



Photograph by Saori Yoneda

Winnie Kelete embraces co-worker Susan Esquivel as attendees of the dedication ceremony tour the home built for the Keletes through the Habitat for Humanity program.

The Kelete family realizes the 'American Dream,' thanks to Habitat for Humanity and a generous community

By Linh Tat



Photograph by Saori Yoneda

Winnie Kelete inserts the key in the door of her new home for the first time as Atobrehan Kelete (far right) and contractor Jesus Oropeza congratulate each other with a celebratory hug.

By Linh Tat

"This is the key to your future. This is the answer to your dreams." With these words, Winnie Kelete was handed the key to her new home. She slid the key into the lock, turned the knob and pushed open the door. One by one, the six members of the Kelete family filed into the house—and into their new lives.

In about two hours, the formal dedication ceremony for the latest Silicon Valley Habitat for Humanity home was over. Yet to the volunteers and donors in Los Gatos who had worked since mid-March, hammering nails and collecting goods to furnish the home, this project was six months in the making.

But the Keletes know better still. They know that the two-story, three-bedroom home on Charles Street they now own is another point along a journey that dates back 18 years—a journey rich with tales of perseverance and caring hearts.

Once a medic in the Eritrean army, Winnie's husband, Atobrehan Kelete, faced a possible execution by the Ethiopian government. With only the clothes on their backs, the Keletes fled to Sudan in the early 1980s, where they had the first of their four children.

Gaining political asylum from the U.S. government, the Keletes arrived in Gilroy in the mid-'80s, where a family "adopted" them for six months to help get them on their feet.

The Keletes settled in Los Gatos in 1989. Despite the tight living arrangements of the apartment—where mold penetrated the walls and the bathroom barely functioned—the Keletes chose to remain, for they felt they could provide the brightest futures for their children in this town.

"It's a wonderful community. It's a safe place to raise kids," says Kelete.

To make ends meet, there was a period in which Kelete held down three jobs at a time.

Today, Kelete, 51, works as a custodian for the Cambrian School District while Winnie (Frewoini), 39, is a yard-duty monitor at Daves Avenue School. Their two oldest sons, Tom, 20, and Meconen, 18, are enrolled in local colleges. Eden, the only girl, is 12 and attends Fisher Middle School. Simon, 5, is a kindergartner at Daves Avenue School.

Misfortune struck the family in July 2002 when Kelete had to undergo heart-bypass surgery. Throughout his recovery, he feared losing his job—the only job in the household that offered medical benefits.

The bad luck was replaced with "a miracle" in March 2003 when the Keletes learned that their "No. 1 dream" of owning a home was about to come true. When Habitat first asked them if they still wanted the home, Kelete was speechless.

"I was in shock. It took me awhile to answer. Then I said 'yes,' " he recalls.

During the six months after the surgery, Kelete was readmitted to the hospital several times due to complications. But since learning of the good fortune with Habitat, Kelete has not been to the hospital once—unless one counts the time he accidentally smashed a hammer against his thumb while trying to drive in a nail.

"Habitat for Humanity and the town not only gave us the house, they gave us life," Winnie is convinced.

As a small token of her gratitude, Winnie baked bread for the volunteers nearly every day throughout the duration of the project, using a recipe from her homeland.

"I'm happy to do it for them. They're all such hard workers," she says.

Echoing identical sentiments, the volunteers who have come to know the Keletes over the months say it brings them joy to build the home, knowing it will go to such a deserving family.

Habitat for Humanity is an internationally recognized, nonprofit organization that provides affordable homes to low-income families by allowing them to enter into interest-free mortgage agreements for 30 years. The families who are selected must put in 500 "sweat equity" hours to help build the home themselves.

The Keletes went above and beyond the call of duty, contributing 968 hours, according to Robert Freiri, executive director of Silicon Valley Habitat for Humanity.

"It's not the point to just put in 500 hours. We enjoy the people," Kelete had said over the summer before the house was complete.

From selecting the colors for the walls and carpet to digging out roots to level the ground, hammering nails, sandpapering rough surfaces and painting, the Keletes got involved every step of the way.

But the Keletes did not do it alone.

