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Axum, Ethiopia Fulbright 2017

SEPTEMBER 2017

Fulbright: Who, What, When, and Where

by Janet Lee

A little over a year ago, my son Emmanuel emailed that Fulbright was looking for Fulbright Scholars in Mekelle, Ethiopia, where I spent my last sabbatical. A Fulbright himself in the Philippines, he routinely checks listings. Yes, I could go back to Mekelle, but we discovered that Axum, a Denver Sister City, would also accept Fulbright Scholars. "When is the application due?" I asked. A month later. Oh, my! "We can do this," he replied and somehow we did.

A letter of invitation is required from the University and upon finding the email addresses of the President and the Vice President of Academic Affairs at Aksum University and submitting a request for an invitation, I received the letter within 24 hours, with the proper stamp in purple ink. Nothing happens that quickly in Ethiopia. A month later the government shut down the Internet and a State of Emergency was declared that lasted about eight months. But in that month, Emmanuel and I went through many renditions of the application, the son becoming the master and the mother becoming the student.



In November, I received notice that I passed the first hurdle and that my application would be forwarded to the Fulbright office in Ethiopia. In early spring, I received a "save the date" for pre-departure orientation in Washington, D.C. for June. Although not a guarantee that I had been accepted, it was a

good sign. The final acceptance was delivered the end of March and everything became fast paced: notifying colleagues, updating medical records, a few shots, medication for 10 months, a trip to the dentist, an eye exam and back up lenses, banking, credit cards, packing, buying a phone that was unlocked, a quick trip to Utah to look at a server, working with a publisher on a major donation of books, shipping the books to Ethiopia, attending the American Library Association and picking up more books to be shipped on a container, purchasing 15 Chrome books to be used in conjunction with the server and also shipped on the same container.



There were more affairs to get in order: putting together an issue of *Jesuit Higher Education* and working with Linda Lange and Kari Kloos on succession planning; hosting

the Ethiopia RPCVs for the National Peace Corps Association conference in Denver and passing the torch to the new editor of *The Herald* and starting the migration of data to a new Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs website; putting together a couple of issues of *The Navigator: Colorado Libraries and the World* and passing on duties to a new editor; applying for and receiving a grant from the International Library and Cultural Exchange Interest Group to work on a children's book publishing project in Ethiopia. My thanks to Linda, Kari, Amanda Sutker, Drew Gamble, Nancy Bolt, and Sue Keefer for picking up the pieces upon my departure.

Gratitude

There are many people who made this possible. My appreciation to Dr. Janet Houser, Dr. Steve Jacobs, Dr. Ivan Gaetz, and Dr. Shimelis Assefa for writing letters of recommendation to be submitted with a rather unwieldy online application; Dr. Tsehaye Asmelash, President of Aksum University for the timely letter of invitation; and Dr. Kiros Guesh for the follow up letter to Ethiopian immigration for a resident ID.

Upon receiving word of my Fulbright acceptance, Dr. Houser would not hear of retirement but encouraged me to take leave. I appreciate her confidence and the options that I received.

The staff at the Regis University Library was somewhat upended by the news. Not only was I leaving, but it is temporary, with the expectation that I will return. Special thanks to Mary Sponsel for being supportive, Tom Riedel taking the position of Interim Dean, a position that he had not bargained for, and Shelly Bleckley for taking on a new position knowing that her supervisor would change momentarily. Congratulations to Andy Dorfman on his retirement.

Last, but not least, my family with whom I will miss family gatherings, Emmanuel's book signing, Eric's birthday, and watching Ellie grow.

Pre-departure Orientation

The first hint as to what was in store for us occurred during the pre-departure orientation in Washington, DC. It was there the Ethiopia Fulbright Scholars met and began the process of solidifying our relationships. I cannot tell how many times, someone from another country sat down with us and said, "Oh, this is the Ethiopia table!" We were that tight! Here we had an opportunity to learn about Ethiopia; meet Eyersulem (Jerry) Mandefro, our liaison at

the U.S. Embassy in Addis Ababa; learn how to box our one and only shipment of books via diplomatic pouch; guidelines on obtaining a business visa; discuss the State of Emergency in Ethiopia; health guidelines, health insurance, and emergency coverage; check cashing and ATMs; housing; and "Fly America" travel.



