With over 3,800 scholars and students from more than 100 countries, Emory is a global destination university, attracting students, faculty, and staff from diverse backgrounds and locations throughout the world. One such student is Eyelachew Desta from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Desta recently completed numerous certificate courses at the Rollins School of Public Health and has plans to work toward a Master of Public Health (MPH). Desta was initially introduced to Emory University when he came to the United States for the 2012 International AIDS Conference. On a visit to Atlanta, he visited Emory and was "very impressed by the programs and quality of education offered, especially in the field of Global Health." He has not been disappointed. Desta says that his certificate courses have “helped to broaden [his] knowledge of the public health profession and increase his interest.”

Similar to many of the international students at Emory, Desta brings invaluable knowledge into the classroom, gained through years of experience as a social worker and public health professional in Ethiopia.

Desta views his interest in these two fields, social work and public health, as naturally interrelated. “In this era, the public health profession is comprised of different disciplines, including social work,” Desta explains. “Public health requires knowledge of social issues, communication, and psychology.” Fittingly, Desta is genuinely employing his skills in both fields in his current job as a Family Self Sufficiency Service Division team member at Partnership for Community Action (PCA) in Atlanta. There, he works as a career counselor to help low-income families and individuals become self-sufficient.

In addition to his work at PCA, Desta helped launch the Holistic HIV Service Network (HHSN), a non-profit organization working to end the transmission of HIV/AIDS, mitigate the impact of disease on vulnerable communities, and empower those affected by the epidemic. In the United States, HHSN mainly targets the Ethiopian immigrant and diaspora communities, communities that Desta says...
are often unaware of their risk for HIV infection. “They often believe that the risk of contracting HIV is less in the United States than in Ethiopia, due to the strong health care system in the United States,” he explained. To combat this misconception, HHSN recently launched an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign at the Annual Ethiopian Football Festival in Washington, D.C. The goals of the nationwide campaign are to spark a conversation about HIV/AIDS among the Ethiopian diaspora community and try to end stigma associated with the disease through community education.

Desta is very familiar with the role that HIV/AIDS has played in the Ethiopian community. Before moving to Atlanta in 2014, he served as a program manager for the National Network of Positive Women Ethiopians (NNPWE), where he led and participated in the development, planning, implementation, and evaluation of more than 12 national HIV/AIDS project sites and programs funded by international donors such as USAID, PEPFAR, UNAIDS and The Global Fund. When working with Ethiopian communities to educate about HIV/AIDS, Desta notes that “the biggest challenge was to gain the trust of the community members and then begin to dispel negative attitudes towards HIV.” That is why “community-focused solutions” are essential to the success of any project, Desta believes. Without this focus on the community as an active participant in the project, often, even large international organizations with good policies and programs are unsuccessful in implementing their programs. Desta posits that these international organizations need a local organization who understands the needs and concerns of the community, like NNPWE, to help facilitate health care in a respectful and effective manner.

In addition to his work with NNPWE, Desta worked on a University of Amsterdam supported HIV/AIDS treatment literacy project in the Afar region of Ethiopia. Working in the Afar region, a largely pastoral and semi-pastoral community, was “challenging,” Desta explains. He found that the community was often resistant to health aid, especially related to HIV/AIDS. Yet, their need for HIV/AIDS health care and prevention is great. To effectively educate the community, Desta worked closely with clan elders, building trust and confidence; the elders, in turn, helped spread awareness and understanding about HIV/AIDS to the community.

Changing health care at a community level is “a slow process,” Desta explains. Because of the constant movement of people within communities and this gradual process of change, Desta asserts that effective interventions must be “continuous” and committed to communities for the long term in order to make a tangible difference.

Eyelachew Desta has contributed years and countless hours to the field of public health and there’s no sign he is stopping anytime soon. As he plans to work toward his MPH, Desta is hoping to use his experiences and knowledge to make a difference in the Ethiopian community in the United States.

All photos courtesy of Eyelachew Desta.

For more information about the Holistic HIV Service Network, visit www.holisticlivservice.org