



Recognizing Selflessness

Spotlight for Friends of Eritrea

MERKEN AWARDS

John Stauffer

**For his remarkable commitment to
support Eritrean asylum seekers
and refugees.**

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Recognizing Selflessness

John Stauffer served as a US Peace Corps teacher in Adi Keyih, Eritrea from 1966 to 1968 where he taught English and Science classes to middle school students in rural areas. During that time, he came to learn and appreciate the people and culture of Eritrea. Decades later, in 2003, he connected with former students and learned about the appalling oppression and abuse Eritreans were facing by their government and pledged that he would not rest in helping the refugees who had fled, until they could return -safely - to Eritrea, and until all of the human rights abuse had come to an end. To assist with this, he joined with two Eritreans who were granted asylum in the United States, and, in 2010, established The America Team for Displaced Eritreans



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The America Team for Displaced Eritreans is an all-volunteer non-profit organization based in Pennsylvania that assists Eritrean asylum seekers and refugees in the United states.

John and his team have been working in helping Eritreans resettle in the United States through resettlement services, policy advocacy, and life-saving interventions.

John is a caring, genuine and a true friend of Eritrea and Eritreans. His support for Eritreans is noticed and very much appreciated.



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Responses from John Stauffer of The America Team for Displaced Eritreans

What keeps you going to continue to be a dear friend of Eritrea and support many Eritreans with their needs?

I was a Peace Corps teacher in ኢዲ፡ቀይሽ many years ago. There, I learned about the people and the culture of Eritrea and appreciated them very much. Much later, in 2003, I heard from some former students. I was appalled to learn of the oppression and abuse inflicted on the people of Eritrea by the regime that had taken control from the Derg, and that many Eritreans were fleeing the country. I pledged that I would not rest in helping the refugees who had fled, until they could return -- safely -- to Eritrea, and until all of the human rights abuse had come to an end. To assist with this, I joined with two Eritreans granted asylum in the United States, and we established The America Team for Displaced Eritreans -- <http://www.EritreanRefugees.org>

I'm now retired from a long corporate career. But the Eritrea work has more than taken its place. The work is challenging, often exhausting. I now put in many more hours per

week with my Eritrea activities – frequently working around the clock – than I did in my corporate job. But it's also vastly rewarding. And it's the continuing support from my Eritrean colleagues here, and the improvement in the lives of the many distressed Eritreans whom we help, that keeps my commitment alive.

Would you like to share a tip for diaspora Eritreans in general and for those who are trying to cope with the new realities of their adopted countries in particular?

1. For many years, Eritrean diaspora organizations have focused on political issues -- that is, on how to improve democracy and human rights in Eritrea. But they have often found that work frustrating, for various reasons. At the same time, many diaspora Eritreans, acting individually, have provided humanitarian assistance to family and friends who have escaped from Eritrea or who are still stranded within it. I'm pleased to see Yiakl's apparent movement toward combining the best of those two approaches -- acting as a broad, grassroots organization, and on humanitarian projects. A great deal can be accomplished that way.

2. Diaspora Eritreans are often suspicious of native-born nationals of the host country. Often they may think that those nationals can never fully understand the Eritrean experience, and/or that the host country nationals may be judgmental about Eritrean expatriates. But I believe that diaspora Eritreans can accomplish so much more in their humanitarian work -- particularly in the advocacy side of it -- if they're able to partner with established host country nationals who know how the system works, who can articulate positions well, and who thus can add strategy and credibility to advocacy efforts.

3. It's important that advocacy efforts and messaging be directed not just to other diaspora Eritreans, but to the host country's major governmental institutions. If the host country is a democracy, ignoring the opportunity to advocate with the government can be a big mistake; but engaging in such advocacy can be powerful and rewarding. One of the most important venues for advocacy lies within a host country's national legislature. In the U.S., that's our Congress. Many ethnic groups in the U.S. have been extremely effective in advancing their respective peoples' interests by advocating with Congress. The most effective way to do that is for local ethnic groups -- say, within a particular U.S. city, and through articulate and diplomatic leaders there -- to advocate with their representatives in the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives, on a continuous basis. I believe that there is unfulfilled potential in this area for Eritrean Americans.

As for coping with the realities of adopted countries, number one is: learn the local language. Host country nationals may be suspicious of any newcomer who looks different from them and speaks differently. New residents and host residents need to get to know each other in order to build common trust and harmony.

What is something that you want others to know about your organization and your work?

We are an all-volunteer organization, based in Pennsylvania. None of our team members receives any compensation for our work. We are not affiliated with or influenced by any political entity; and we offer our services independent of ethnic or religious affiliation.

We strive to assist Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in the U.S. and around the world who are in acute need. Both domestically and internationally, we assist at a policy (e.g., governmental or inter-governmental) level as well as at an individual case level. Our work is done quietly and discreetly. With the exception of occasional press interviews and Congressional testimony, we do not publicize it.

Internationally, we have assisted in over 30 countries. This often has involved connecting individual Eritrean refugees with larger and/or local organizations who can help them most directly. One of our members has established life-sustaining support for hundreds of refugees overseas: first in Libya, for those abused by human smugglers and local detention centers; and then in Ethiopia, for refugees displaced by the current war there. We also assist asylum seekers in the U.S. who have asked for help in seeking a lawyer, documenting Eritrea country conditions, providing translations of documents, and related matters. At the policy level in the U.S., we have continuously advocated for relief from deportations of denied asylum seekers to Eritrea, for the protection of Eritrean refugees overseas, and for the advancement of democracy and human rights within Eritrea.