

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.

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

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Thursday, February 21, 2008

The power of a promise | Page 2

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

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In 1974, a Communist junta deposed Emperor Haile Selassie and civil war broke out. Michael quit the military and took the advice of his father – locked in jail and about to be assassinated – to flee.

He and some army friends drove a military Land Rover out of Addis Ababa, ditched it in the next town and began walking – over mountains – to Sudan.

"We could not drive," he says, "because if they catch us, we'd be killed instantly."

They shaved their heads and relied on the kindness of strangers to shelter and feed them. The nights were cold, and the roads were dotted with evidence of civil war: dead bodies.

Three months later, they arrived at Sudan.

"The border guards pointed guns at us," he says.

"We don't speak Arabic. We just raise our hands and say, 'Aman.' That means peace. And we give them the IDs we sewed into the cuffs of our pants."

Michael and his friends were accepted as political refugees and shipped to Khartoum, where he spent four years saving to come to America.

About 30 years later, he'd return to his hometown to keep a promise he never dreamed he could afford.

I'LL BE RIGHT BACK

He'll show you his rejection letters.

Here, this one's from the Queen of England. This one's from Laura Bush. These are from Bill Gates, Prince Charles and Oprah. Here's an autographed picture from Arsenio Hall.

"What do I need an autograph for," Michael asks incredulously. "I was very, very disappointed."

In 2000, Michael returned to Tembien for the first time since leaving. He was shocked at the damage caused by Ethiopia's 17-year civil war:

A crashed helicopter served as a playground. Rocks placed in the shallows of a river served as a bridge. A homemade stretcher on two men's shoulders served as the ambulance.

Begging kids followed him everywhere. Some without shoes. Some without homes. Most without a school.

"I'd sit with them and tell them, 'I'll be right back and build you a school,'" he says. "I promised them."

He returned the next year with his life savings –

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several thousand dollars – and helped build a temporary, adobe-style school. No floor. No beams. No chairs. But shade at least. And a further promise of a real school.

For the next three years he asked everyone he could think of – including the most influential people listed in his library's "Who's Who in the World."

His letter-writing campaign was a miserable failure. He wrote 100 letters, and got 100 rejections.

"I did the best I could, right?" he says. "I raised my hand to God to respond to me. I had one last choice."

One day in 2004, he put his three-bedroom home in Corona for sale.

A PROMISE FULFILLED

Chapman University held a remarkable ceremony this year. It gave its 23rd annual Albert Schweitzer Award of Excellence to a man who sold Amway cleansers, Mary Kay cosmetics and toilet paper before writing parking tickets on campus.

Past winners include a Nobel Prize winner, a Medal of Freedom recipient and human rights activists from Chile to Kenya to Australia. This year, it went to Michael Belay – who sold his own home to keep a promise.

"He exemplifies the ethics of Albert Schweitzer, that all life is sacred," says Prof. Marvin Meyer, director of the Albert Schweitzer Institute on campus. "If ever there were a story that showed one person can make a difference, it's the story of Michael Belay."

Belay's home sold for \$449,000. He moved his wife and two children into an apartment, paid off what they owed and banked \$10,000 for each

child's education. The rest, more than \$100,000, he took to Tembien.

"It makes me feel good," he says, swiping a hand to his eyes. "My entire life, I was in the military and then traveling country to country. I didn't get that chance. I hope these kids can learn and someday lead their country."

More than 250 children now attend his four-classroom school with library, bathrooms, showers and playground.

"It's a little harder now," admits his wife Almaz, who works two jobs as a nurse's assistant to help pay the bills.

They no longer have cable TV, no longer have the space or privacy they once had, she says: "But I'm happy for the kids back home. Now they can be somebody."

Michael's not done, however. He's now trying to raise \$975,000 to bring clean water to 30,000 people in Tembien.

It sounds impossible, but already he has the support Chapman's president, three trustees, four deans and a dozen professors. A noted Ethiopian author, a consul from the Ethiopian consulate and a few hundreds students also attended Michael's first fundraiser this week.

The result? Less than \$5,000.

Once again, the man who writes parking tickets at Chapman University is left with almost nothing.

Except a promise.

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