

Drew Gannon

Ethiopian Community Association receives authentic Ethiopian artifacts for new cultural museum

When LaDena Schnapper saw all the police cars on Washington D.C.'s International Drive, she knew there was a problem.

“Lady, is this your truck?” the police officer accosted her as she first stepped out of her car. “Are you aware of all the trouble you caused? My God, this is D.C., this is post 9/11, and this is the embassy row. Don’t you realize what a truck like this parked on this street without any identification could possibly mean?”

Schnapper’s 26-foot U-Haul was parked outside the Ethiopian Embassy. Overnight, Homeland Security had placed the truck on a satellite and scanned it with radar. By the time Schnapper arrived, dogs were already inside, sniffing its contents. Once the officers decided that the truck was just filled with “old African stuff,” they left, advising Schnapper to move her truck and warning her not to park any unidentifiable vehicles on the streets of the nation’s capital again.

“It was definitely an adventure,” Schnapper recalled. “But my truck wasn’t filled with just stuff. It was filled with treasures.”

The truck contained 60 large packing boxes filled with Ethiopian artifacts. After being housed in the Ethiopian Embassy for 11 years, the artifacts were finally being relocated by Schnapper to their new home: the Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago.

Schnapper is what you could call an Ethiopian enthusiast. Originally from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, she joined the Peace Corps in the 1960s to see the world. From 1963-1966, Schnapper served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Dessie and Awassa. In her three years in Ethiopia, she learned Amharic, emerged herself in Ethiopian music and dance, and helped the students in the area.

“We were part of the second group to go out following Kennedy’s word: ‘ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country,’” she said. “I called it my Ethiopian imprint because I haven’t let go of it since.”

Returning to the United States, Schnapper maintained connections to Ethiopia. In 1984, she helped establish the Ethiopian Community Association of Chicago (ECA) and interviewed Erku Yimer to become the organization’s executive director. Yimer had been a student in Dessie when Schnapper served in the Peace Corps and had since moved to Chicago as a refugee. For the past 47 years, the two have remained close.

“LaDena is wonderful,” Yimer said. “She is a friend to the ECA and she is my dear friend.”

Schnapper assumed the position of International Coordinator for the American Association for Ethiopian Jews in Chicago and returned to Ethiopia for two years to assist in the final exodus of the Ethiopian Jews, including Operation Solomon - the one day airlift of 14,000 Ethiopian Jews

to Israel in 1992. She then moved to Washington D.C., where she met Tesfaye Lemma, a well-known Ethiopian composer and cultural expert.

Lemma is another Ethiopian who came to the United States in the 1980s due to the political turmoil of Ethiopia at that time. Ethiopia, the oldest continuously independent country in Africa, has a long history of royalty. However, in 1974, a provisional administrative council of soldiers, known as the Derg seized power of the country. In the late 1970s, the Derg began Ethiopia's "red terror," a mass extermination of any suspected enemies. This genocide caused many Ethiopians, like Lemma, to escape their homeland and find solace in the United States. Still, Lemma maintained a fierce love for his country.

"Tesfaye was a man of dreams," Schnapper said. "His dream was to set up a cultural center, and a folkloric band, and eventually a museum for Ethiopia."

Schnapper became Lemma's administrative assistant, helping him realize his dreams. They formed the Ethiopian-American Cultural Center and the Nile Ethiopian Ensemble, the first folkloric Ethiopian dance group in the United States. Still, Lemma, was not satisfied.

"He said, 'No, they need to learn more, all these people in America. We've got to start a museum.'" Schnapper said.

Lemma returned to Ethiopia in the 1990s and accumulated, Schnapper estimated, a thousand cultural artifacts, including religious relics, agricultural tools, paintings, musical instruments, and clothing. With the help of a wealthy Ethiopian businessman, these artifacts were shipped back to the United States. Lemma and Schnapper named their new museum Tesfa, meaning "hope" in Amharic.

Unfortunately, in 1998, Lemma entered a nursing home to receive intense medical care for his diabetes and kidney failure. At the same time, Schnapper's mother fell ill, and she returned to the Upper Peninsula to care for her. Having no one to maintain the museum, the artifacts were stored at the Ethiopian Embassy indefinitely.

"The artifacts were stored two levels underground the Embassy," Schnapper said. "They were safe and secure, but they gathered significant amount of dust and I'm sure all of the mice of Washington D.C. visited at least once and probably every bug in the world that liked skin and horse hair made their way to the boxes down there."

From the UP, Schnapper managed to stay connected with the organizations she had dedicated her life to. In fall 2009, she learned that the ECA had received grants to move from their Uptown office into a larger, more permanent building in Rogers Park.

"The Ethiopian community is moving to the northern Chicago neighborhoods, and we move where they are to service them better," Yimer explained. "Since our move in December, we have been able to consider increasing what we provide to this community."

The ECA's new facilities provided the organization with more space for their various services, including tutoring programs, English languages classes, and reception and placement services. The organization also hoped to start their own cultural museum, and Schnapper quickly became the liaison between the ECA and Lemma's artifacts.

"Tesfaye was delighted with the idea that his artifacts were going to be put into a museum," Schnapper said. "And the Ethiopian Community Association was equally delighted to receive them."

Schnapper returned to Washington D.C. and spent several weeks with the artifacts, dusting and repackaging each one. In January, the ECA sent out one of its own staff, Yohannes Tegegne, to return with Schnapper. With the help of the staff of the Ethiopian Embassy and with only a minor altercation with Homeland Security, Schnapper, Tegegne, and the artifacts were on their way to Chicago.

The artifacts are currently stored at the ECA's new building, 1730 W. Greenleaf Street in Rodgers Park. ECA staff is in the process of sorting and organizing all of the artifacts and hopes the museum will be fully completed within the year.

"There is still a lot of construction that needs to be done on the building," Yimer said. "Now we have the storage space, but it will take time before we can fully display these items."

The ECA plans on giving visitors a sneak peak of the artifacts on at their open house event on April 10. The event includes workshops, a movie screening, and traditional Ethiopian food and music. Schnapper intends to return to Chicago for the event and is excited for what the cultural museum will become for the community.

"I see the museum really as a bridge, a very vital bridge," Schnapper said. "It serves as a link between the past and the future generation of Ethiopians and between Americans of all ethnic groups and this fantastic 3,000 year old rich culture. I would like Ethiopian children to realize the glory of their past and for all Americans to see what Ethiopians can offer to the world."