

Montgomery Sister City Delegation Trip to Ethiopia

The Gondar Committee of Montgomery Sister Cities celebrated the New Year with a delegation of twenty representing Montgomery College, Montgomery Sister Cities, county government, and county residents embarked on a historical trip to Gondar, Ethiopia as part of our community building and sister cities partnership strengthening efforts.

Led by County Council Member Craig Rice, the trip was incredible in many ways, leaving a great impression on not only the delegates who traveled but our host community in Ethiopia.

From the many highlights of visiting awe-inspiring ancient monasteries, mosques, cathedrals, and castles that continue to tell of the extraordinary, beautiful, rich and resilient culture of Ethiopia, to brilliant growth and economic power of modern-day Ethiopia. This merger of majestic ancient history preserved and revered so well; the Simien Mountains National Park, vast and diverse natural terrain, to the modern infrastructures, skyscrapers, cosmopolitan life in major cities, makes the Ethiopian experience most enriching, diverse and intriguing.



A warm welcoming reception by the Mayor of Gondar, Dr. Muluken Adane and city department directors commenced with the reading and presentation of a proclamation from our honorable County Executive Marc Elrich, congratulating, and reaffirming his and Montgomery County's support to the Sister Cities relationship with the people of Gondar, Ethiopia. This was followed by another presentation from the honorable Congressman Jamie Raskin also congratulating Dr. Muluken on his great efforts in fostering the sister cities relationship. The

delegates also received gifts of traditional clothes from the people of Gondar, and a beautiful painting by a local artist to the people of Montgomery County, MD.

One of the highlights of the trip was the groups' participation in Gondar's Timket (Epiphany) Festival. Getting up before dawn to join over a hundred thousand pilgrims and visitors surrounding Fasilides' bath and watching a golden sunrise on the 17th century stone structure majestically standing strong, while religious leaders and thousands reenact the baptism of Jesus, a symbolic renewal of their own baptism, was quite a humbling and life-changing experience.





Yet, there was more. This trip was much more than sight-seeing and cultural immersion. Members of the delegation visited Gondar's main polyclinic donating much needed primary care medical supplies, and sports uniforms and equipment to the local Gondar youth soccer team. The group also visited two primary schools, identified by the host community, donating much needed desktop and laptop computers. Both schools had a student to teacher ratio of 65:1, and a shift system to accommodate the large student population.

Despite the visible and expressed needs in the communities visited, the delegates were warmly welcomed at each visit with coffee ceremonies, gifts of roses and hand-made scarves, speaking of the incredible hospitality and generosity of the Ethiopian people.

Just when the delegates thought it could not get any better, history was made by the celebration of the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. at the University of Gondar on January 21st, 2019.

After a beautiful coffee ceremony, opening remarks were given by the Vice President of Gondar University, Dr. Asrat, followed by Mr. Ayanaw Mengesha of Gondar City Council, Dr. Clemmie Solomon, Dean of Student Affairs, Montgomery College, Interfaith prayers led by our very own Rev. Mansfield Kaseman, and the keynote speech by Council Member Craig Rice. This was then followed by a moving video presentation of *Lift Every Voice and Sing*. Students and faculty from the Department of Theatrical Arts brilliantly performed a dialogue between Dr. King and King Tewodros II, Emperor of Ethiopia. The performance reminding the audience of two great leaders, 39 and 49 years of age, both dying fighting for the rights of their people. Dr. King dying April 4, 1968 and King Tewodros II dying April 13, 1868. Both leading their people towards the mountaintop, though never making it there themselves during their lifetimes.



This event which started with a day of community service, ended with a community interfaith dialogue, meeting between Montgomery College faculty and Gondar University faculty, and a touching dedication of a small park to the Gondar Montgomery Sister Cities relationship, marked by a beautiful tree plaque dedicated to former County Executive Ike Leggett who championed and fostered so strongly these Sister City relationships.

“There is more that connects us; our vision, our goals, the opportunities we all bring to the table, our love to serve our communities, than divides us. More that connects us beyond race, beyond skin tones, challenges, that we can all overcome for the common good. We have so much more in common”, Mayor Muluken relayed to the group when he hosted the delegates at City Council offices. The group with members of the city council, discussed upcoming initiatives in education, championed by Montgomery College, Interfaith dialogue, championed by Rev. Kaseman, Economic development and Land and Waste Management discussed by the entire group. As a testament to the importance of the relationship, this meeting was also graced by His Excellency, Mr. Reta Alemu Rega, Deputy Ambassador of Ethiopia, to the United States of America.

Overall, this life-changing, outcome-focused and very successful trip, exceeded everyone’s expectations. I am sure most of us came back from Ethiopia knowing we have learned and received much more than we expected, and much more than we gave.

Special thanks to the generous support of Ethiopian Airlines, East County Regional Service Center, St. Andrews Lutheran Church and all other donors who helped make this trip a success.

For more information on this trip, and future trips please contact Josephine Garnem at Josephine.garnem@montgomerycountymd.gov or visit <http://montgomersistercities.org/>