

Place of Vision

Massaneta Springs, which Native Americans long ago named a “Place of Vision,” was the setting for an annual Ethiopian Culture Camp I attended seven years ago in Virginia. Under the low hanging trees, sat rows of little girls having their hair braided by older girls. The little ones were sitting on the grass, all tilting back their heads and resting them on the legs of the older girls. The older girls sat on benches and with ultimate finesse, swiftly entwined the beautiful dark flurry hair of the young ones into shiny black braids. The tree shaded them from the summer sun and enveloped this special moment of tenderness. Little did I know that this image had made such an impression that it would stick with me for so many years. That was the first Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp, which I attended as a new adoptee. The Camp truly helped me revisit my homeland; it was an authentic vision that took me back to my experiences as a little girl living in Ethiopia.

My first experience of the Culture Camp was so impressionable because I was still trying to figure out American society and trying to adjust to this new culture. The Ethiopian Camp gave me a pause during this turmoil and helped me reconcile my two worlds. Among Ethiopian hosts celebrating our culture here in the United States, a safe environment was created that allowed me to revisit sights, sounds and smells I had known growing up. The poignant moments, the friends I made and I still hold dear, as well as the food we shared were a reaffirmation of the importance of our culture to our identities. During the intervening seven years, the same vision of the little girls under the tree played over and over in my head and I made a point to return to the same Heritage and Culture Camp in Virginia last summer.

As a young adult, now 20 and attending college, I volunteered to be a staff member for the 2015 Culture Camp, and share these same cherished experiences with other younger Ethiopian-Americans. I wanted to give back and celebrate my culture in a way that I knew best, through cooking. My fondest memories growing up were watching my grandmother prepare dishes that would take

all day to cook. While helping as best I could, she taught me her special recipes. Last summer, at the Culture Camp, I was able to lead a cooking class during which children of various ages came and helped me cook Ethiopian dishes, such as injera firfir, misir and shiro. It was not the cooking, however, that mattered the most to me, it was meeting the children and building a bond with them. In the days after the cooking class, the children would come to me and thank me for the tasty dishes they enjoyed. Food, though so essential, can evoke through our senses so many lost memories. It was such a rewarding experience and these encounters led to other shared moments like playing Suzi (Chinese jump rope), Futbol (soccer), Pepsi (tag) and Meharebosh (duck-duck goose). One little girl hardly left my side and followed me from place to place, joining in every activity. She would even dance imitating my every move of the Eskista dance held that evening.

I especially loved answering the questions from adults about growing up in America as an Ethiopian adoptee. I hope I was able to give the parents more insight into the struggle and emotional lives of their children. Seeing how much the camp meant to both the adults and children really made this place so special. Personally I felt it was tremendously fulfilling to be able to share my culture and give back to the community in the way I envisioned. I was amazed to still feel the same emotions I had felt seven years ago.

Simret Hunt attended the first Heritage and Culture Camp in 2009 as a young teenager and is now coming back to camp as a volunteer. Hunt wrote after the most recent camp: “My family and I attended Heritage and Culture Camp, the first time it opened. As an adoptee the camp meant a lot to me. I especially enjoyed connecting with other Ethiopian children my age. It was an amazing experience overall and I learned a lot. I would really like to help give others the same experience I had.” In addition to participating in the youth panel, she will handle the cooking lessons for this year’s camp. Hunt is currently a sophomore at Smith College in Massachusetts, studying economics and international relations.