

## New Thinking: Bikila Award Essay Submission

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### United and Educated We Stand, Divided and Ignorant We Fall

I am a young Ethiopian who has lived in many different cities across the world; some of which have had a strong Ethiopian community to guide and support me and others where my family were the only other Ethiopian people I saw. Through these diverse experiences, I have realized how crucial it is to identify with a greater people since there is so much knowledge, resources and wisdom one can draw from. Although I have gained a lot from the Ethiopian community in Toronto, I have seen some major problems that need addressing. The largest of these problems is that the Ethiopian community is fractured based on religion, political beliefs and ethnicity and this has weakened the community greatly. In addition, another problem is that a lot of young people are struggling to find their cultural identity and are stuck in what one may call a cultural limbo. If these problems can be addressed swiftly and efficiently, the Ethiopian community can build a reputation for itself as one of the most successful immigrant communities in Canada.

The largest issue preventing the Ethiopian community from improving is the fracturing among religious, political and ethnic lines. Because of this I do not know very many Muslim Ethiopians or Protestant Ethiopians which is a shame as I am missing out on the knowledge and advice those people could provide me. I have heard many awful things said about other

Ethiopians with different beliefs and it is very saddening to see that we have cut ourselves apart to no one's harm but our own. Even within religions we have separated ourselves, for example the Ethiopian Orthodox Church has split into many different factions not based on theological differences but political and ethnic ones. This has weakened the community and the youth have suffered the most since it is they who need the support of the entire community to succeed and receive opportunities. The only way forward is to unite all those who have split apart and even though this will not be possible for the older generation it is quite feasible for youth. As we live in Canada, a country with many different cultures and races, we should leave behind the divisions that come from our country and embrace new Canadian values such as unity and acceptance. To achieve this, a place needs to be created where Ethiopian youth of whatever ethnicity, faith or political belief can share ideas and come together to help one another. This has been attempted by particular youth through many initiatives but these initiatives need more support, encouragement and funding from the greater community. Everyone needs to let go of their prejudices not only for the well being of themselves but the future of the Ethiopian community. It is now the responsibility of the youth to clean up the mess that the generation before has made and through that the youth will push the Ethiopian community closer to excellence.

Another important problem that often gets ignored by those who are older is the issue of the cultural struggle young Ethiopians face in western society. Lines get blurred in the minds of youth and people ask themselves whether they are black or Ethiopian; and with the media, internet and western cultural having a stereotype for "black" culture, Ethiopian youth feel pressured to assimilate into whatever the media portrays. The difference between ethnicity and

race is often forgotten in this struggle of identity as one can be both Ethiopian and black. Black is just the way someone looks, being Ethiopian is much more than looks, it is the languages, the traditions and the values one holds. This problem is exasperated since when a white person looks at an Ethiopian youth and a Black American youth, they cannot tell the difference and the youth grow up believing there is no difference. This leads to the erosion of the Ethiopian community as people will start forgetting their or their parent's homeland. To stop this from occurring the adults in our community should make a stronger effort to educate children on the history, unique cultures and languages of Ethiopia. Through education from a young age a person will always know how to identify themselves and who to associate with. Kids need to hear that their country is different from any other and that it is important to keep your customs and traditions that have existed for thousands of years. A lot of parents value education and good marks, which inherently are not bad things, but by solely directing their children's focus on academics they inadvertently ignore the essential cultural education a young mind needs. Those parents who are too focused on their day jobs and are trying to provide also need to cut out time to educate their children culturally; if they aren't then what's the point of their hard work? Finding oneself is a struggle that everyone faces at some point in their lives, but this quest could be made easier if youth are connected to the older generation who could educate them about what it means to be Ethiopian. If programs which connected youth and older members of the community were established, it would go a long way to build an intergenerational bond necessary for the continuation of Ethiopian culture in Canada.

As we strive to build an intergenerational culture I hope to see the Ethiopian community defined as one that is united, strong and compassionate. I want others to see our success and

model themselves off of how we are conducting matters. I feel great pride when I see the Ethiopian flag or hear Ethiopia mentioned in the media and I want that to continue for the generations that come after me. The only way that is possible is if we put aside our differences, come together and make an effort to educate our youth on what it means to be Ethiopian. This will not only build a brighter future for the youth but the entire Ethiopian diaspora.