

New York Times Article

By Eilene Zimmerman

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Forging Connections Among Members of the African Diaspora

Almaz Negash lives in California but never forgot her native Eritrea. Now she heads a group that brings together dispersed Africans, philanthropists, entrepreneurs and business leaders.



Almaz Negash founded the African Diaspora Network with an aim of connecting people and building community. “This way,” she said, “we all rise together.” Credit...African Diaspora Network

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This article is part of our [Women and Leadership special report](#) that profiles women leading the way on climate, politics, business and more.

One of Almaz Negash's most vivid memories was of her parents' planning for the marriage of one of her four older sisters. She was 12 or 13 at the time and recalled her mother trying to pull together the bride-to-be's dowry, which was the tradition in the 1970s, in the northeast African nation of Eritrea.

"My mother had to figure out what we could give, because she had five daughters, and you can't give more for one daughter than the other," Ms. Negash said in a video interview. It became a defining moment for her, and the start of a life spent defying expectations about women, especially African women.

"I told my mother, you will never give money for me," she said. "The man who marries me will give you money."

It has been a long journey from Eritrea to Sunnyvale, Calif., where Ms. Negash, 59, now makes her home. Today she is the founder and executive director of the Silicon Valley-based African Diaspora Network (A.D.N.), a nonprofit with a mission to facilitate collaboration between Africans of the diaspora, supporters of Africa, social entrepreneurs and business leaders

The path to heading a nonprofit that helps Africans began, ironically, with Ms. Negash leaving Africa. In 1984, she left Eritrea and joined a brother in the Netherlands, where she began learning Dutch so she could study at a university. Her plan, though, had been to emigrate to the United States, and three and a half years later she was in San Francisco.

Ms. Negash had become part of what's known as the African diaspora, communities of people worldwide who are from African countries or descended from native Africans. It is so large that it is often referred to as the [sixth region](#) of Africa, in addition to the five geographic regions of the continent. It is nearly impossible to determine the number of Africans in the diaspora globally, because what constitutes a diasporan has become complex, said Abimbola A. Adelakun, an assistant professor of African and African Diaspora Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. Estimates range from 16 million to more than 200 million.

Ms. Negash's start in San Francisco had been tough, she said, until a chance meeting changed her life. She was introduced to the [Rev. Dr. James G. Emerson Jr.](#), pastor of Calvary Presbyterian Church and his wife, the clinical psychologist Margaret Bonnell Emerson.

The Emersons allowed Ms. Negash to live with them while she was in college, even helping her get a scholarship to the University of San Francisco. "They had a commitment to helping people, especially women, and made me a member of their family," said Ms. Negash "I lived there for six years and grew to love them; they are an integral part of my story." Her success, she said, would not have been possible otherwise. "I was lucky enough to have this highly privileged white family open doors for me."

Some of the doors opened for her were ones she pushed open herself, a skill she learned from her mother. Ms. Negash's family in Eritrea had a comfortable life largely because of the business savvy of her mother, Teblez.

"My mother did not like to be told what she could and couldn't do," Ms. Negash said.

In the early 1970s, Teblez went to court to fight the leaders of the family's ancestral village of Tselot for the right to own land. She won, becoming the first landowning woman in her village, and she began investing in real estate. "I spent a lot of time with my mother," said Ms. Negash, "seeing how she did things, and I followed her example."

Ms. Negash created a life and a career for herself in the Bay Area, marrying an Eritrean man she met in San Francisco and getting her masters in business administration while working and raising two children. The couple is still married (and no dowry was ever paid).

Her first job was an entry level position at an investment bank, but she soon shifted to focus on international business, eventually becoming director of international trade at the Bay Area World Trade Center and after that, director of the Silicon Valley Center for International Trade Development in San Jose. (Both are now closed.)

In 2004, she became the director of global leadership at the [Markkula Center for Applied Ethics](#) at Santa Clara University, and in 2008 she led the expansion to Silicon Valley of the Women's Initiative for Self-Employment (now closed). By then, though, Ms. Negash's interests were shifting to social entrepreneurship: the creation of for-profit businesses aimed at building social value, often by addressing societal needs. She was particularly struck by the ways social entrepreneurship could benefit Africans and African countries.

"I would be at these meetings where everyone was talking about starting businesses that would help Africa, but there were no other Africans at the meetings," she said. "The voices, ideas and financial backing of Africans were absent."

The African Diaspora Network, which she founded in 2010, aims to change that, through its African Diaspora Investment Symposium, an annual conference that brings together government, nongovernmental organizations, corporations and foundations to discuss issues related to Africa and the diaspora. It also provides a platform for investment in African-led ventures.

A.D.N. is home to two accelerator programs, [Builders of Africa's Future](#) for African entrepreneurs and [Accelerating Black Leadership and Entrepreneurship](#), which focuses on U.S.-based Black entrepreneurs. In the last two years, 27 leadership and entrepreneurship participants have received a total of \$206,000 in start-up funding. One of those participants was Akissi Stokes, co-founder and chief executive of WunderGrubs, which produces healthy, affordable protein from sustainably farmed insects for human food, animal feed and soil fertilizer.

The Builders of Africa's Future program has helped 53 start-ups; last year, each of the 11 start-ups in the group received \$25,000 in funding from the U.S. African Development Foundation.

The experience of creating and growing a prominent nonprofit — while having received a great deal of support in the process — has profoundly changed Ms. Negash, both as a human being and a leader, she said.

“I have become more empathic, compassionate and understanding, because of the generosity of people I never thought would be generous to me, most of whom don't look like me. That's been pretty amazing,” she said.

At the African Diaspora Network, Ms. Negash sees herself more as a community builder than as a top-down executive director. “I am a horizontal thinker because the vertical, the hierarchy, isn't sustainable. I see my team as peers. There is no other way to build an organization,” she said. “This way, we all rise together.”

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