

## Lost and Found

The air was hot and thick with the sun glaring through the clear blue sky. I was looking over the railing of the upper commons, where I could see the dry, deep green outdoor basketball court contrasting with the bright color of the grass. Ahead, I got a glimpse of the even larger upper field with the blazing red track surrounding its perimeter. I waved to my friends as I spotted them descending the yellow rimmed stairs on their way to the upper commons. Moments later, I weave through the storm of students heading for the stairs exiting the building with either a snack or a piece of paper in hand. After clear instructions from our teachers, I, along with the new batch of students, inched my way closer to the glass where we studied the white piece of paper plastered with dozens of names. These numbers decided where we would sit, along with who, to carry out the Story Exchange activity between 9th-grade students and various adults for English class.

After finally getting to the front, I see my name followed by the number sixteen. As I step into the vast, dim space of countless chairs, I search for chairs with numbers taped to their back. I suddenly spotted “16” in large black letters, taking up nearly a whole page, taped to one of 6 chairs in a circle near the front of the room. As I made my way over, pencil and notecard clutched between my fingers, I greeted two women in conversation and took a seat. A few moments later, the two women rise and join the bustle of people in search of their place in the room. It felt as if a year had passed until 3 friendly faces, classmates, joined me in the circle along with two other men, whom I recognized. As the chaos around the room seemed to die down, our group leader informed the teacher of the four students and two adults present in our circle.

Despite the commotion around the room, the silence within our group of people seemed only to exacerbate my nerves. The teacher concluded that two students would have to pair up. Eventually, the room settled and was instead filled with the voices of the teachers and translator as they introduced and described the Story Exchange event along with its value. All had their attention on the front of the room where the introductory slide included a couple of videos. I gazed at the large screen displaying individuals sharing authentic perspectives on the activity that my future partner and I would soon take on. One of my classmates beside me was asked to join another group while another man pulled up a chair, taking a seat beside me, evening out the ratio of students to adults. After more clarification from the teachers, our group dispersed, with only me and the new member remaining.

The noise of the room started to die down, with the initial chaos beginning to fade. I found myself sitting across from him as he greeted me with a strong smile on his face, “Egziharya,” he said. Slightly uncertain, I asked him to repeat it multiple times. He gestured to my card, pulling out a silver and red pen I noticed slightly matched his maroon suit paired with black oxfords. As I watched, he carefully spelled out his name for me before I introduced myself and let him share his story. “I was born in the North of Ethiopia,” he began. “Now, it is Eritrea,” he added. Immediately, I was swept by a strong wave of curiosity as I held his gaze and listened intently. His journey began in the capital of Eritrea, Asmara. He had lived in Asmara throughout his

whole childhood but moved to Addis Ababa to complete secondary school. After completing his senior year, he took the ESLCE (Ethiopian School Leaving Certificate Examination). He then accepted a scholarship to Addis Ababa University in the medical field, jumpstarting his career.

As he shared it with me, his story seemed like one of success-going to university, earning a degree, and developing his work. I was stuck on the revelations of his successes. However, this would change soon as Egziharya's life had other plans. After concluding his studies, he worked in numerous hospitals in Ethiopia. In due course, his skills and experience eventually landed him in the neighboring country, Sudan, where he continued to practice medicine for some time. He was later offered an opportunity to work in India, where things started to take a turn. During his time in India, his behavior began to change, and he was diagnosed with Bipolar Disorder. Unable to continue his work, he was sent back to Ethiopia, where he began surviving on the streets. In that moment, I was shaken by the weight of his words, each dropping like heavy stones into the space between us.

I could feel my brows rising and my chest tightening, a wave of disbelief drenching me. How can someone lose everything- their life's work- because of a situation beyond their grasp? I felt a deep sense of unfairness as, rather than receiving aid, Egziharya was left to fend for himself. I kept thinking, what if that was me? What would I do? Simultaneously, I felt a small flame inside me. How had an educated and qualified mind gone to waste because of the lack of knowledge around a significant topic like mental health? How must've that felt? As if reading my mind, he carried on by conveying how returning to Ethiopia was a painful experience. He emphasized how the effects of his condition left him on the streets. He had no support or understanding. I noticed that, as he held his gaze on objects around the room while speaking, he concurrently clasped his hands together, fingers interlaced on his lap.

As he expressed this, I felt the balloon in my lungs inflate larger and larger the more his story continued. I couldn't help but compare this news with my own sheltered life. I have always had a home to go to, food to eat, and family to eat it with. The idea of losing everything felt unimaginable. As he continued, he expressed how, in an attempt to help, the community took him to a monastery, possessed by the belief that the spiritual environment and practices would cure his condition. In this moment, I couldn't help but think, why are topics around mental illnesses in society unknown? Why is society not educated on such a severe subject that could lead to the downfall of many livelihoods like Egziharya's? However, as the story went on, fortunately, his fate changed course for the better.

Egziharya explained how the founder of the non-profit humanitarian organization Mekedonia, Biniam Belete, found him after hearing about Egziharya's story and condition, and took him from the monastery to Mekedonia. During his time under their care, he was treated with the modern treatment he was in desperate need of. With their help, he was rejuvenated. In time, he became a psychiatrist at Mekedonia, where he currently works. I found myself feeling a sense of relief, mixed with solace. Despite being familiar with Mekedonia from prior school visits, my admiration for the organization's impact continued to skyrocket. With his story coming to a close, I realized that the foggy window separating Egziharya and me had finally cleared up as he shared his

story. With this story-sharing experience, I learned to appreciate how it can foster empathy and connection in communities.

Fortunately, I also understood the severity of stigma around mental health and how misunderstood it truly is in many communities, causing others like Egziharya to be left unsupported and unnoticed. Story sharing bridges the gap between individuals, regardless of whether their stories are similar, as it helps shed light on the fact that every person has their journey that shapes them into who they are. The hazy image of his identity had cleared up as he opened up his life to me and I felt the sensation of honour hand in hand with a twang of pressure to share it with the group. As the familiar rush of disruption invaded my ears, and the four empty chairs around me were once again filled, I felt the atmosphere change from when we began. Then filled with anticipation, now filled with connection.

Hearing Egziharya's story made me realize how rarely we listen to each other as much as we share. We assume that we understand others' struggles derived from what we see or hear on the surface. But true understanding comes from an open mind, respect, imagination & visualization, putting ourselves in others' shoes, etc. As I consider this, I'm aware of the sturdy blue chair contrasting against the hard grey floors that create low rumbles across the room as people scooted their seats. Despite the time running out before I could share my story, the responsibility of then sharing Egziharya's kept me on my toes. As the story exchange from another pair in the group began, I leaned in and offered my complete attention. Sometimes that's all it takes. To listen. As I previously listened to Egziharya, he once stated, "Nobody knew anything about mental illness. Even the doctors and health workers didn't know anything about bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, etc."