ready to embrace us and a new life, and in her mind, that life did not contain things Ethiopian. In Ethiopia, she lost her parents, and endured years of pain and hearing loss due to ear infections. To her, Ethiopia was a place of sadness and suffering. She was too young

to understand her culture while she lived it or to appreciate her “Ethiopian-ness” as she left it behind. So, while Mati closed her heart and mind to the country of her birth, we struggled to find ways to help her embrace her birth place.

About the same time, Mekdes Bekele was starting a business and found she was attracting some unusual customers. Bekele and her husband who had emigrated from Ethiopia to the United States in the 1980s, became parents of their daughter in 2003. They worried how their daughter would communicate with her grandparents in Ethiopia and appreciate her special heritage. “There were no tools — no books, no videos, no learning materials — to keep her connected to our family and our culture,” Bekele said. So Bekele solved the problem in 2006 by creating AbshiroKids, an online resource for books, DVDs, posters, CDs and other learning materials in Amharic and

English, many written and produced by Bekele. She chose the name AbshiroKids to honor her grandfather, a carpenter by trade, who built the first schoolhouse in his region.

While Ethiopian-American families enthusiastically began buying materials from AbshiroKids, Bekele soon noticed that she was shipping orders to names that weren’t Ethiopian. Intrigued, she called one of these customers and asked why they were buying Amharic learning materials. Bekele discovered that there were more Ethiopian-American children in the United States than she realized — children adopted from Ethiopia. Bekele found several adoption support groups in various parts of the country, and began teaching Amharic and sharing her products with them.

“I was overwhelmed that these American parents were making such an effort to ensure their children remembered and loved their native

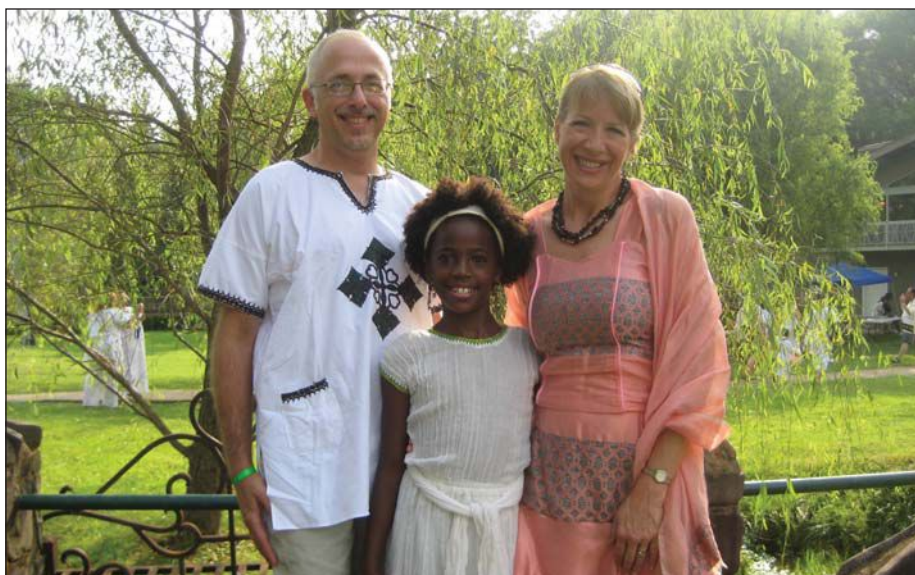
language and culture,” Bekele said. “I felt that as an Ethiopian, I had a responsibility to help them.”

It was through one of these groups that Bekele met Carol Bittner-Stimely, Deedie Stuart, Lori Oliver-Owens, Trisha Meyers and Julie Caran, all adoptive mothers of Ethiopian children. Bekele and the women shared conversations that began with how to help their children connect with Ethiopia and ended with a realization that both adoptive and immigrant families have the same needs: Keeping culture and language alive for their first-generation Ethiopian-American children. The seeds for the Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp were planted.

The camp, now in its fourth year, is held over a long weekend in July or August at Massenetta Springs Conference Center in Harrisonburg, Va. The camp is open to children of Ethiopian heritage and their families. Last year a total of 350 people participated in the four-day event. Most families were from the East Coast, but participants came from as far away as California, Washington, Arizona and Belgium.

Mati and I have gone to camp every year. As soon as we get out of the car at Massenetta Springs we are immersed in the sights and sounds of Ethiopia. The sound of the krar drifts across the parking lot as Temesgen plays under a shady tree. Walking toward registration, we see Ethiopian children and their ferengi siblings, many dressed in traditional Ethiopian clothes, playing on the lawn or sitting quietly listening to the music. At the registration desk, Mati finds herself enveloped in the embraces of beautiful Ethiopian women in their stunning traditional clothes. In an instant, any negative thoughts about Ethiopia evaporate, and she’s hooked. Back in our hometown, Mati sometimes thinks she looks out of place as she runs errands with her white-skinned mother. But at camp, I’m the one feeling out of place in my shorts and t-shirts, watching these beautiful and graceful women in their flowing white dresses give loving embraces to my daughter.

Thanks to Bekele’s connections in the Washington, D.C., Ethiopian community, the camp is well-staffed with Ethiopian-Americans, giving the camp an authentic atmosphere as



**PARTICIPATING** at Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp is Mati and her parents, Elizabeth and Rob.

they run the camp behind the scenes, lead workshops and perform traditional music and dance.

The camp is tailored to the interests of both adults and children. Adults might attend language and history lessons, cooking classes, travel seminars or panel discussions on raising first-generation Ethiopian-Americans. Children participate in craft, language, history and etiquette classes. The highlight of last year’s camp was a dance performance by children who had participated in an intensive dance workshop.

There’s plenty of time for socializing and relaxing, and children and adults look forward to swimming, the opening night bonfire, movie night and games. During breaks girls have their hair braided and children play soccer on the lawn, while adults take part in the coffee ceremony or browse the market for Ethiopian clothing, foods or souvenirs.

The camp is a reunion for many families. Several of Mati’s friends from her orphanage in Addis attend the camp. We both look forward to reuniting with these children and their families who, through our shared experience of adoption, have become part of our extended family.

The highlight of the camp is the traditional Ethiopian banquet on the last night. The evening takes on a celebratory feel with everyone dressed in traditional Ethiopian finery. After the meal, Almaz dazzles everyone with a dance per-

formance, and then invites children and adults to join her. The Ethiopians in the group encourage the ferengi and teach them to move their shoulders in true Ethiopian style. By the end of the evening, everyone is on their feet, and the feeling that we are one community together is overwhelming. This, says Bekele, is what she dreamed of when she created the camp.

“There is a feeling you get here that isn’t easy to explain. This is more than a vacation. It’s an experience that lets these children know that they have worth, that they are an important part of a community, and that they are loved — by their parents, who want to give them this experience, and by Ethiopians who want to share our beautiful heritage. This is where they belong.”

For my daughter, Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp has been transformative. Last year after camp, she turned to me and said, “Mom, don’t you wish you were Ethiopian?” This is the gift of Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp: It has made my daughter proud to be an Ethiopian; and for a few days every July, I feel like one too.

*Elizabeth Scheld Glynn is a freelance writer, jazz singer and community volunteer from Newton, North Carolina. She and her husband, Rob, are the parents of three children, two biological boys ages 15 and 19, and one adopted daughter, age 10, who came from Ethiopia to her forever home on December 31, 2007.*