Our group includes Guenet Abraham, Tim Landers, Jordann Loehr, and Tsegaye Nega, all scholars. Colton Flynn and Rahwa Hassen are both student researchers. Guenet, Tim, Tsegay, Colton and I planned to arrive in late August, Rahwa in October and Jordann coming in early 2018. Guenet, Colton and Tsegaye have been assigned to Addis Ababa. Tim, Jordann, and Rahwa are assigned to Gondar. I am the lone person who chose to travel to Axum. This gives us an opportunity to visit other sites and have local contacts.

We are ready to go!



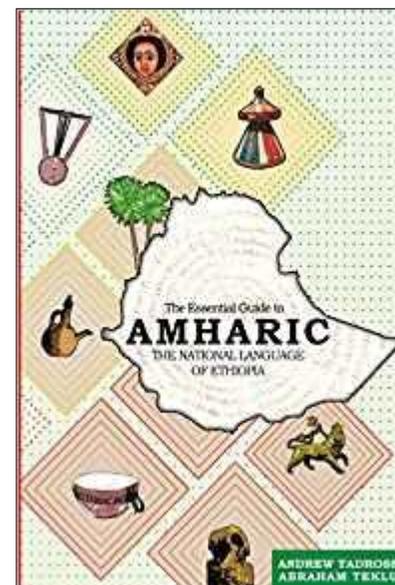
Arrival in Addis

It may take some time to figure out the nuances of using the Department of State travel agent, but I was able to fly from Denver to Addis Ababa with only one stop in DC. Still a long flight, made easier by getting to know my Denver/Ethiopian travel companions. Customs was a breeze. An agent from the U.S. Embassy met me and Jerry was in the parking lot with a driver to take me to a small hotel used by a past Fulbrighter. It was not long until the others arrived from various parts of the U.S. Tim and his family, Peggy and Brian; Guenet; and Colton.



First course of business was to attend a security briefing at the U.S. Embassy and ultimately a badge that allows easy access to the Embassy. Although a requirement of obtaining the badge, most of the information was not relevant to our situation.

Second course of business was to get a resident ID at the immigration office. Although I had a letter from the university, it was an obvious scan of a photocopy and was denied. No ifs, ands, or buts!!!! Thus began the challenge of getting an original letter from the University of Aksum and multiple trips to immigration, a not so friendly place. Dr. Kiros to the rescue who found an original, had it hand carried to the Axum airport and picked up by an agent at the Addis Ababa airport and delivered to my hotel. I had the ID expedited since we were dealing with several holidays that affected getting anything done: Eid and Labor Day. There were multiple needless trips to pick up badges and IDs. The resident ID offers significant discounts on hotels, airfare, and admission to cultural attractions. Needless to say, this did not give many opportunities to do much sightseeing in Addis.



I was able to connect with RPCV Andrew Tadross and his wife Himanot. I can't believe

I didn't take photos. Andrew has been teaching at Addis Ababa in landscape architecture and has been drafted into working on the landscaping of the Axumite Heritage Foundation library. He drafted landscape plans that I delivered to Axum. Andrew has written an article or two for me for *The Herald* and has authored and published several books including, *The Essential Guide to Amharic*, *the National Language of Ethiopia* available on Amazon or in person if you happen to be in Ethiopia.



I also had the good pleasure to meet RPCV Gerry Jones (Debre Birhan and Dessie 1967-71) at the Addis Ababa Hilton. He has dedicated much of his life to Ethiopia, returning recently to lead a non-profit. If you haven't noticed a trend, there will be many current and returned Peace Corps Volunteers in my 10 months in Ethiopia.

Arrival in Axum

Axum is a small but growing city known for its stelae, St. Mary of Zion church, and of course the Ark of the Covenant, all within walking distance of the hotels and the Foundation library. Initially I was to be put up at the Sabeen Hotel until I could find permanent housing. We were dispatched to two large villas out of town and a large flat near the market area. The villas were beautiful, but isolated. The large flat turned out to need repair and was very expensive. The negotiated price at the hotel was reasonable. It also had the advantage of a guard, housekeeping, television (BBC), relatively stable wifi, and is within walking distance of the Foundation Library. After a miscommunication (one of many), I now have shuttle service to and from the University.

Axum and Denver have been Sister Cities for 21 years and was one of the main reasons that I chose Axum as the site for the Fulbright. One of the main streets leading to the stelae is named "Denver Street."



