Later in that same year, he was honored with an Honorary Doctorate in Public Service at Regis University, in Denver, Colorado. He was then further honored by being featured in “Changing the World: Stories Celebrating 100 Years of Graduate Education at the University of Texas at Austin,” published by the University of Texas Press.

In an effort to expand literacy efforts to the northern region of Tigry, he established the Tigray Library and Literacy Development Project, under which he set up the Segenat Children and Youth Library in Mekelle. This gained the attention of American Libraries editor, Leonard Kniffel, who wrote about his work in an article: New Youth Library in Ethiopia Makes Impossible Dream Reality.

In addition to his beloved book, “Silly Mammo,” Yohannes has written a new children’s book, “Tirhas Celebrates Ashenda: An Ethiopian Girl’s Festival.” Over 3,000 copies of this book were distributed during the dedication of the Segenat Library.

Yohannes Gebregeorgis, children’s librarian and library champion, received Honorary Membership to the American Library Association in New Orleans during the opening session of the ALA annual conference in June 2011. Honorary Membership is the highest honor bestowed by ALA on an individual.

Honorary membership may be conferred on a living citizen of any country whose contribution to librarianship or a closely related field is so outstanding that it is of lasting importance to the advancement of the whole field of library service. It is intended to reflect honor upon the ALA as well as upon the individual. Past recipients of the award have included: Bill and Melinda Gates, Oprah Winfrey, President Jimmy Carter, members of congress, and other noted librarians.

In 2008 Yohannes was named a TOP 10 CNN Hero for his work in bringing libraries and literacy to his native Ethiopia. Throughout his career, Yohannes has overseen the establishment of over 40 school library partnerships, three free-standing children’s libraries and seven donkey mobile libraries.

He received the Presidential Citation for International Innovation in 2008 from ALA President—and his former Professor—Dr. Loriene Roy, and was invited by ALA President Camila Alire to present the Presidential Keynote in Boston in 2010.
While in New Orleans, Louisiana to receive Honorary Membership to the American Library Association, the highest award ALA bestows on an individual, Yohannes Gebregeorgis was invited to speak at the Dr. Martin Luther King Branch of the New Orleans Public Library, a joint-use library of the New Orleans Public Library and the Dr. Martin Luther King Charter School in the Lower Ninth Ward. He was warmly received by an audience of young children, adults, and library professionals.

The King Library was totally submerged under floodwaters after the levees broke following Hurricane Katrina in 2005. Despite opposition from the local government, the school and the library were rebuilt demonstrating the resolve of the community.

Yohannes presented branch manager, Linda Gielec, with a framed Ethiopian Cross. More photos can be seen on the ALA web site at: http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/al_focus/photos/ala-honorary-member-visits-new-orleans

Yohannes Gebregeorgis Presents at the Dr. King Library

Kindred Spirits

Yohannes Gebregeorgis, children’s author and social entrepreneur, ducked out of the rain and into the Royal Street studio of author/illustrator Alex Beard for his scheduled appointment. Beard’s studio was replete with full-sized prints of illustrations from the series, “Tales from the Watering Hole.” Kindred spirits, they quickly exchanged copies of their books: Yohanne’s “Tirhas Celebrates Ashenda” and Beard’s ‘The Jungle Grapevine” and “Monkey See, Monkey Draw.”

Yohannes was in New Orleans to receive the award of Honorary Membership to the American Library Association at its annual convention for his work in bringing libraries and literacy to his native Ethiopia. This meeting had been arranged by a colleague who knew of Beard’s interest in Africa, children’s books, and the importance of imagination.

Upon entering Beard’s studio, Yohannes and his companions were awestruck at the artwork that decorated the walls. There were monkeys and elephants and crocodiles whose images flowed from the canvas onto the matting and seemingly beyond. The colors were vibrant and the images whimsical. Beard regaled the visitors with stories of his photographer uncle who encouraged him as a child to dream of all that is possible. As a teenager he spent his summers in Africa and fell in love with the land, “the red soil gets into your blood” creating a bond that endures indefinitely. Beard is an adventurer who has had many opportunities to visit the world’s most untouched and often remote wildernesses around the world. These experiences were easily transformed into “Tales from the Watering Hole.”

