

## NEWS

# Devoted to his family, country and God, he's learning English to love them even more

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At a recent visit to Lakeview Church, Mengsteab Aregay Gebremariam stood with his head bowed down and arms raised up, swaying to Christian pop music inside the auditorium.

The live performance was followed by a sermon on "the image of God." The service took a modern approach, so over the next hour the pastor entertained just as much as he preached, sprinkling in jokes and anecdotes.

It was all in English.

Gebremariam isn't fluent so he doesn't fully understand, but he doesn't need to. He closes his eyes and feels warmth. It's the same God he's been praying to since his childhood days in Eritrea, the same kind of worship that brought him comfort during war, he said.

He chooses to attend this church with its English service with his children in mind.

"It's more convenient for children," Gebremariam explains through a translator, noting that the English-speaking church is easier for his son, Mikias, 14, and daughter Sina, 11, to understand. "(The church) also teach(es) them the culture, this country's culture, in many ways."

A doting father, he's like that with his life choices. Sacrifice for his children. Work night shifts so he can be there for them during the day. Settle in America so they don't feel the pains of war. Attend this church, with its modern worship service, to learn a way of life that he hopes they love as much as him.

Ultimately, he wants to learn English better for his children, too.

It's the parental and cultural calculus Gebremariam has been navigating since he and his wife, Abeba Kahsay, immigrated here as refugees in 2009, following the devastating Eritrean-Ethiopian war.

The language barrier has been a big hurdle since moving here, they said, yet still, the couple has found a way to write their own version of the American Dream. One that is both unique to their family and universal to all parents — the desire to pass on the best parts of their past to their children, the hope that, just maybe, their children may have a better life here.

In light of those burdens, organizations like the Immigrant Welcome Center offer life-changing, personalized support. In 2020, Gebremariam tackled his biggest challenge head on by beginning English classes through their “Pathway to Literacy” program, a pilot initiative introduced by IWC and other Indianapolis organizations and education providers.

“I was really excited because the only thing that I care about ... is just being confident by myself,” Gebremariam said, “And, you know, not even getting dependent on anybody.”

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## 'No hope at all'

Gebremariam came to the U.S. after serving as an Eritrean soldier and then living as a refugee at the Shimelba Refugee Camp in Ethiopia. For years, the conflict between the two countries set the trajectory for Gebremariam's life.

He remembers dropping out of school in ninth grade — the same age as his son today — and moving away from home to attend a military training camp. Years later, he eventually became a soldier for Eritrea, which was like “jumping from prison to prison.”

“(All) I had been experiencing was darkness. There was no hope at all,” Gebremariam said. “When I was a soldier, it was really horrible because the only thing that you think about is dying.”

In those days, and today, faith keeps him going. And the promise that the future will be brighter for his children.

“I'm really, really elated at their change,” Gebremariam said. “Just seeing their life going this way makes me really happy ... Thanks to America, really, god bless America ... they opened

up this opportunity, refugee opportunity for us, (and) we are able to join in the country.”

After church on Sunday, Kahsay has lunch prepared at their home. Gebremariam says a quick prayer in Tigrinya before they begin eating in the family dining room, which is decorated with academic achievement awards. Sixth-grader Sina has multiple trophies for earning straight A's in school. Mikias, a high school freshman, is already thinking ahead to college, where he wants to study philosophy and eventually become a professor or lawyer.

But those accomplishments weren't the first things Gebremariam praised when asked about his children.

“The (biggest) thing that always impressed me about them is they ... really like reading my feeling(s) from my face,” Gebremariam said. “And they really don't want me (to) get sad or mad or anything, so they really take care of my feelings, too.”

He knows he has to rely on his children to navigate life in English, more so than other parents, so Gebremariam is filled with gratitude. He hopes finally learning the language will help them move on to bigger, better, more independent lives as they grow up.

“I hope every ... every beautiful thing for them,” Gebremariam said. “I'm doing everything for the kids.”

## **'This is the country that changed my life'**

Arriving here was the first step, but navigating and assimilating into American life can be a yearslong work in progress.

Gebremariam previously struggled to take English classes because, for years, he worked night shifts — he wanted to be home with the kids during the day while Kahsay worked her job. So, he often missed the morning classes, life kept going on, and he found ways to get by without more advanced English.

His survival tactics include hand gestures and simple terminology. Asking for a word or phrase to be repeated. His son, Mikias, often helps by playing translator for his parents.

"It's kind of my job and, like, I need to do it," Mikias said. "I have to help 'em."

It is an added chore as the family's oldest kid, he notes, but he sees firsthand how challenging it is to learn English as a second or third language.

“It’s really confusing seeing how ... some words are just, they seem like they’re pronounced one way, but they’ll be pronounced in a different way.” Mikias said. “It gets really tiring and confusing for people and ... for someone who speaks something from Africa, like Tigrinya or Amharic, it’s just like, it’s completely different.”

Gebremariam, too, felt the frustration whether it was communication misunderstandings with his own children, or at his job.

“I really used to get mad at me not understanding what they were saying,” Gebremariam said. “I also used to miss some of my schedules (shifts), and it was really a disaster for me.”

In 2020, he tried English classes once again because he wanted to move up at work — and because he knew Mikias would not always be around to help him. Unlike previous classes, the Pathway to Literacy course was created specifically for students with limited literacy skills in their native languages. And, classes were taught during a time that aligned with his schedule.

“Definitely his confidence increased. We saw it,” Ginger Kosobucki, English Learning Director, says. “We saw it every time he came to class. He felt like he knew more of what was going on and he would participate and his reading was really improving ... We’re just so excited for him.”

The pilot program was born out of a Lilly Endowment-funded research project to identify barriers for immigrants in Indianapolis learning English. After surveying more than 1,200 people over the course of nearly a year, they made two key findings:

Logistical barriers, such as class scheduling and transportation, presented major challenges for people taking classes. And a sizable portion of those surveyed, about 31%, had limited literacy in English, or the ability to read at or below a first grade level.

That’s a problem, Kosobucki says, because most English or adult basic education programs assume students have some type of basic literacy skills, yet there aren’t enough programs in Indianapolis geared toward them.

“They need a lot of encouragement and affirmation,” Kosobucki said. “So building up their confidence, helping them to feel that they are contributors, that they are respected, that they have so much to offer.”

Along with strengthening language skills, Kosobucki notes how the classes build community and repertoire for students of all backgrounds, even over Zoom. She remembers how one student from Somalia encouraged new students from Afghanistan, saying "'Good, good job!'" Another student from Mexico has shared how the classes have helped with her depression.

For Gebremariam, after nearly a decade of work, he says he earned a promotion in the summer of 2021 and is now working the day-side shift.

"People love this," he says, "They have noticed my change ... Now I'm able to chat with them, able to have conversations with them. So they really admire me ... that's really nice."

In 2022, as he continues to take the Pathway to Literacy classes, his goal is to eventually pass his U.S. citizenship test. But he's not waiting on that victory, or even on the perfect level of English fluency, to feel proud to be an American. Though he spoke to IndyStar through a translator, the one English word he was sure to articulate, was "appreciate."

"I'm an American," Gebremariam said. "I feel American because this is the country that changed my life, not Eritrea ... I feel American."

*Editor's note: Mengsteab Aregay Gebremariam speaks Tigrinya at home, but his interview for IndyStar was conducted in Amharic. He spoke to IndyStar through an interpreter, Tizita Abate, from the Indianapolis-based nonprofit Immigrant Welcome Center. She serves as a Natural Helper specialist for the organization, helping new residents transition to life in Indianapolis.*

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