

Shegitu Kedebe, co-owner, Flamingo Restaurant

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church,
March 1, 2011

Q I'd like to hear about your personal story, how you got here from Ethiopia.

A That's a long story. Like you say, I came from Ethiopia. I have lost my parents. I live in the war in my early four, five years old. And after that I was an orphan. And then so the war started again and I lost two brothers in the war and I became a refugee. I got married at a young age, as a teenager, and then war broke down so I have to flee to Kenya – pregnant, three months – and I have my child in a refugee camp. I have experienced poverty. And then I was a legal refugee there in Kenya, so that's how I got to come to the United States. I first arrived to North Dakota – Fargo. That's where my sponsors were, and so...the U.N. is the one who arrange where you need to go. If it was my choice, I wouldn't come to Minnesota. The snow is not a big part of the...but I didn't know, you know? The snow was the first thing for me to get to experience. It was very shocking. But as time goes on, now I learn and my kids love it and we learn to build with it and do fun activities in the winter. But that's how I came. And then after I arrive in North Dakota, I have another family who came to North Dakota and they have also a child, a young child, and so my son and their child became good friends and they have family here and they moved. So we thought, I don't want to separate those two and I moved because of them, here. So I have been living here, I believe, for over 18 years. Both of my children grow up here and I got into the community work and I have worked in a nonprofit and grassroots neighborhood group and I have done so many work in the neighborhood and I just fall in love with St. Paul/Minneapolis. So it's been home for me for a long time.

Q You started a cleaning business....what was it like to start a business as a fairly new resident?

A It was very challenging and at the same time a learning process for me. When I have started the cleaning job, my purpose was...at the time I just divorced and have been going through financial difficulties and so I work at the time for a nonprofit organization and I have an opportunity to interact with a lot of immigrant women. And I heard their stories and what they go through – the difficulties. And so I say to myself, you know, I have the ability to access information and I speak the language and if I can have a difficulty I could imagine what it looks like for those who are not able to have this advantage that I have. So I say to myself, I can't just see them and go on with my life. So I quit my job and I went to my boss and I told him, you know I have this idea. It may sound crazy, but I want to do this so I could help others, because right now I'm experiencing that and I could imagine what it looks like for another immigrant woman who are not able to speak any English and go out and find a job or support their children and live in a domestic abuse situation. And he said, I will do everything I can. And he did. He wrote a letter to every president of apartment buildings or office buildings and they all really just helped me. So I took those single immigrant women who have children and are struggling and because of most of their difficulty that finding a job because they don't have work experience, they didn't have education and they don't speak the language and they don't know how to find a job. So I took those women and I trained them. It wasn't just the cleaning, but I have language classes I arrange, I have

