

Sunday, February 24, 2008

# Parking lot attendant in Orange County, hero in Africa

Michael Belay sacrificed nearly everything to help strangers. It changed their lives, and his.

By **TOM BERG**

THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

ORANGE He writes parking tickets at Chapman University.

He patrols lots. Asks drivers to move. He's the guy people brush off. Avoid.

They hurry past without a glance as he tries to keep them out of a reserved lot. Or they lie when caught:

"I always park here," one student says when asked to leave a spot reserved for the Board of Governors.

Michael Belay remains polite, almost docile. Once in a while, on break, he can be found wandering the

second floor of the Argyros Forum, looking at pictures on the walls about a man he admires: humanitarian Albert Schweitzer.

"He saved lives," says Belay, 53, of Orange. "He built hospitals. When I see his story, it makes me so grateful."

But what can a parking-ticket man do to save the world? How can a former toilet-paper salesman help anyone? He is an ordinary man supporting a wife and kids.

Long ago, however, Belay wore a different uniform. Long ago, he walked three months to find freedom. Long ago, he survived four years in a refugee camp to reach America. After that, he made a promise to several strangers.

"I never give up," he says, in slightly broken English, 26 years after coming to America. "I am never going to stop until I die."

How he kept his promise makes people shake their head in disbelief. It makes them speak his name in the same breath as Albert Schweitzer.

And it gives them hope. Hope that any of us, even the parking-ticket guy, can change the world – if we're willing to try.

"AMAN" ("PEACE")

Michael's escape began in a stolen military vehicle and ended at gunpoint.

He'd always been a good Ethiopian boy. Born in the village of Tembien, he moved to the capital at age 7 with his father, a judge.

Michael was inducted into the military at age 13 – as most boys were. He had to train all night and attend school all day with little sleep.

Advertisement

"It was not easy," he says. "But it's not like America. Nothing is easy in Africa." ... *Continue reading on Page 2*

Contact the writer: 714-796-6979 or [tberg@ocregister.com](mailto:tberg@ocregister.com)

Advertisement



A bright idea in online advertising.

