

Season of Sharing: Once homeless, veteran's family moves upscale

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Umoja Selassie and his three daughters were the first family to move into the tony planned community of Bayport Alameda last year. They remember everything seemed to sparkle, with sidewalks that were flawless and a street so empty that their footsteps echoed across the neighborhood.

"We were the first ones in the whole neighborhood, and everything was brand new," Selassie remembers. "The street wasn't even named when we got in here."

Unfortunately, it wasn't the first time the 55-year-old Navy veteran and his three then-teenage daughters lived without an official address. They were homeless in San Francisco several years ago, until they received help finding an apartment in 2003, with several months of rent provided by The Chronicle's Season of Sharing Fund.

Years later, they've turned into one of the program's biggest success stories. A case worker at the veteran aid organization Operation Dignity helped Selassie find his new home - a three-bedroom, 2 1/2-bath apartment that he rents for less than \$500 in a neighborhood that includes million-dollar houses. All of his daughters are in college, with plans to become an artist, a nurse and a psychiatrist.

For Selassie, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder from working on ships during the Vietnam War, the Gulf War and the conflict in Somalia, the home is a blessing that he makes sure his family gives thanks for every day, not just Christmas.

"They said, 'You're just what we wanted. You're a single parent, you don't have bad credit and you've got no criminal record,'" Selassie says, recalling the day he found out he qualified for the low-income housing. "Deep in my heart, it just dawned on me that we had to take advantage of this opportunity. Because this kind of thing doesn't last forever."

Selassie said he's had other blessings. After he grew up poor in New Orleans, his Navy job allowed him to see the world, meeting his ex-wife in the Philippines and having three daughters in the 1980s. His home now looks like a museum, with paintings and other souvenirs from Africa adorning the walls - sharing space with bright still-life paintings by his youngest daughter, 19-year-old Imarie. Small models of Navy planes seem to rest on every flat surface.

But the military job both gave and took away, contributing to asbestos-related respiratory disease and stress-related illnesses from working in pump rooms and other confined quarters during wartime.

"All the stuff over there caught up with me," Selassie said. "I'd watch people get their fingers cut off. All the overtime and time away from your family. It gets to the point where you don't know what day it is."

Selassie was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder in the 1990s and took early retirement, but his troubles didn't go away. The veteran hit a low in 2003, after he went to the Philippines to bring his daughters back to the United States, and his benefits were suspended for eight months. Selassie says he sold nearly everything he owned to feed his family, who eventually ended up on the street.

Life improved dramatically after the Hamilton Family Shelter in San Francisco and Swords to Plowshares found the Selassies a small apartment in Alameda, and Season of Sharing helped with the rent. His daughters enrolled at Encinal High School, their English improved quickly and they found studies that interested them. After much persistence, the veteran says he received some of the

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money he was owed by the government.

As the girls settled into school, Selassie remembers seeing the Bayport Alameda development being built not far from the Alameda Naval Base on the north side of town, but he never dreamed that he might live there someday.

"I saw all these rich houses," Selassie said. "I remember thinking, 'Daddy can't touch that.' "

Then he got word from his Operation Dignity case manager, Barbara Edmondson, who suggested he apply for one of the special apartments for low-income families that had been built in a corner of the neighborhood near the college.

A year after the Selassies moved, Bayport Alameda looks a little more lived in. The streets are lined with new cars, with more than a few luxury models. Selassie's daughters are a regular sight walking to and from college, and his neighbors wave and exchange pleasantries when the veteran walks outside to meet a reporter and photographer.

"We don't hear about anybody getting killed or shot around here," Imarie Selassie said. "My friends who live in other areas have so many issues."

Imarie's sisters are both pursuing studies inspired by their father, and all plan to transfer to four-year universities. Iesha, 21, wants to be a nurse, and hopes part of her work involves helping veterans. Izetta, 20, would like to be a psychiatrist, and enjoys coming home and talking to her father about what she's learned in school - some of which applies to his own experiences.

Case manager Edmondson said Selassie has gone through struggles like everyone else in Operation Dignity, but always focuses on what's best for his daughters.

"He has been a role model to other families that are here," Edmondson said. "We all fall down in our lives. I tell people, 'If you can fall down and see up, you can get up.' "

Selassie says if he's set an example, he hopes other homeless people and veterans utilize the services available to them. His \$475 per month rent is about to go up, but Selassie can cover the cost, and has even saved enough so the family can take a trip by train to Texas to visit some relatives early next month. Other than a short trip to Yosemite in high school, it's the first trip the girls have taken outside of the Bay Area since they arrived in the United States.

"I've had tough times, and I still have struggles, but having these kids and being a veteran has helped me a lot. I feel really blessed that my kids have a future," Selassie said. "We're not all perfect. I look at society like you're a cancer or an antibody cell. We want to be an antibody cell. We don't want to do no wrong."

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<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2007/12/30/BA0PU30VJ.DTL>

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