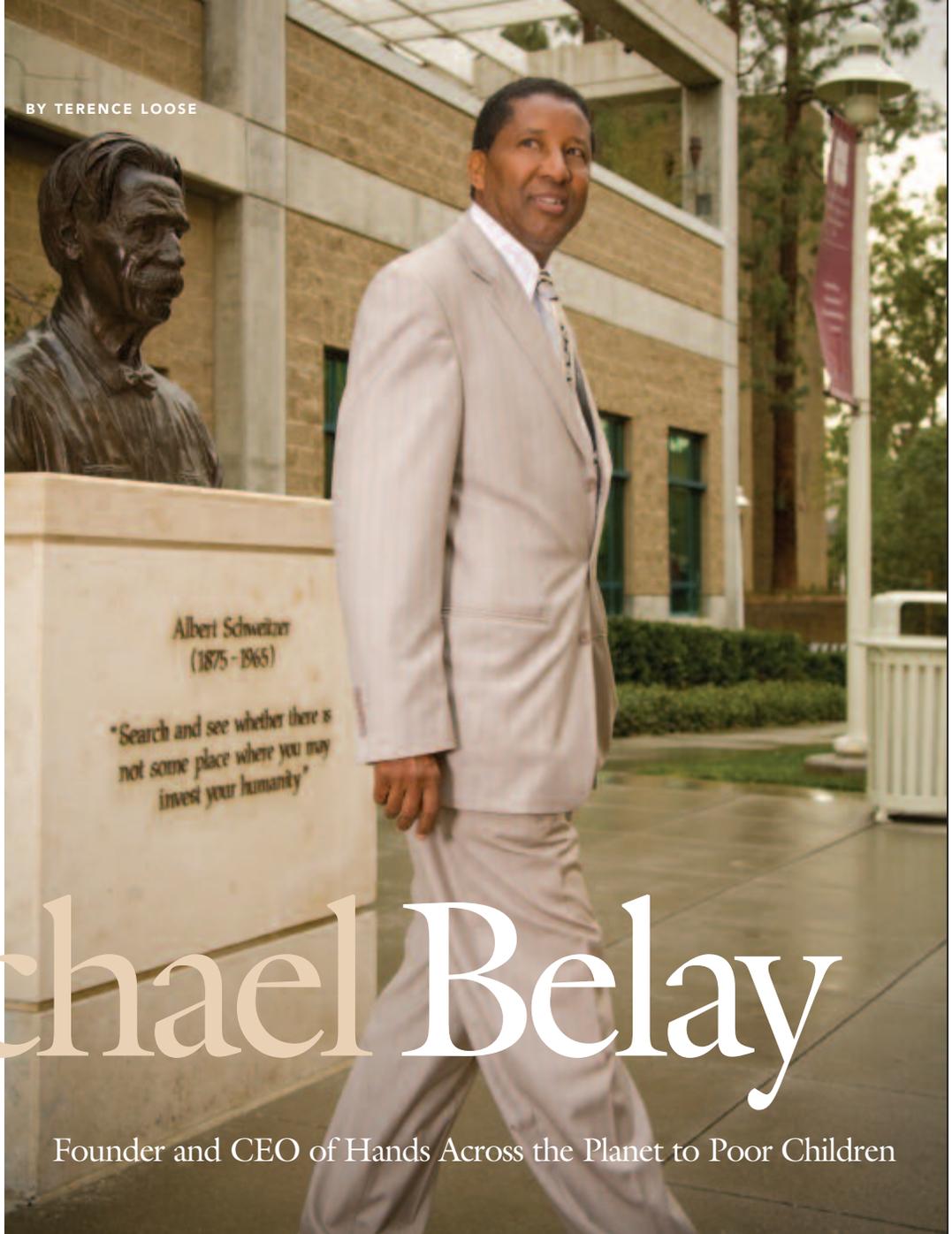


This Chapman University public safety officer, a native of Ethiopia, talks about why a simple trip home led to his receiving the 2007 Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence.



Michael Belay

Founder and CEO of Hands Across the Planet to Poor Children

In 1981, Tilahun Michael Belay came to America as a political refugee – with nothing. But he worked hard and within a few decades he had become a citizen, had a good job, had raised a family with three kids, and owned a nice home on a half acre of land in Corona. He was living the American dream.

Then he visited his hometown village of Tambien, Ethiopia, and his dream faded to illusion. Devastated by the poverty and suffering he found, especially among the children, he returned to America determined to rally help for medical supplies and to build a school for Tambien orphans. But after years of writing letters to people of influence, no help came.

Undeterred and haunted by visions of hungry children’s faces, he did the only thing his conscience would allow: He sacrificed his dream for theirs. He sold his home and used the proceeds to build the Tilahun Belay School, now with 250 kids and seven teachers, and supported through the nonprofit organization Belay founded – Hands Across the Planet to Poor Youth (H.A.P.P.Y., www.happyinethiopia.org). For his efforts, Belay was given the prestigious 2007 Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence.

