

The Christensen Fund

# Helping Ethiopians in Northern California Develop Cultural Identity

SAN JOSE & OAKLAND



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**SINCE THE 1970S, A LARGE NUMBER OF ETHIOPIANS HAVE IMMIGRATED** to the United States. Many of them settled in San Jose and Oakland, which are now home to two of the largest Ethiopian communities in the United States.

Unfortunately, many of these relocated Ethiopians struggled in their new environment because of language and other cultural barriers. There were few resources available to help them integrate into their new communities and most relied on earlier immigrants as their sole source of support. Some became successful entrepreneurs, but many others struggled to make ends meet.

In addition, a number of the newly displaced parents were concerned that their children would lose touch with Ethiopian languages and traditions, while their children were often embarrassed by the parents' inability to communicate and take control of their families' lives in this new country.

In 2004, the Christensen Fund decided to help groups of recent immigrants bridge the cultural gap between their traditional homelands and their new communities. One of these groups was the Ethiopian community in northern California.

The Fund's Ethiopian Program Officer, Dr. Wolde Tadesse, knew that there were many energetic and dedicated Ethiopians willing to tackle the challenges of building a vibrant cultural community for themselves and sharing this culture with the greater Bay Area.

The Fund made several grants to local Ethiopian organizations to begin this community-building process, including the Ethiopian Community Services, Ethiopian Community Cultural Center and Ethiopian Arts Forum. The Fund supported a number of Bay Area



“Our support enabled this community to adapt to life in the United States while celebrating and sharing their vibrant Ethiopian culture with their children and the rest of the Bay Area, including their art, languages, foods and traditions.”

— DR. WOLDE TADESSE

ETHIOPIAN PROGRAM OFFICER, THE CHRISTENSEN FUND

projects that showcased Ethiopian traditions, including a colorful celebration of the Ethiopian New Year, a new International Ethiopian Studies Journal and a rotating credit system called Idir.

The Fund also focused on cultural opportunities for the Ethiopian children in these communities, including a weekend language school run by the Ethiopian Cultural Institute. One of the Fund’s grantees, African Cradle, organized summer camps for Ethiopian adoptee children and their American parents with the goal of bringing these families together to network with each other and take part in Ethiopian cultural life.

By 2009, the Fund had made over \$600,000 in grants to strengthen the cultural connections within these Ethiopian communities and those investments were paying off. Cultural expression and celebrations were gradually taking center stage in Ethiopian communities. Ethiopians of all creeds, ethnicity and political affiliation were beginning to meet with each other on a regular basis at artistic events organized by members of the Ethiopian community throughout the Bay Area. The San Francisco Chronicle published an article about an exciting new amateur group of Ethiopian dancers. The cities of San Jose and Oakland were starting to identify with the communities and adopted resolutions to observe the Ethiopian New Year as “Ethiopia Day” and fly Ethiopian colors on this date.

In addition, as the cultural bonds within these Ethiopian communities grew stronger, they were able come together to engage in charitable activities to help improve health, education and the environment back in Ethiopia.

Recently, the Fund partnered with the Wildflowers Institute of San Francisco to bring together leaders who had relocated to the Bay Area from various countries around the world. These leaders were able to share common experiences about adapting to their new environment and sustaining cultural values and community cohesion. The Ethiopian community was an active participant in this opportunity to share experiences and collaborate with others.

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**THE CHRISTENSEN FUND:** *Through grantmaking in the African Rift Valley, Central Asia and Turkey, Northern Australia, the Greater American Southwest, Melanesia and the San Francisco Bay Area, the Fund seeks to strengthen the conditions for local custodians to care effectively for the landscapes and other biocultural heritage under their stewardship. To do so, the Fund employs a constellation of approaches that includes working at various scales – local to global; fostering the blending of various streams of knowledge and experience; keeping a focus on the complex interactions between cultures and places, especially in regard to indigenous peoples and the landscapes they control.*

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The Christensen Fund  
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