computer classes, I have work readiness program that I have arranged partnering with the University of Minnesota and Minneapolis Technical College, Augsburg College. I recruit college students and I train them and so they know what to do with these immigrant women. So I train those women each day. We go out and we do the cleaning – the actual cleaning job. They come back, we have classes; those who have English problems, we teach them English. Those who have English ability or have high school diploma, we teach them small...ten keys and how to do a little computer work so they can do cashiers and things like that, or work in a cafeteria, in a restaurant or in a hospital setting. So we give them a little job skill at the same time. So I train them to do work readiness – how to work with your co-workers, how to deal with your boss and how it's important to be on time and how you take care of yourself- personal hygiene. All those things that the cultural differences. And so I teach all this and then after one woman worked for me for a month to three months or six months – depending on how they catch up – once I figure out that person is ready, I take them out and look for a job. I mean, I create a resume for them, we drive around and look for a job, and I become their references. So I give out my best workers and I also go and talk to community people and I ask for work clothes. I ask for other women to drive them around and find them a job, be a reference and be, you know teaching or so...I created...I just didn't want immigrant community to stay with immigrant community. You need to be interact and know your community so we started a quilt program. So I recruit white Americans from the neighborhood – especially those who are retired and sitting at home. I bring them together, we cook food together, we do potluck, they learn how to cook African food and we learn how to cook American food. At the same time we quilt. We sew, we knit, we do anything that we can do and it's so amazing that everything that we do, when it comes to activities, all of those American women also have done and the African women have done. So it was so fun. You may not speak the language, but the commonality was there and women just connected together and that coming together helped a lot of immigrant women to practice their English. So we have done that and that was very successful. The first year I believe I had about 38 women who graduate from that program and right now are working out anywhere in the Twin Cities. And I didn't stop there. I also thought about their children because I was a mom, a single mom and I have two kids and I knew how hard it was when you're working all day and have to make time for your children. Their education is important. So I started after school program for their kids. So we have the kids...we work with their homework. I partner with the 4-H program. Right now they call it inner-city education and I believe it's an extension program from the University of Minnesota that my children grew up with. So I partner with them and the 4-H program. It brings many different activities. We have science, we have math programs in a way that the kids don't know they're doing those things. We take them to do river studies, plant studies and outdoor studies and I have a gentleman named Joe Selvaggio – I don't know if you've heard of him – he started the PPL. I asked him to take once in a while our kids to Minneapolis Club so they could see what life will be if you are really pay attention and go to school and be successful. And I don't want them to just think and live in a way like this is it. There is a big life out there, but you have to put in effort. So I took them to Minneapolis Club. They toured that, they swim in the swimming pool there and I want them to see and dream that. And some of the people were kind enough to let us go through the neighborhood and tour their homes and they did. So I wanted to put in the kids mind that there is a reward when you really do good at school, you pay attention and you stay away from troubles. And those people, they didn't get there just by sitting around and being in a gang or doing drugs. They have to study and work hard to get there. So I did those kinds of things and those are my passion.

Q Where was it that you had the quilting and these classes?

A One of the buildings that we did it was in Minneapolis – it's the Common Bond building, the Seward Towers. They both towers that I used to work there and so the neighborhood women from the Seward neighborhood they came and the Seward neighborhood group also were involved with this project – connecting us with the neighborhood people. You know, recruiting volunteers who teach us how to sew and bring sewing machines and fabrics and it's a lot of things involved. People were so kind to me when I came up with this idea, everybody just came from left and right and we...it was a community project. And we have that quilt right now hanging in Seward West building – the Seward Towers West. It's on 26th and Franklin.

Q I understand Frewoini was from another country that was at war with your country. How did you meet and decide to start a business together?

A Me and Frewoini, we had met through a mutual friend and we have been friends for a long time. But the reason we really wanted to start a business together is we wanted to make a statement to the world that we're supposed to be enemies but we both lost a family member, we're both against war, and this is our way to show the world that there is no such thing, you know? We're people and we're human. We all want peace for our homes, peace for our neighborhood and peace for our kids. And the only way we can make peace is when we understand each other, you know? But we have been friends for a long time. We both have a lot of things in common. We both wanted to make a difference in our communities and we love people and we love our families so we...this is one way we thought we come together and do this.

Q Back up and explain the countries you were from.....

A I'm from Ethiopia and my business partner – Frewoini – she is from Eritrea and our countries have been in a war since we were born and raised – all of our lives, over 30-something years. But we really think this war is not something...nobody benefits. She has lost family members, I have lost family members and it's not...you know we can live without the war. Seriously. And we wanted to make a statement on that. As a Christian, it's our life. We wanted to say to people, we don't need a war. We can do without a war and war doesn't have to make us enemies also. We're supposed to be enemies, but we are not. We're friends. We love each other. We care about one another. We raise our children as one another's family. We discipline one another's children. And we wanted to come together and make a difference in our community and that's the way we wanted to make a statement to the world – we are against war.

Q How did you decide it would be a restaurant, and how did you decide to be on University Avenue?