But Belay’s story doesn’t stop there. He is working tirelessly to raise funds for a medical clinic and water purification system for the Tambien region. “Mothers will carry their children four



Michael Belay in his home town of Tambien, Ethiopia with some of the children he's helped.

kilometers to a clinic, hoping just to save them. Kids are dying every day from diseases easily avoided," he says. "Every day." And Belay's passion seems infectious, as his friend and now H.A.P.P.Y. Vice President Craig Lee discovered. "I got involved watching Michael work his tail off trying to help," Lee says. "He showed me a couple of videos of the children and the school. And once you see the videos, you have no choice but to help."

Many at Chapman felt the same way, resulting in gifts from some of the county's most prominent philanthropists and a planned February 19 gala to raise funds for medical supplies and a water purification system. There will be a price-per-plate dinner, followed by a celebration open to the public that will showcase Ethiopian food, dance, music, and culture. It's the next step in Belay's march toward fulfilling his Great Ethiopian Dream, to bring hope to forgotten kids in a forgotten corner of the world. "I am just one man. I am doing what I can. But it is not enough," he says, holding back tears. "But I also have hope. I have a dream and I just know it will come true."

Where were you born?

I was born in the Ethiopian village of Tambien. But my father became a judge when I was seven and we moved to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia's capital.

You had to join the army at a young age?

When I was 13 I had to join the army, yes, but it wasn't that bad because we

were only at war with Somalia. It was not a civil war, which was much worse.

What happened when civil war did break out in 1975?

My father told me it was too dangerous to stay and I had to leave. He said they would kill us all. So, with my brother, I walked to Sudan. It took three months. We walked by night, using the stars as a guide, then slept by day because it was so hot. We ate mostly fruit from trees and found water where we could. I lived in Sudan for a few years, and then made it to Europe. I finally came to California in 1981 as a political refugee and became a citizen.

And your father?

A year after we left, insurgents killed him and 25 others and burned their bodies.

When did you return to your home for the first time?

In 2000 I went back to visit my family, but I couldn't find anyone but my mom. Everyone else had been killed. I searched, on foot since that was the only way. I walked through villages, for many kilometers, and I kept finding children. They were orphaned, dying, living under trees, or out in the open. I would sometimes go to pick a child up and find that they were dead. It was very sad. It broke my heart to see my home in such a bad state and I knew I had to do something.

What did you do?

I didn't have much money, but I went

to the city and bought as much clothing as I could. Then I went back and found 150 orphans. They had nothing, so I gave them the clothes and anything I could. But I could not do a lot. So I promised them I would come back. I told them I'd return to America and get people interested and come back and build a school for them. They were so excited. They wanted to learn, but they had no books or pencils, nothing. Yet they were still smiling, happy, full of hope.

Did you get the response you were hoping for?

I tried. I founded the nonprofit, H.A.P.P.Y., and contacted everyone I could, sending letters to President Bush, Bill Gates, Oprah, Queen Elizabeth, and Prince Charles of England, and so many others to try to get some help. Anything at all. For more than three years I did that and got nowhere. I got rejection letter after rejection letter. The comedians Bernie Mac and Arsenio Hall sent me an autographed photo. What am I going to do with that? How is that going to help a child?

Why doesn't the Ethiopian government help?

The government is trying but it's broke from all the wars over so many years. They didn't do anything but fight and make war and so now they have no money.

So you finally sold your Corona del Mar home in 2004?

I had no choice; I had run out of options. I asked my family, and they knew we had to do it, too, so we moved to a small apartment here and I took the money back to Tambien and built a school.

That must have been a very difficult decision.

Yes and no. I love America, it has given me so much. I have a car, I have a job, I have so much. But these children have nothing. Nothing. And they are still happy, they still have hope. It's truly incredible. I think sometimes we take what we have for granted.

Did your act inspire others to get

involved?

Yes. After that, [Orange developer] Roger Hobbs bought us 100 desks and chairs for the classrooms. Staples donated school supplies and [Chapman Trustee] Paul Musco paid \$6,500 to ship them over. And Chapman donated computers.

What's next?

A water purification system is badly needed. It would save the population of 30,000. The people drink from the river, which is used for everything, like washing clothes and bathing. The livestock also uses it, so it is very unclean. The children get malaria, the number one killer, and other bacterial diseases from it. So that is my number one problem to solve right now.

Have you made progress?

Yes. Michael Slaby of Pure Effect is helping me. He has designed a system, but the cost to get it up and running is \$907,000. [Slaby] is spending \$50,000 of his own money to come, with his engineer, to Africa with me to make sure the system will work. But once it is set up, it's solar powered and very cheap, so it would go on saving people's lives, possibly for the next generation and the next.

How will you raise the money?

I'm hoping that we can raise it during our February 19 fundraiser. I have hope. I have a dream and I just know it will come true.

And if not?

The children are waiting. And they are dying while they wait. So I will send more letters. I will talk to more people. I'll do whatever it takes. We have so many generous people in this country, so I just know that if they saw the children, if they saw their need and their hope, they would help. I'm a believer in people and their hearts.

For information on the February 19 H.A.P.P.Y. event at Chapman University, call (714) 321-3752 or visit www.happynethiopia.org. Dinner is 6 to 8 p.m.; tickets are \$250; admission to the cultural party afterward, from 8 to 10 p.m., is \$20.☺