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Tracing Roots



Photos by Traci White / DN-R

TOP: Almaz Getahun dances in traditional Ethiopian clothing after a dinner of authentic cuisine at Massanetta Springs Conference Center Saturday during a four-day camp for families who, either through adoption or heritage, have a connection to the culture. RIGHT: Elizabeth Fikru (left), 5, and Laney Owens, 4, twirl each other around while they dance at the camp.



Traci White / DN-R

Almaz Getahun (left) leads a dance circle along with her partner, Ashenafi Mitku (top, middle), for families with connections to Ethiopia on Saturday at the Massanetta Springs Conference Center.

Valley Home To Increasing Number Of Ethiopians

Ethiopia FROM PAGE A1

that kind of cultural experience that the camp — in its second year, held at Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center in Harrisonburg — strives to provide.

The four-day camp, which ended Sunday, is aimed at Ethiopian families who have immigrated to the United States, as well as American-born parents who have adopted children from the east African nation.

The central Valley is home to an increasing number of Ethiopian immigrants, due in part to its proximity to Washington, D.C. The nation's capital has the largest Ethiopian community in the United States. What's more, as countries like Russia and China have tightened restrictions on foreign adoptions, Ethiopia has become an increasingly popular choice among couples seeking to adopt a child. The nation now ranks 4th on the list of countries with the most adoptions by American parents. That's up from 16 just 10 years ago.

'WISE UP'

The goal of the camp, according to Bekele, is to provide campers with a place to meet and befriend other Ethiopian families, and learn more about, and immerse them-

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— MEKDES BEKELE
ETHIOPIAN HERITAGE AND
CULTURE CAMP FOUNDER

selves in, Ethiopian culture and traditions.

To accomplish this goal, the camp offers a plethora of activities and workshops. They range from cooking lessons, where campers are given recipes and spice lists to make traditional dishes at home, to sessions on hair and skin care.

Campers could also attend "WISE UP" sessions, designed to teach them how to deal with questions about adoption and "blended families."

"They just gave us information about what children see and perceive at different ages, about race and about being adopted," said Kevin Caran, who, with wife Julie, adopted 23-month-old Abinet from Ethiopia last month.

Bonding Time

The Carans, who helped organize the camp, said they felt it was important for their son to be able to connect to his Ethiopian culture by

spending time with other people who were born there.

"The people who are working with the kids are really from Ethiopia," Julie Caran said. "It's important for him [to know] that there are adults here that look like him."

Bekele agreed, adding that the mixing of the two groups — American-born residents and Ethiopian immigrants — is the crux of the camp.

"We want to make sure the kids feel their culture, with no division [between the groups]," she said. "There is this feeling [of community] when you're here that you can't really explain. You just have to feel it."

At least one camper said she did. Seven-year-old Masene Stimely, who traveled to the camp from Linticum, Md., with her parents and three sisters, said her favorite activity up to that point was painting a T-shirt with a picture of a "tukul," a traditional Ethiopian hut.

But naming her all-time favorite part of camp? That was a little trickier.

"I've got to say, about everything," she said. "I like everything about it."

COMING HOME

Camp Offers Reconnection For Families With Ethiopian Heritage

By KATE ELIZABETH QUERAM • Daily News-Record

HARRISONBURG

The opening night of the Ethiopian Heritage and Culture Camp was supposed to consist of a welcome ceremony and dinner for attending families, followed by a low-key campfire.

But as musicians gathered around the flames and played their traditional Ethiopian instruments, families — white parents with adopted Ethiopian children; Ethiopian parents

and their kids — began to dance.

"The way we dance, you can't really teach it. You just have to feel it," said Mekdes Bekele, the camp's founder. "And this was impromptu. The kids were dancing. All of us were dancing."

Cultural Immersion

Unplanned though it may have been, it's

See ETHIOPIA, Page A5

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