

International Vendor Spotlight: From Eritrea to Switzerland and freedom

BY ISABEL MOSIMANN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

After being persecuted for her religious beliefs, Tirhas Ghebremichael, 45, fled her home country of Eritrea for a new life in Switzerland nine years ago. She now sells the street paper, Surprise, in Bern where she has found freedom and happiness. But still, life is not always easy, she said. Finding full-time work to help support her daughter is Tirhas' next challenge. Here is her story, in her own words:

On Oct. 20, 2006, that is nine years ago, I came to Switzerland via Basel and applied for asylum. I had left Eritrea, my home country, a few months before. I just couldn't stand life there anymore.

My problems began when my family and I had started to read the Bible intensively and met with likeminded people in a Protestant church, instead of attending the Eritrean Orthodox church services as before. Our president did not approve of those gatherings. So our church was closed, and my mum was put into prison for a while. The government also tried to find me, but I managed to hide. But in the end, they captured me and brought me to Sawa, the biggest army training camp in the country. There I had to work in the

National Service. The work – laundry, cleaning and cooking – wasn't the problem; I couldn't bear to live unfree. You can't decide anything for yourself, everything is dictated, you are not allowed to resist or to even voice criticism.

But then one night, I had a chance to flee from the camp. As soon as I was out, I knew I had to leave the country, there was no way back. Together with two other women, I crossed the border to Sudan. Because you don't really have a chance to make it there on your own as a woman, I continued toward Libya. Then I crossed the Mediterranean and reached Italy and Switzerland.

After a long and difficult time, here I have found some joy in my life again. I had met a man during my journey and became pregnant. My daughter, Lydia, was born 2007 in Bern. Her father and I are not together anymore, but he also lives in Switzerland.

Because I am a single mother, it has been difficult for me to find a full-time job. That's why I'm still not fully recognized and don't have a proper residence permit. I can only claim the "Identification Card B" when I have lived in Switzerland for one year without claiming any social benefits. But there is a problem: whenever



PHOTO COURTESY OF SURPRISE
Tirhas Ghebremichael fled her homecountry Eritrea and went to Switzerland, where she's found a new life selling the Street Roots' sister paper Surprise.

I apply for a job – today, my daughter goes to school the whole day and I could work longer hours – they always say they only take people with a "B-card." Apparently that is more safe and easy to administer for employers than hiring someone with the "Identification Card F" which I have. Luckily, I found work for a few hours with a cleaning business. But the time it

takes me to travel to work and back is often longer than the actual hours. So I hope to find more work in or near Bern.

My religion still gives me strength and hope. When I came to Switzerland, I used to attend Eritrean services, but for a few years now I attend a church in Zollikofen (a suburb in Bern) every Sunday. There I have met a lot of Swiss people. That feels good. I also love to meet people and talk to them, when I sell Surprise at the Co-op supermarket in Bahnhof Street in Ostermündingen (a town in the outskirts of Bern). Once a woman walked up to me and asked me where I was from. We talked for a while, and then she gave me a bag full of beautiful, new clothes and started to cry. I didn't understand exactly why, but I started crying as well."

Translated from German into English by Katrin Wolf. Courtesy of INSP News Service www.INSP.ngo/Surprise

SURVIVORS, from page 5

One woman said she was violently thrown out of her home by an abusive husband 14 years ago. She couldn't find work or housing and eventually gave up. She's been homeless ever since.

Another woman said she chose the streets, "because I'd rather be alive." The women said their stories are not unique among Portland's homeless female population.

Coaching applicants

Beier and Neal said advocates are coaching survivors on how to present themselves to landlords. This includes, "how to show up, how to talk a certain way, look a certain way, act a certain way," said Beier, so that a landlord finds them more desirable as tenants. These conversations, she said, disgust her "because housing is a basic need." She also warns survivors not to tell landlords about a TA-DVS grant on the front end because despite anti-discrimination laws put in place to protect survivors receiving assistance, with dozens of tenants to choose from, landlords tend to rent to those with better rental and employment histories.

Neal said that countywide, advocates have incorporated apartment application tips into their conversations with survivors. To combat the lack of housing and shelter, she said, other new approaches have emerged as well,

such as working with landlords to avoid evictions or add security and using hotel vouchers while clients wait for restraining orders to kick in. She said making landlords aware of their tenants' rights has helped prevent illegal evictions in some cases.

A push for funding

Marc Jolin at A Home for Everyone said that as his organization prepares to make recommendations to the city and county about how to best spend the newly allotted \$30 million for shelter space and housing, the growing needs of domestic violence survivors has been a part of the conversation. However, how to spend that money is ultimately up to the City Council and county commissioners.

But, Neal said, there's a "vast difference" between homeless shelters and domestic violence shelters.

"Homeless shelters have a long way to improve. They're very stressful and traumatizing places," she said.

Later this month, she plans to visit several alternative shelter models in Washington that were built following the Building Dignity Strategy. This approach incorporates shelter design and programming focused on healing, empowerment, and meeting the needs of survivors and their children who can benefit from trauma-informed care.

Neal said she's trying to build the case for funding something similar in Portland.

"It's not just about income," she

said. "When people leave, the risk for serious violence or homicide goes up significantly."

A 2003 study of 11 cities and 220 domestic violence homicides found the risk of severe violence and murder is nearly four times greater when a survivor attempts to end an abusive relationship.

"Things look different when a domestic violence survivor leaves or becomes homeless because of violence – because there's somebody out there looking for them," Neal said, adding that the involvement of child welfare, police and the courts, on top of trying to find or maintain housing and employment, put survivors in a complex and often scary situation.

This past legislative session, a bill that would have increased the TA-DVS amount from \$1,200 to \$2,000 died in the Joint Ways and Means Committee with a \$5 million price tag. Senate Bill 503 would have also expanded TA-DVS to include sexual assault victims. Sen. Laurie Monnes Anderson (D-Gresham) introduced the bill and said she will continue to push the issue. She submitted a budget request to Ways and Means to increase the amount to \$2,000 before next session. She's waiting for a response before deciding whether to introduce another bill in the short session but said she will "absolutely" be back with a similar bill in 2017 that will possibly seek a more substantial increase.

Sight 4 Sore Eyes

By Mike Vance

What you want to see is all you behold or even notice. You can't be bothered with the possibility that your knee-jerk judgement was wrong.

If there is a better perspective, you turn the other way, annoyed what you hear is what you were trained to listen for. As if all other information was just extra lettuce in your salad.

To lend a hand to one who suffers on the streets, you just can't be seen to do so. Even though your pockets are exploding with dough. You hope to see me gone and you feel that I owe you an apology.

For my edgy personality and the sharp biting words that fired from my mouth. As you turned a deaf ear to me.