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Local man reaches a hand across planet

Michael Belay knew of the need in his Ethiopian hometown, and gave everything he had to help.



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Chapman University public safety officer Michael Belay saw a need and did something about it.

In 2000, while visiting the Ethiopian village he once called home, Belay saw many children without schooling of any kind. So he came back to the U.S., sold his home and used the funds to build the Tilahun Belay School, with 250 students

and seven teachers. It's supported by a nonprofit organization he founded – Hands Across the Planet to Poor Youth, or H.A.P.P.Y.

But Belay was not finished. On Feb. 19, at a fundraising and awareness event for his nonprofit held at Chapman University, Belay pleaded his case for a water-purification system and medical clinic for his impoverished home village of Tembien.

"Children, as well as men and women, are dying of malaria and bacterial diseases because of lack of water," he said. "They are drinking from the same muddy water where clothes are washed, people bathe and livestock frequent."

The event, themed "An Evening in Ethiopia," drew 85 guests to a pre-concert dinner in Chapman's Beckman Hall. Later, the general public gathered just outside Memorial Hall to sample tasty Ethiopian dinner fare, donated by Tana Ethiopian Restaurant in Anaheim.

Guests enjoyed Ethiopian entertainment provided by pastor and singer Iris Hailu from the Walk With Jesus Cathedral in Colton, the Revelation Dancers from Riverside and the Selassie Ethiopian Orthodox Church Choir from Los Angeles.

Dr. Marvin Meyer, professor of Bible and Christian studies and director of Chapman's Albert Schweitzer Institute, welcomed everyone, congratulating Belay for his recent honor as Chapman's Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence recipient. "Michael exemplifies Schweitzer's ethic of reverence for life,"

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Meyer said.

Chapman's president, Dr. Jim Doti, said:
"We have a quotation of Schweitzer's on a pedestal on campus that reads, 'Search and see whether there is not some place you may invest your humanity,' and Michael Belay has found that place. He is an incredible example to all members of our Chapman community of an individual who has found a way to invest in humanity by giving back."

Other speakers included noted Ethiopian author Ato Daniel Gizaw , a longtime friend of Belay's, and Michael Slaby , president of Pure Effect Inc., who is heading the team to develop a nearly \$1 million water-purification system for Belay's village and its 30,000 residents.

Belay thanked Chapman trustees Roger Hobbs and S. Paul Musco – Hobbs for donating 100 desks and chairs to the new school and Musco for the \$6,500 to ship them. Over \$15,000 was netted for the cause.

For donations to the water-purification project, visit www.happyinethiopia.org.

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It was Bill Steiner' night.

His children were on hand (Laurie Hendron , Jimmy Steiner , Kristie Wetmore , Marcie Tripp and Scott Steiner) to cheer him on, as was his 90-year-old mother, Byrma Ritchey . As they watched, the Community Foundation of Orange

presented Steiner with its 2008 Community Champion Award for his lifetime of community involvement.

At the event, held Friday at The Grove of Anaheim, Steiner told a crowd of 336 about perspective:

"I measure progress in inches. I celebrate the successes. When I view the big tragic social problems as overwhelming and sort of a puzzle, a puzzle that has to be put together one piece at a time, I learned that the job is not done by one person. That perspective leads to optimism, opportunity and a significant life."

Steiner said he was touched that the foundation had brought Domingo Gutierrez , whom Steiner met when Gutierrez was a boy, from Dallas to the event.

"Domingo was a foster child I worked with 42 years ago," Steiner said. "... I was later best man at his wedding."

Gutierrez, who attended with his wife, Maria , said of Steiner's impact: "He was the first person in my life who really cared about me and was my first father figure. I also have Bill to thank for my good marriage because he taught me how to be a good person and care about others. I credit all I am, and that I am here today, to Bill Steiner."

A video tribute to Steiner included Michael McKenzie , whom Steiner met when he headed Orangewood Children's Home. "I have Bill to thank for finding me a wonderful family,"

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McKenzie said.

Steiner's good friend, "America's Most Wanted" host John Walsh , also commended him, via video, for his exemplary work with abused and neglected children.

Master of ceremonies **Jim Doti** helped auctioneer Larry Dick , whose razor-sharp wit kept people in stitches, with the live auction, which included a cash call for KidsPlay, a program that helps low-income children in Orange play recreational sports. Net proceeds reached \$64,000.

Others helping make the evening a success included CFO president Tim Paone , CFO executive director Susie Cunningham , Orange Mayor and honorary co-chairwoman Carolyn Cavecche and CFO founder Roger Hobbs (a past Community Award winner).

Hobbs lauded Steiner: "Bill has been a great community activist over the years. We are just delighted that at his age he is willing to serve on our foundation board."

Hobbs' wife, Kathy Hobbs , created the floral centerpieces. Villa Park High School's string octet and jazz ensemble provided entertainment during the reception and dinner.

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