A Frewoini, her degree is in hospitality and tourism. She is in the food industry for a long time. She has managed big restaurants and she used to be a restaurant owner. I have no idea about restaurants. I love to cook and I love food and I love people. But we have been...we go out a lot, me and her, and we just...the places that we go in our community, our restaurants, we don't see as much showcasing our culture and the food is not as good as it's supposed to be. So we always talked about one of these days we will open a restaurant and it will just be the way we dreamed and the way we envision it.

And that has been in our mind for a very long time. And when we have this opportunity, this place will be available. It was a practical place for us because it was very close to Minneapolis and it was a lot of East African community lives in the Midway area and so that's one of the reasons.

Q What kind of customers visit your restaurant?

A In our restaurant we have all kind of people. It is our desire also not to just be the East African community come and dine in there, but we want everybody to experience. And we have seen that so far, and we really want it to be the place that people can come and experience culture, experience...we serve three different country's food right now in our restaurant – Ethiopian, Eritrian and Somalian. And we really showcase our place where our culture can show and our hospitality can show and the quality of food. We choose the healthy version of everything and we really want people to come and feel at home, just the way our parents were back home and how neighbors come together and eat and socialize and get to know each other. We make our business to know our customers by first name because that's how it is back home – everyone, you just feel at home whenever you go to someone else's place. And we wanted that to be shown here and so that's our goal in life. And we have everybody come to our restaurant.

Q Talk about the Neighborhood Development Center and the classes that you took.

A The Neighborhood Development...like I told you earlier, when we started the restaurant business we really didn't know that much what it takes to be a restaurant owner. We just, we both have a passion for food and we have...we love to sell food. But there is a lot of technicality on the back of it that you need to know - what's the right code, and what the city requires, and the insurance, and the permit, and all the things that require to run a restaurant. And if the Neighborhood Development wasn't there, I don't know how we could have done it. But they have been really helping us a lot. I know Mike Temali for a very long time. We have been colleagues, we have served on so many boards together, I have taken business classes there in the early 90s, I have taught classes in the Seward neighborhood for them. So I know about the program. But really they took a great stake, interest in our restaurant and they came and they are supporting us technically. They have supported us by coming and being our customers. They are teaching us everything - how to do our books, how to be really up to the code, what the city requires – everything that we need – all the technical assistance. If it wasn't for Neighborhood Development, I didn't know how we could do it. So we really appreciate their help.

Q How would you describe University Avenue to somebody who has never been there?

A Yesterday I was talking to someone who stepped into the restaurant and they were appreciating the food and they were appreciating the diversity that they see in our cities. It is true that in the last ten years our city just grew so much. We're not any different than New York City or California right now, when you think about diversity. We have a pretty good diversity going on in our state and especially on University Avenue. You look out and there are Asian businesses, there are Latino businesses, there are African businesses and we're becoming so diverse. That is so beautiful that you don't have to travel around the world to experience anything. We have it right here in our

cities and University Avenue is the showcase of the culture that the Twin Cities have. And I'm just so proud and glad to be a part of that.

Q What are your hopes for the future for your business on University Avenue?

A We hope our restaurant becomes a part of this community. We wanted to make ourselves visible in the community. We want it to be the place that community, you know, kids that play soccer they could come and eat there and us sponsorship and a place that the community can call and say, we need help. The place that we can be that kind of community. We just...we don't want to be just the people who sell things, but we want to be part of a community who solve a problem, who will be a part of the community to make it strong and grow. That's our vision and hope for the next five years and more.

Q Do you have any concerns about the light rail?

A One of our concerns is that we are new in the neighborhood and not everybody has heard of us. And we are a little bit tucked in so we're worried people may not notice us or pass us by and we may lose the business. We don't want to lose our business. We want to stay in the neighborhood and thrive and grow and be a part of this community.

Q Mention the different cultures....

A We have some Asian customers, we have some Latino customers, we have a lot of Caucasian customers, we have a lot of African Americans, we have a lot of Somalia customers, Ethiopia and Eritrian. So we're pretty much touching everyone and that's our dream. Me and Fre we love people. We love our culture to be recognized and our food to be experienced. We have fabulous food and we want everybody to come and experience it.