

# The Boston Globe

## Following a vision of self sufficiency



During a slow period this week, Ethiopian-born Petros Bezabht repaired his bike. He works as a parking attendant, takes classes, and wants to become a US citizen. (Pat Greenhouse/Globe Staff)

**By Jennifer Schwartz**  
**Globe Correspondent / November 9, 2008**

At a time when statewide homelessness is on the rise and the Cambridge City Council is discussing how the economic crisis will affect homeless people, Petros Bezabht's story of self-sufficiency bucks the trend.

Today, the 44-year-old Bezabht holds down two jobs as a parking lot attendant and lives in his own apartment near Rindge and Latin School. He enrolled in English as a Second Language classes, took a technology class at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and recently got his driver's license.

But when Bezabht arrived in Cambridge in January 2007 - after winning a US lottery that brings 50,000 people from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States each year through a Diversity Visa Program - he was homeless and jobless.

"My country is poor, I was very lucky," Bezabht, who is from Ethiopia, said in heavily accented English. "I was number 5,830 in the lottery. And with this opportunity, I decided that I needed to change, and that I needed to save money."

After living for 15 days at his sister's apartment, and then three months at the Bristol Lodge, an emergency shelter in Waltham, Bezabht was recommended for Cambridge's Carey Program, a free, nine-month support

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program in the YMCA that helps 22 sober men transition from homelessness to self-sufficiency. It is run through the city's Multi-Service Center.

"It was evident that Petros came into the program with a vision," said Stephen Johnson, the program coordinator and a case manager. "No one mapped out these things for him. This is not a hand-holding society, and the agent of change has to be within the men themselves."

The Carey Program aggregates resources, both from within the center and from ancillary services. There is a housing advocate, a free legal clinic, a social worker, and relapse prevention, among other support systems.

"There are very few programs of its type," said Len Thomas, the director of the center. "The city understands that homeless people are part of the community and part of the diversity."

Although it is funded largely by Massachusetts Housing Shelter Alliance, the Carey program also receives city money.

The men come to the program via referrals, and they must be sober and currently employed. The program requires that they save 30 percent of their income, and put that money toward housing.

Bezabht, who graduated from the program on June 23, saved quite a bit more than the minimum. Not only did he save enough to find an apartment for himself, he accumulated \$13,000 to send back to his family in Ethiopia so they could build a home.

"Petros really maximized his time here," said Thomas. "He knew he had to help himself first if he wanted to help others, and he didn't try to skip any steps. Some guys think some jobs are beneath them because of their lifestyles before they were homeless."

Statistics from the Department of Transitional Assistance show that homeless individuals and families statewide reached a record high in September. However, Johnson said the homeless scene in Central Square, where the center is located, is sometimes misleading. "It just so happens that a lot of the resources are located here," he said. "There is a lot of conversation about hours shelters are opened, and where certain help can be found."

Thomas did acknowledge that there has been an increase in homeless families in Cambridge.

"Right now, 73 families are at the Gateway Inn," he said, referring to the Cambridge hotel where families are housed by the state.

"That's a huge number," Thomas continued, "and it's pretty daunting. The economy doesn't help, but I don't think the current homeless situation in Cambridge is much worse than it's been in the past."

The purpose of the Multi-Service Center has shifted in recent years to accommodate those who may be on the brink of homelessness, but are not there yet.

"We wanted to do more homeless prevention - people who feel like they are endangered of being on the streets can utilize these services to prevent it," said Thomas.

Another change at the center is an increase in homeless immigrants, such as Bezabht.

"A lot of it is cultural," said Thomas. "In the last 10 years, we've seen an influx of immigrants especially from East Africa."

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Johnson said that many of these men tend to thrive. As the program coordinator, his job is to identify how well or poorly the men are doing.

"The immigrant story is of these people coming from onerous countries," he said, "and when they plug into these local resources, there is an explosion of talent. They do remarkable things."

Though Bezabht has achieved success for himself and his family back home, he misses his wife of three years, who is still in Ethiopia.

Bezabht speaks with his family on the phone a couple of times a week.

"I think being connected to people is part of the reason why Petros was so successful," said Thomas. "He has a sense of family, where as many people in the program are working to repair fractured relationships."

As for Bezabht, he plans to stay in the United States and become a citizen. Though he has a degree in agriculture and taught modern farming techniques in Ethiopia, Bezabht is happy working as a parking attendant, for now.

"I love it here," he said. "I want to bring my wife here and have children."

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