



Oh! Was I wrong!

By Bilen Yoseph

Every summer for four years now, I have been volunteering at a camp called Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp. When I first decided to volunteer it was because my cousin asked me for help. I was not excited about spending four hot days at a camp with little kids, but it was a family thing so I said yes and joined them. Little did I know that this camp was going to change some lives.

As I said before, the camp is called Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp — To connect, to be educated. It's for families raising Ethiopian-American children. It's about keeping the kids connected to their heritage so that they are well-rounded individuals. There are language classes, history classes, cooking classes and more.

The kids also get to sing, dance and play games that we used to play back home in Ethiopia. When this idea was explained to me I thought, "OK that's nice, but I didn't fully understand the effect it could have on the families. You see, I came to this country when I was 11 years old, so I had a taste of my culture. I remember most things, I have a big family and I also live in the area that has the biggest population of Ethiopians outside of Ethiopia. I have had my culture around me all the time; so going to a camp to see more of it didn't excite me that much.

Oh! Was I wrong! By the end of the fourth day of that first year, I was emotionally DRAINED. Seeing all these kids who were born here in the United States, or were adopted, or who came here at a young age enjoy every single bit of the camp was an amazing feeling. Parents thanked

us over and over again for bringing the pride back to their kids' eyes and for bringing the memories of home right here to Virginia.

We welcome the families to the camp wearing traditional clothing from different areas of Ethiopia, we have a coffee ceremony waiting for them under a willow tree, and the kids either play traditional games or get their hair braided. All attendees receive T-shirts made in Ethiopia.

Our banquet has traditional food catered by one of the best Ethiopian restaurants in the Washington D.C. area. Professional dancers show off their dance moves. We made toys and decorations from simple items you find around the house, just like we did as kids growing up.

We showed them how to have fun outside with these items. To help families connect even more we set out maps of the United States and Ethiopia and the families put pins to show what state they came from and what part of Ethiopia the kids and their families come from. They get to see who from the camp is from the same area as they are. The connections they make at this camp will last them a lifetime.

At this past year's camp we even had two children that were guests in previous years who become volunteers. I never thought four days could make such a big difference in someone's life, but it does and I am proud to be a part of it. So after four years, I still go through the same emotions as the first year.

Of course, the first one started out with me

complaining about how much work is waiting for us and how hot it's going to be, but I got over that once the camp started. Every year, parents come up to us volunteers and tell us in tears how much we have helped their children connect and feel proud.

The camp director also receives e-mails and letters about what this camp has meant to them and their children. There is no amount of back pain and swollen feet and messed up hair and vacation hours spent at this camp that can make you say this is not worth it.

My nieces couldn't wait to go home and tell their grandma about all the things they did at the camp. They talked about getting to play the traditional musical instruments and making Injera, dancing at the banquet with the professional dancers, getting to ride the pony (Ferres Gilbiya) all the cotton candy and popcorn. . . (pew I'm tired just thinking about all the different activities we have), and when my sister asked my niece if she had a good time at the camp she told her. . . "Oh Yeah I wish I could live there." What more reason do I need to go back next year?

Bilen Yoseph was born in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Although she came to the United States at the age of 11, she has kept in close touch with her Ethiopian roots. Bilen is also one of the lead volunteers for the Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp. She not only spends many days and weeks in preparation for the camp, she also takes time off from work to run the camp with unmatched passion and dedication to kids at camp.