

# CHAMPION OF **Affordable Housing**

## A RECENT IMMIGRANT HELPS BUILD HOMES FOR THOSE WHO NEED THEM

**Weldetinsae Yemane** is no stranger to hardship. Or hunger. Or homelessness. He's had more than his share of all. Born in Eritrea, "Welde" (as his Canadian friends call him) was deported, by Ethiopia, to Sudan during a period of violent conflict. The Sudanese authorities shipped him to Egypt, where he was arrested as an illegal immigrant and detained in prison. Life, you could say, didn't deal him a fair hand.

But in prison, it came to the attention of the powers that be that Yemane had construction experience. This set him apart from hundreds of other, less lucky, illegals that the Red Cross was trying desperately to get out of Egypt—to Canada. It's no accident that after settling in Canada—first Calgary and then later Saskatoon—the 25-year-old Yemane sought out volunteer work at Habitat for Humanity. It's no little irony that an impoverished African immigrant,

only recently homeless himself, now builds homes for those "less fortunate." "He could have been on the receiving end of our programs," says Kathleen Crowther, a Habitat for Humanity resource development coordinator, and Yemane's sometimes translator (Yemane is still learning English). Instead, Yemane allocates time that could be spent at one of his paying jobs (he has two—one at a plumbing company and another at

a large retailer) building Habitat homes. And learning a thing or two about Canadian construction. You see, Yemane understands intuitively something central to volunteerism—you get what you give. By donating his time, Yemane is gaining knowledge, experience and a much-needed network of Canadian contacts. He will, in turn, be in a better position to continue contributing to his community.

Says Yemane: "We didn't have power tools in Eritrea. So when I was first starting [at Habitat for Humanity], I couldn't even operate a simple drill. The construction supervisor with Habitat would joke with me and say, 'You're killing my drill!' Then he showed me how. He showed me how to work safely, too. I gained lots of experience in construction and this allowed me to find a job in construction."

Mentors like that construction supervisor are just some of the people Yemane hopes to "repay" with his volunteer work. "Many people were very good to me when I first arrived in Canada," says Yemane. "Now it's my turn."

This modest, hard-working immigrant understands better than anyone what misfortune feels like—and what a big impact a single pair of helping hands can make.

—Liza Finlay



PHOTO: KATHLEEN CROWTHER

PHOTO: ERIC MUNN

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