

FEATURES



Illustrations by Katie Murphy

From Addis Ababa to Atlanta

GSU student's journey leads to serving others

by [Elizabeth Klipp](#)

In the Intensive Care Unit of Grady Memorial Hospital, Georgia State senior Mesfin Yana leans over a patient returning from heart surgery and begins to remove her intubation tube.

Yana, a respiratory therapist in training, pauses when he sees fear in her eyes and reassures her not to worry; it may be uncomfortable at first, he says, but it gets better. He tells her that he's had the same very same mitral valve replacement surgery.

"Look how good I turned out," he jokes.

The woman's eyes brighten, and when the cardiologist arrives to check on her a few minutes later, she is comfortably relaxed.

"I understand Mesfin told you his story," says Dr. Allen Dollar, chief of cardiology at Grady. "He knows exactly how this is. You're in good hands."

Yana can relate to pulmonary and cardiac patients on a level few others can.

About nine years ago, weak with rheumatic heart fever, he struggled to make the journey from his home in the small village of Shafina in southern Ethiopia to a clinic in Addis Ababa, the capitol city, where he planned to die alone.

"Even taking one step after another was hard," he recalls. "I couldn't breathe. I could barely walk."

Today, not only is 25-year-old Yana healthy, he will graduate this spring with his bachelor's degree and begin his career as a respiratory therapist.

With his warm demeanor and friendly personality, Yana shows no outward signs of how much he endured in the fight for his life. His incredible journey encompasses thousands of miles and wouldn't have been possible without the generous help of physicians, surgeons and humanitarians - and perhaps, Yana says, a bit of divine intervention.

"Being in the United States is a blessing," Yana says. "Every opportunity the American people have given me has made me think about how I can change my life and how I can change the lives of others here and back home."

A sudden illness

Yana grew up in a large family of 13 brothers and sisters in Shafina, a village that during Yana's childhood was without electricity or automobiles. Yana says he had a happy childhood until he became sick with strep throat as an early teen. The streptococcus was to blame for the rheumatic heart fever that nearly killed him. His family took him to doctors in the area but they were unable to help. Yana needed surgery, but in Ethiopia, a country of nearly 80 million people,

heart surgeons are extremely rare.

"By then I was at the point of death and I was praying to be delivered from my suffering," Yana remembers. "I was not afraid to die, for I had lost my hope to live. Struggling to breathe, it felt like I was drowning all the time."

His family tried everything to help him, staying up with him at night when he couldn't breathe or sleep. "When I hurt, they hurt," he recalls. Not wanting to be a burden to his family any longer, Yana decided to leave his village and make the long trek to the Mother Theresa Mission in Addis Ababa - the place he hoped to find solace in his final hours.

Instead, Yana found the person he calls his "angel," Dr. Richard Hodes. Dr. Hodes is the medical director of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in Addis Ababa and cares for Ethiopia's destitute suffering from heart disease, severe spinal disorders and cancer. He began working in Ethiopia during the famine of the early 1980s and has helped hundreds of children, including supporting three houses full of orphans.

"It says in the Talmud, 'He who saves one life saves an entire world,' and that's what I'm trying to do," Dr. Hodes says, referring to the Jewish Holy Book.

Dr. Hodes said he found Yana lying on a stretcher in the mission near death, showing signs of severe congestive heart failure. The doctor knew Yana needed heart surgery to survive and immediately began contacting his network of doctors and hospitals across the United States for help.

Another son

It was in the fall of 2001 when Dr. Allen Dollar, then a cardiologist at Piedmont Hospital, got the call from Hodes. An Atlanta based non-profit, Childrens Cross Connections International, helped facilitate Yana's journey, and in October of '01, doctors at Piedmont performed successful surgery on Yana's heart.

He stayed with a sponsor family for two months as he recovered, then flew back home to Ethiopia and moved into Dr. Hodes' home to continue healing.

Six weeks later though, Yana wasn't improving. At first, Dr. Hodes thought Yana was just having problems adjusting to the altitude of Addis Ababa, which is more than 8,000 feet above sea level. But Yana developed a low-grade fever and an enlarged spleen - telltale signs of an infection of the heart lining, which is 100 percent fatal without treatment, Dr. Hodes said.

Using daily injections of medications and monitoring him at home, Dr. Hodes was able to cure Yana's infection, but not before it had damaged his heart valve. He needed surgery again, so Dr. Hodes immediately called Dr. Dollar and the pair arranged for him to fly back to Atlanta. An ambulance met Yana on the tarmac and rushed him to Piedmont Hospital for the emergency operation.

During surgery, Dr. Dollar and a colleague determined that Yana needed a prosthetic heart valve because his own valve was beyond repair. With a prosthetic valve, however, Yana would need to be on blood thinners and would need close monitoring, leaving him medically unable to go back to Ethiopia.

"We were in surgery and my colleague asked, 'What are you going to do with him?'" Dr. Dollar says. "I said, 'I don't know.' Then I called Shelly and said I think we're going to have another kid."

It was a phrase that his wife, Shelly, has come to hear frequently over the years. Not that she minds. The high school sweethearts had always wanted to have a large family and that dream has come to fruition, with children coming into their lives on purpose and at times by happenstance.