Current PCV Jeremy Moree came to my rescue upon my arrival. He is a third year extende and assigned to the Foundation library. It is not typical that a Volunteer is assigned to a library, but I welcome his guidance. He has shown me the best place to eat, a juice bar, a suk to buy oranges, bananas, peanuts, peanut butter, and other essentials. He took me down to the open market where you can buy just about anything related to housewares and food.



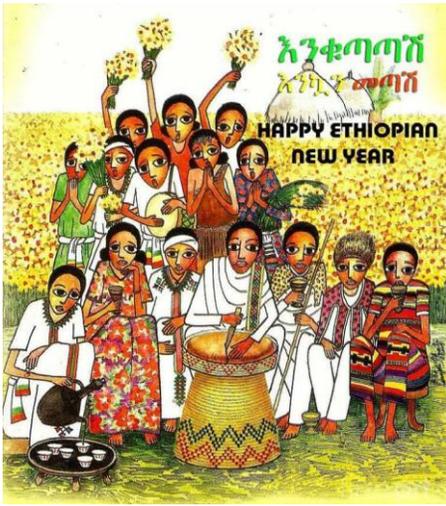
EVERYONE asks him if I am his mother. I am not the least offended. He set up my phone to be used as a wifi hotspot, configured file transfer and loaded WhatsApp! I even had a chance to receive a call from Emmanuel on my newly configured phone. Jeremy is off to American for his month's leave because of extending. But not to worry, a Bajaj driver has offered to take care of me while he is gone.



Shortly before Jeremy left, another third year extende came to town to help settle new volunteers in the area. Two other second year volunteers were passing through and we all headed to a restaurant for shakla tibs.



Ethiopians celebrated New Year on September 11. It appears that much of the festivities occurred during the day itself and not on the evening prior. There was screaming music the entire day and boys singing "Hoya hoyo" and carrying unlit torches of tied straw (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oipiu3BYP3E>) the boys' counterpart to girls' Ashenda.



Aksum University

The administration and the library director could not have been more welcoming. The four boxes of books were successfully shipped to the U.S. Embassy. The University of Aksum agent in Addis Ababa sent them forward to Axum on one of its regular land vehicles and I was able to present one of the books to Dr. Tsehaye Asmelash, President of Aksum University. Moving the books to my office in the library presented, perhaps, the greatest challenge of all as a very young, very petite and quite formidable young woman, refused release of the boxes from the President's office until the University Comptroller interceded on my behalf.



The entire lead staff met with me on the first day, although my office was not ready as promised. It is a rather large staff, but they must cover 24/7 library operations and three separate branches. I must say that the lack of technology has given me pause. More than once I have questioned what I am doing here, but there is always a ray of sunshine.

One staff member, Kefyalew, whom I met on my second and third visits here has been promoted to managing the Natural Sciences Library after receiving an undergraduate degree in library science in Dessie. A year ago, ITC loaded Koha software for its online catalog. It seemed exciting. In the interim,

not a single record has been loaded. Somehow, we will remedy this. Yet, the digital library is using DSpace and "soft copies" of books, e-books in American parlance. I keep saying over and over, *Little by Little, the Egg begins to Walk* in English and Amharic. Everyday there is a little bit of progress.



Oh, but the student chairs. They are in greater disrepair than the chairs we are replacing at the Regis Library. Will chairs become the bane of my existence?

The Foundation Library

We are greatly anticipating the arrival of a container filled with shelving, Chrome books (donated by Bill Graff (Addis Ababa, Sodo, 1963-65), boxes of books, media equipment and the like. Dwight Sullivan (Yirgalem, Dodola, 1970-72), will be arriving at month's end and we will be hard at work unpacking and setting up the functional parts of the library. Landscaping is in progress. A series of small shops are being built along the perimeter of the compound with the intention of providing ongoing income to ensure the sustainability of the library. A small café is in the design phases, another source of revenue. A public bathroom is in the works, because when you gotta go, you gotta go and the opportunities are few and far between.



Donations Needed

Dwight and I are still trying to raise funds for the children's library. We are 75% of our \$10,000 goal. We would appreciate any and all donations, no matter how small. The money raised thus far will not be released until we make 100% of goal.

Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs
c/o Randy Marcus
1634 Martha Terrace
Rockville MD 20852-4134

Make out your check to "Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs," and in the subject line enter "Axum Children's Library." Include your email for tax receipt.

To donate online through "Just Give" click on the following button (a small processing charge will be included): [Donate Now](#)

My next update will not be as long and will focus on the projects and not how I got there. Until then.... Ciao!



