

## DAILY SPECIAL

# Caring family helps teen stand tall

Ethiopian youth with crippling spinal condition looks to bright future after surgery in Vancouver

BY MARY FRANCES HILL  
VANCOUVER SUN

Last Remembrance Day, Gary Segal, a member of one of the city's top philanthropic families, went to a Denny's restaurant for a late lunch with his wife Nancy.

Over their meal, discussion turned to his frustration over two weeks of phone calls and e-mails to Dr. Michael Dvorak, a respected spine surgeon.

Through their humanitarian work in Africa, the Segals had committed themselves to bringing an Ethiopian boy to Vancouver for vital spine surgery he couldn't get in his native country. Dvorak would be the perfect person to perform the surgery.

Then Segal glanced briefly at another table in the restaurant, and saw him: It was Dr. Michael Dvorak, sitting nearby.

Finally, he had an opportunity to contact with one of the city's busiest spine surgeons.

"It was a small element in a whole bunch of coincidences," Segal says. "I knew then that this was meant to happen."

Because Dvorak and Segal met that day, the life of Tesfaye Nagassie Anagaw, a young Ethiopian man who spent the previous 14 years in pain, was changed forever.

## Teen felt pain, fear

Tesfaye, 19, a native of the Gogjam region of Ethiopia, wasn't capable of handling a proper sit-down meal.

Tesfaye's life was full of heartache, pain and fear.

His heartache came from not being able to pursue a healthy, normal life like other boys in their teens. He endured the pain that came with his illness, and lived constantly with the fear he would be laughed at, ridiculed.

A member of the Agaw tribe, which claims its own dialect, he was raised with four siblings in a one-room hut; his father, a farmer, died early in Tesfaye's life. He contracted spinal tuberculosis at age eight. Complications of the disease caused his spine to collapse.

He couldn't expand his chest, sit down for a meal, or lie on his back. He walked at a 100-degree angle, and he was forced to crane his neck to look anyone in the eye. To support himself, he was forced to place his palms on his thighs.

"Something as simple and silly as giving someone a hug — he couldn't do it," Dvorak recalls of the young man who would become his patient.

Despite his pleas to adults around him to help ease his pain — and an unsuccessful visit to a village doctor who anointed him with holy water — Tesfaye received no medical attention.

When he was 12, he and his brother made the journey to the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa to seek medical help. There, and in Ghana, he was rejected several times by visiting experts from the developed world.

Finally, a breakthrough: After a visit to the Mother Theresa Mission in Addis Ababa, Tesfaye began an eight-month treatment session for his tuberculosis.

Through that treatment, he met Dr. Rick Hodes, or Dr. Rick, an American surgeon revered among Africans and known as "Father Theresa" for his philanthropic work with children with spinal trauma.

Hodes, who has taken many young, sick Africans into his home as they worked their way back to health, took a liking to the optimistic, affable Tesfaye, and invited him to live in his



JENELLE SCHNEIDER / VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouverites Nancy and Gary Segal brought Tesfaye Anagaw to Vancouver from Ethiopia so he could have a major, life-changing operation on his spine. Tesfaye is now able to stand straight thanks to this procedure, and is ready to pursue his education in his native land.

home during his recovery.

## Segals paid medical bills

Meeting Dr. Hodes would place Tesfaye directly in the path of Gary Segal.

The Segal family has visited Africa frequently over the years to perform humanitarian work. Through these efforts Gary Segal became acquainted with Hodes, a man he now considers his hero.

Once connected through Rick Hodes, the Segal family invited Tesfaye to Vancouver to pursue his surgery and recover in the comfort of a family home, while the Segals covered his medical costs.

On June 20, he landed in Vancouver.

## Breathing was laboured

Bent over as he was, Tesfaye's breathing was laboured.

"There's not much that keeps me awake at night and I rarely get concerned about cases, but I was concerned about him," says Dvorak.

The African doctors who had turned him away "were quite justified in their worry," said Dvorak.

The prospect of using anaesthesia on a patient with pulmonary issues brought up dangers.

Though Tesfaye's tuberculosis had long before been treated, the disease had eaten away at his front vertebrae.

He suffered from ankylosing spondylitis, a condition that inflames the spinal joints and leads to chronic pain, fusing the spine and forcing him into his



TESFAYE'S JOURNEY BLOG

Tesfaye Anagaw enjoys a casual day with the Segal family at their home before the surgery that would straighten his spine.

forward-stopped posture.

"He was a fairly thin kid, and with surgery there was a risk of blood clots and paralysis. What would the future be like for him if he were paralysed?"

On June 12, after more than 14 hours of surgery, Dvorak and co-surgeon Mike Boyd placed and re-placed rods and screws four times to correct his back.

After the most intense phase of the surgery, "there was this profound moment," Dvorak recalls. "[Boyd] and I rolled him onto the hospital bed and for the first time in 15 years, he lay flat on his back."

The doctors looked at each other in silence.

Then Boyd, quietly reached over to Dvorak and shook his hand.

Dr. Marcel Dvorak remembers it as the first time he saw Tesfaye's body as a thing of beauty.

## Contracted pneumonia

The dramatic straightening of his spine may have changed Tesfaye's life in the long term. But it was the following two weeks that may have put the most strain on his health.

The surgical staff expected some problems with his breathing post-surgery and braced themselves for pneumonia.

He did contract pneumonia, and it was much more severe than any of VGH's intensive care staff had expected.

After weeks in intensive care, Tesfaye slowly recovered. His newfound health, while still fragile, came as a relief to his newfound family and caregivers.

From the time Tesfaye first entered the front doors of the Segal family home, he got a warm welcome into the family. It wasn't

difficult to do, said Segal.

Segal admits that once the family got to know Tesfaye, it became difficult to separate their emotions from the practical tasks involved in shepherding him through his painstaking medical process.

"I certainly went through a gamut of emotions [over Tesfaye's health]."

Ditto for the whole family — Nancy, his wife of 33 years, and his four grown children.

In the end, it's been a learning experience for a family that has devoted itself to humanitarian efforts, he says.

"I'm fortunate that [my children] have grown up with an inherent knowledge of the less fortunate."

"But to have Tesfaye in our own house, and watching what he's going through, it certainly enriched our lives beyond what we imagined."

Dvorak said he and the hospital staff were impressed with the respect and attention that Tesfaye's new family provided during his hospital stay.

During his pre-operative stay and in his recovery, Tesfaye was rarely alone, always receiving the comfort of at least one Segal family member by his side.

"The staff were blown away by how truly caring they are."

To commemorate the family's involvement in Tesfaye's recovery, Segal launched a blog, Tesfaye's Journey ([www.tesfayesjourney.blogspot.com](http://www.tesfayesjourney.blogspot.com)). The site recounts in words and photographs his steady progress and his growing connection with the family that have made him his own.

Standing tall, ready to pursue

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his education in his native land, the once very sick boy has become a man with a future.

"You can tell he's happy about his new outlook on his life, both physically and mentally," says Segal.

Much of the credit for his recovery goes to the young man himself, says Dvorak.

"He's remarkably non-complaining and captivating. Everyone fell in love with the guy."

[mhill@vancouver.sun.com](mailto:mhill@vancouver.sun.com)

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