

# Former SM resident opens home for elderly in Ethiopia

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When former Santa Maria resident Tsige-Roman Gobezie returned to her native Ethiopian village after decades spent abroad, the abject poverty of the people living there stunned her.

Five years later, the woman known as “Ziggy” to friends and family cashed in on her retirement savings to open the Gobezie Goshu Home for the Elderly, a haven for disabled and or destitute seniors in Adwa.

The charity has since expanded to include a scholarship fund that covers tuition, books, lunch, and uniforms for impoverished children who otherwise would never receive an education.

“When you do for yourself, you always want more,” Gobezie said of her work. “When you do something for somebody (else), that’s the only time you are happy inside. I have never been happier in my life.”

As a young women, Gobezie wed a government official and led a comfortable life replete with all the perks that come with civil service in Ethiopia.

However, a communist coup turned the couple’s lives upside down, and the new regime forced Gobezie’s husband to languish in jail alongside several others who had served under the former government.

“I was very fortunate I did not get put in jail,” Gobezie said. “God was protecting me.”

To escape government retribution, in 1981, Gobezie decided to join her two brothers in Barstow, Calif., before eventually moving to Los Angeles and becoming a pharmacist.

“I had to start life all over again,” she said.

Though Gobezie’s husband was released from jail shortly after his wife’s arrival in California, he never joined her in the United States.

Eventually, Gobezie tired of the hectic pace in L.A. and felt the itch to return to her small-town roots, targeting the Central Coast as her locale of choice.

A job as pharmacist with the county of Santa Barbara eventually landed her in Santa Maria, where she remained until her 2004 retirement.

But Gobezie's beloved Ethiopia never strayed far from her thoughts, and in 2000 she returned to Adwa for a visit. What she witnessed there touched a nerve.

The severe drought, food shortages, and the rapid-fire spread of water-related illnesses in recent years had hit the country hard.

Elderly people, riddled with disease, lay dying and abandoned in the middle of the street, while starving children with distended bellies begged for scraps.

"When I saw the poverty, I thought I should come from the States and help," Gobezie said, traces of her soft East-African accent still detectable in her speech.

During the fall of 2003, she assembled a group of local volunteers to raise funds to aid the people of Adwa. Two years later, the Gobezie Goshu Home opened its doors.

There, six full-time and up to 10 part-time employees serving as caretakers, cooks, and cleaning staff lovingly care for Ethiopia's throwaways: the poor, ill and handicapped elderly population.

However, even that did not satisfy Gobezie.

While running the Home, the plight of AIDS orphans and other neglected children came to her attention. Today, the Gobezie Goshu home funds the education of more than 120 children.

Every year, Gobezie returns to Santa Maria, always taking with her a stack of photos of the home's residents.

Tenderly tracing a snapshot of a frail, toothless old man, Gobezie explains that days exist in which she worries about whether she'll have the means to carry on her work.

But somehow, a miracle always comes through.

Thanks to the timely generosity of a stranger, Gobezie is able to pay for one more resident's medication, or yet another child's schooling.

"You don't do it," she said. "God does it for you."

For more information on the organization or how to donate, visit [www.gghe.org/](http://www.gghe.org/).

Checks can be made payable to Gobezie Goshu Home and sent to P.O. Box 7533 Santa Maria 93456.

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