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Survivor Success Story: Mezgebu Abiyu Tesfaye

by Bekele Gonfa [YYGM]

Mezgebu Abiyu Tesfaye, an Ethiopian landmine survivor, was born in the East Gojjam zone, Amhara region, in 1967. Raised in a farming family, Mezgebu left school after the eighth grade to help his parents care for their cattle and do daily chores.

In 1989, the army recruited him as a trainee soldier. In June 1990, his leg was injured in Eritrea by a simultaneous landmine explosion and machine-gun bullet. Mezgebu's left leg was amputated. Shrapnel wounds also injured his right eye. The machine-gun bullet wound on his residual leg left the area too weak for Mezgebu to use a prosthetic. Instead, he uses crutches because they allow him to move with greater flexibility and speed. His recovery and release from the hospital took nearly one year.

After leaving the hospital, Mezgebu moved back with his parents in East Gojjam. However, his parents were ashamed of his recently acquired disability. Believing that he could no longer be a useful and productive citizen, Mezgebu's father said that it would have been better if his son had died in the accident rather than losing a limb.

Leaving the family home, Mezgebu moved to the capital, Addis Ababa, renting a room in Piazza for 5 birr (US\$0.26 as of 24 September 2013) per day. Eventually, he found a job as a hotel security guard for 30 birr (US\$1.59) per month. Although the hotel provided his meals, Mezgebu made far less than the guards without disabilities who earned 75–80 birr (US\$3.97–\$4.23) per month, despite having the same responsibilities.



Mezgebu Tesfaye (far left).
Photo courtesy of Bekele Gonfa.

While working at the hotel and listening to the radio, Mezgebu heard about an amputee named Roba who traveled as a peace-walker. Inspired by the idea, Mezgebu decided to learn more about Roba and conduct his own peace walk with his friend and fellow amputee, Mogas. Mogas served in the army with Mezgebu and was also injured by a landmine. With support from individuals and the Addis Ababa municipality, the two men traveled from Addis Ababa to Moyale, a

distance of more than 700 km (434.96 mi). On their second journey they walked from Addis Ababa to Asmara, a distance of more than 1,000 km (621.37 mi). Mezgebu and Mogas traveled together for three-and-a-half months.

Their motto was "Let's end war, stop killing peaceful people and ruining property." They traveled to Yemen and Kenya, cutting their journey short in Kenya at Tika because of an Ebola epidemic in the region. Mogas became ill and traveled with Mezgebu back to Ethiopia, where he passed away a few days later. After the death of Mogas, Mezgebu ended his peace-walk campaign. Mezgebu then worked a number of odd jobs before Children's Hope International, an international adoption agency, hired him.

In 2004, Mezgebu co-founded *Yitawekilin Yeakal Gudatagnoch Mehiber* (YYGM), a local disability association where he is serving as manager.¹ The former nonprofit Survivor Corps established YYGM as a social-support group, and Mezgebu was chairman of the organization at that time. YYGM members are survivors, persons with disabilities and affected families.

The International Campaign to Ban Landmines and the Cluster Munition Coalition provided grant funding to YYGM for its Survivor Network Project for 2012–2013, a program to increase awareness and YYGM's capacity. Through awareness-raising activities, members of YYGM learn about disability development at the national and global level. YYGM trained 44 of its members for job-related tasks including raising poultry, tailoring, television and radio maintenance, sheep rearing, and food processing. Most of those trained are currently self-supportive. In addition, YYGM conducts peer support activities that are fundamental to trauma recovery. Staff also receives training. YYGM has developed a very good partnership with many other organizations.

Mezgebu says that he became a stronger and better person because of the lessons he learned from Roba and Survivor Corps. Mezgebu says he gained additional strength from the awareness and advocacy training that Survivor Corps gave him. He believes his disability gave him the strength not only to survive but to become a better citizen. Mezgebu hopes to encourage and support other survivors by sharing his experiences.

Biographies



Bekele Gonfa serves as vice chairperson for the Ethiopian Center for Disability and is a board member for Cheshire Service Ethiopia. He serves as a technical advisor for *Yitawekilin Yeakal Gudatagnoch Mehiber* (YYGM). He actively campaigns for International Campaign to Ban Landmines, Cluster Munitions Coalition and the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons. He also works as a researcher for the *Landmine and Cluster Munition Monitor*.

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Endnotes

1. *Yitawekilin Yeakal Gudatagnoch Mehiber* translates to "Recognize that we, persons with disabilities, can do what others can do."

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