The family's dream of owning a house became a reality through the collaborative efforts of volunteers and donors in and around Los Gatos. A total 963 volunteers labored for more than 15,500 hours to help build the home, Freiri says.

When Jesus ("Chuy") Oropeza, a contractor with Colonial Builders and Consultants, agreed to take on the assignment for Habitat at a reduced fee, he was not sure what he was getting into.

"I just knew it stirred some emotion in me," says the man who has also helped build an elementary school next to a church in Mexico through another organization. Joining him to build the Habitat home were his wife and mother-in-law.

"By helping the Keletes, it gives me hope in my heart that somebody is watching out for my family in Mexico," he says.

Los Gatos resident Bill Miller, who has helped build 25 Habitat homes, says no other family he has worked with put in as much of their personal time as the Keletes.

"We felt really close to this family, even more than the others, because Winnie was there every day," he says. "We've been delighted to have them and their enthusiasm. They earned their home."

Joining Miller in lending a hand were employees of local businesses and members of civic organizations, who performed manual labor or collected money and other goods.



Photograph by Saori Yoneda

Los Gatos resident Bill Miller hammers a nail into the frame of the roof. Miller, who has helped build 25 Habitat homes in Silicon Valley, says that no other family has put in as many hours toward building their own home as the Keletes.

The Los Gatos Rotary Club pitched in to pay for the roof and collected furniture and kitchen appliances for the Keletes. Sur La Table partnered with the Rotarians when it hosted the Jazz on the Plazz summer reception to ask attendees to donate to Habitat or to purchase a kitchen appliance for the new home. Also, the Los Gatos Kiwanis kicked in \$3,500 for the purchase of solar panels for the roof.

"I noticed there was greater involvement from this community. It was greater than in any other community," says town resident and Habitat volunteer George Ahearn.

Doing their part to help were the third graders at St. Mary's School in Los Gatos. Second graders at the time construction first began, the children decided to take on the Habitat home as one of their community-service projects. They were there for the groundbreaking ceremony in March, where they served doughnuts, fruits and drinks. Throughout the project, the kids also took field trips to the home to bring food to the workers.

The students took on extra chores around their homes, ran lemonade stands and washed cars to raise money. With the money, the class purchased a gardening set, complete with a hose, work gloves and gardening tools.

"They really jumped through hoops to get this done," Diane Carty

Speicher, community outreach coordinator at St. Mary's, says of the children. "They're going to come back and do lunch."

The gardening set is a gift that Winnie can truly appreciate. Winnie, affectionately referred to by her Habitat family as "Mama," already has plans to plant jalapeños and tomatoes in the yard—just like the garden she used to tend to in her homeland.

The town of Los Gatos also stepped in to plant a Holyoke tree in front of the house for the Keletes, "so that they, along with this tree, can grow in the community," says Mayor Sandy Decker. The mayor, along with fellow council member Mike Wasserman, visited the site and delivered drinks to the workers over the summer.

"I would love to have them as neighbors. They're very giving, very generous, very gracious," says Los Gatan Christine Carbone, a member of Habitat's family selection committee that named the Keletes as recipients of the new house.

But the Keletes almost did not remain in town.

Tom Kelete, the eldest child who no longer lives at home, recalls that his parents considered moving to Sacramento, where houses are more affordable, during his senior year at Los Gatos High School. Refusing to graduate anywhere else, Tom persuaded his parents to postpone the move.

After he graduated, however, Meconen, the Keletes' second son, opposed moving, as he too wanted to graduate high school with his friends. When Meconen graduated Los Gatos High this past June, the Keletes were already on their way to building their home in town.

The house at 25 Charles St. is special—just like the number on the house, this is Habitat for Humanity's 25th home in Silicon Valley. It is also the first Habitat home in Los Gatos.

"Los Gatos was thrilled that we had this piece of property for Habitat to do its good work. We have done what had to be done to have this become a reality," says Decker.

No one is more thrilled that this piece of land was available than the family that left its homeland 18 years ago in search of a new, permanent home.

Kelete continues to express gratitude to the town that helped make his family's dream a reality: "You didn't build us a house, you built us a home."

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