"Whenever a need comes up and things fall into our lap, we've tried to rise to the occasion," says Dr. Dollar, a fit 50-year-old with wire rim glasses, a buzz cut and slight beard. "Not that there haven't been hard times, but the fun stuff outweighs it, the chance to see these kids' potential come to light."

The Dollars have three biological daughters - Lauren, Diane and Stephanie - plus four adopted international children with health issues: Jon, a son with a congenital heart problem from China; Gabriela, a daughter with cerebral palsy from El Salvador; and Tony and Hugo, two boys with mental health issues from Mexico. Also part of the Dollar clan are Mesfin, as well as foster children Mike and Todd, who were too old to be adopted but are considered family members all the same.

The Dollars also help nine children in Addis Ababa who are either in remission from cancer or recovering from tuberculosis or polio and attending school - part of the Ethiopian Education Project of the Children's Cross Connection International. They also support Yana's family and another family in southern Ethiopia, buying the occasional ox to revive a herd or whatever is needed.

"It's just how I'm wired," explains Shelly Dollar when asked about her generosity. Her no-nonsense, take-charge character helps her keep up with finances for all the children in college, the rents for multiple houses and apartments, health care bills and food budgets. But Shelly, a woman who doesn't wear make-up and hates having her picture taken, is never far from a child who might need her company or simply a hug.

Blending into the Dollar family was easy, Yana says. Stephanie Dollar, the sister who was closest to him in age, quickly showed him the ropes in at high school.

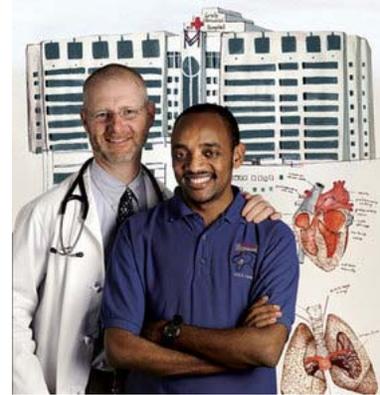
"I remember thinking, if he's going to be my brother, we're going to have to go shopping right away and get him new clothes," Stephanie says with a laugh. She helped him become more "American" and even took him to his first toga party.

After high school graduation, Yana chose to attend Georgia State because of its diverse community and location - he wanted to remain close to the Dollars.

"They are amazing people," Yana says. "They are here for other people, not themselves."

Dr. Dollar is now a faculty member at Emory University. In addition to his work in Ethiopia, Dr. Dollar has volunteered in El Salvador, India, Cambodia and Vietnam. The needs in such countries are overwhelming, he says.

"You can't save everybody," Dr. Dollar says with some resignation. "Whether you do a lot for a little, like we did with Mesfin, or do a little for a lot is the true dilemma."



"I think we're going to have another kid," said Dr. Allen, Chief of Cardiology at Grady Hospital (left), to his wife, Shelly, after Yana (right) was given a prosthetic heart valve that left him medically unable to go back to Ethiopia.

College and Career

Although no longer the skinny wide-eyed boy who first came to America - "He's a savvy American who knows how to use elevators," Dr. Dollar jokes - Yana still experienced a "culture shock" when he first arrived at Georgia State.

He found his way thanks in part to Heather Housley, director of the Office of International Student and Scholar Services, who guided him through visa regulations, class scheduling, advising and other issues.

Housley says Yana has been unassuming about his past.

"He's such an amazing guy and the truth is I didn't know all he has been through until two years after I met him," Housley says.

Yana also found his niche by joining the Ethiopian Student Association and giving tours of Georgia State to incoming international students.

Most importantly, Yana is grateful that Georgia State led him to the field of respiratory therapy, where he focuses on aiding and improving the function of his patients' hearts and lungs. Mesfin has completed his required classes and is now doing his clinical practicum at Grady Hospital three days a week, working 12-hour shifts.

Though he is moved around the hospital regularly, Yana mainly works in the Grady's ICU seeing patients with issues ranging from severe asthma to major trauma, which requires a breathing tube to be inserted and the patient to be placed on a ventilator.

"Every time I see a patient, I feel the emotion they are going through that brings me closer to them and allows me to take care of them," Yana says. "It's like a flashback."

A Time to Celebrate

About two months before his graduation from Georgia State, Yana's family gathered at Bahel Ethiopian Cuisine on Briarcliff Road to celebrate his birthday, or at least what they think is his birthday. Ethiopians generally don't record birth dates, though Yana said his parents know his month and year of birth.

After enjoying platters of spicy beef, lamb and vegetables on injera, a large, spongy sourdough flatbread eaten by hand, the family teased each other over money and chores, and, just like any family would, they shared stories about growing up together.

As the meal wound down and the traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony was performed, the tone turned more somber. Dr. Dollar remembered the children he and Shelly have tried to save, but who didn't make it.

It's moments like this that Yana opens up and reflects on his struggle.

"I believe that God has reasons for what he does," Yana explains. "He made me sick to bring me over here to go to school and to be someone who can help others in need."

The Dollars have been working hard to get Yana's parents access to United States for his graduation. But even if they can't make the ceremony, they'll be cheering Yana from Ethiopia, along with his angel, Dr. Hodes.

"I was always impressed with his drive and think it's simply wonderful he's graduating," Dr. Hodes writes in an e-mail from Addis Ababa. "[Respiratory therapy] is a great choice for Mesfin - he has great people skills and this is a way for him to use his brains and his heart."