Yohannes and Beard huddled over a stack of books, a copy of each title for each of Yohannes’ libraries. Each signature was embellished with illustrations depicting characters from the books. Beard has promised his young son a trip to Africa in a year, possibly Ethiopia, repeating his own youthful experiences. And with his generous gift to spark the imagination, the children of Ethiopia will know that all things are possible.
In the spirit of cooperation and collaboration, the Segenat Children and Youth Library provided the school at Zeroreha with a modest collection of children’s books. Months earlier, Yohannes Gebregeorgis, of the Tigray Libraries and Literacy Development Project visited Zeroreha with a few Peace Corps Volunteers and members of ERDA (Enderta Regional Development Association), including Ato Teame Gidey and Ato Hailemariam Senbety. This very remote school was at the top of a mountain, a fifteen kilometer trek up a winding rocky road outside of Quiha, over fifteen kilometers from Mekelle.

Yohannes and his companions were touched by the great efforts of ERDA in building a school in this remote and impoverished community. “The beautiful new school replaced a traditional “Das” school, one made out of chiseled rocks with a roof of tree branches.” The wind was harsh and the old school was open to the elements. The committee understood the importance of libraries and committed to providing a library for the school. This small collection of books will provide the students with basic resources and opportunities to explore. The Tigray Libraries and Literacy Development Project look forward to further opportunities to cooperate in bringing libraries and literacy to the children of Ethiopia.

“A very successful seminar and workshop on “Children’s Books Writers & Illustrators” was held in Addis Ababa on May 17th and 18th and in Mekelle on May 20th. The purpose of the seminar was to bring children’s writers and illustrators from different parts of the world together, to illuminate the different traditions and ways of working, as well as to inspire and learn from each other.

Invited speakers for the seminars were: Helena Willis, illustrator; Petrus Dahlin, writer; Matilda Wallin, librarian from Sweden; John Kilaka, illustrator and storyteller from Tanzania; and Yohannes Gebregeorgis, writer, librarian; Samrawit Araya, writer from Ethiopia.

The seminar was a collaboration between The International Library (Sweden), Bokspindeln (Sweden) and Sololia Publishing/Tigray Libraries and Literacy Development Project (Ethiopia) with funding from The Swedish Institute.

A panel presentation on The Importance of Children’s Books: Children’s Literature in Sweden, Tanzania and Ethiopia was conducted by Willis, Dahlin, Kilaka and Gebregeorgis. It was followed by a workshop on The Power of Impulsive Creativity organized by Willis and Dahlin. John Kilaka demonstrated illustrations “Tinga-Tinga” style, a common type of painting in East Africa.

Participants in Mekelle had an opportunity to visit the highly acclaimed Segenat Children and Youth Library.
The Segenat Children and Youth Library is a modern, full-service library serving the information needs of the children and youth in Mekelle, Tigray Region, Ethiopia and its environs. The 20,000 volume library has a networked computer lab with limited internet access, an online catalog, reference services, and a variety of clubs and other programming. It is open 48 hours per week, Monday through Saturday.


Adi Gudom is Site for Next Children's Library.

The community of Adi Gudom has invited Yohannes Gebregeorgis and the Tigray Library and Literacy Development Project to build its next library in Adi Gudom, a site fewer than 30 kilometers from Mekelle, home of the Segenat Children and Youth Library. The townspeople have designated a large, free-standing building for the use of the library and computer/media center. Fundraising has begun in earnest in the U.S. and in Sweden to help with staffing, local language collection building, and furniture. Adi Gudom is the capital of Hintalo Wajirat Woreda in the Tigray Region. It has a population of approximately 10,000 people.

In addition to a core collection of English language materials, local language materials will be purchased to augment the growing need for first language materials for children and youth. All of the furniture, shelving, and other equipment will be provided by local carpenters, metalworkers, and practitioners of other professions. Local library assistants will be hired from within the community and trained by TLLDP staff.

Current Peace Corps Volunteer, Bryan Cramer, has joined the TLLDP and the community of Adi Gudom in this effort.

Financial contributions to support the library in Adi Gudom or the Segenat Children and Youth Library may be made in two different methods:

Send checks to:
Tigray Development Association
Library and Literacy Development Project
P.O. Box 73295
Washington, D.C. 20056-3295

Or credit card payments to Peace Corps at this site:
https://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=donate.contribute.projDetail&projdesc=663-019

100 percent of all donations will be used for these projects.

For more information contact: tigrayreads@yahoo.com

Photos Bryan Cramer.