



Mekonnen Damessa moved to America from Ethiopia in 2008 - along with his wife, Etsegenet Zerihun, and his three children – Dawit, 12; Yeabtsega, 10; and Yoself, 6 – in pursuit of a better life.

"Many people in my country believe America is the land of opportunity," he said. "I came to set up my opportunity."

Mekonnen left behind a position as an employee of the Ethiopian government and landed a full-time job as a parking valet in Philadelphia. When he was offered a position with the Maryland State Police, the family settled in an apartment in Baltimore. They also welcomed their fourth son, Binyam, now ten months old. Yet, while the growth of their family was a cause for celebration, it exacerbated an already cramped living situation.



Not only was the Damessas' home wrought with a lack of space; the family faced consistent structural problems, inefficient heating and cooling, and high rent. Their complex was also infested with cockroaches and rats. Broken locks shattered their peace of mind, especially in a neighborhood inhabited by known sex offenders.

"We are living very strict lives," Mekonnen said, "No vacation and an old car. We don't have these things. We don't have any furniture, only a sofa."

To protect the welfare of his family, and to ensure better education for his children, Mekonnen decided to try and purchase a house of his own in a more secure community.

"After I came here, it was in my mind to have my own house because, you know, I have a big family. You feel taken care of when you have your own house," he said, "but is very difficult for us to buy a house here."

It was his sister-in-law who referred him to Habitat for Humanity. She moved into a Habitat home in York, Pennsylvania ten years prior. Mekonnen was also familiar with the organization's influence in his home country.

The Shanka's, a Harford County-based partner family, and fellow church member learned of the Damessas' plight, and suggested they try Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna.

The Damessas were soon approved for a home at 4818 Philadelphia Road and began working to achieve their required sweat equity hours. Once completed, they will move into the house they helped to construct.

Mekonnen says Habitat has not just transformed his life, but has also brightened the future of his family. In their new home, they will have security, space and a sense of personal pride.

"Now my kids will be having a new house where they can play outside, where nobody will complain," he said. "I'll have a new life. Having a house myself, I will know security. It's my house now. I can take care of it. My kids won't move from one apartment to another apartment, from one school to another school."

The couple is eager to start saving for their children's college education. Mekonnen, who already has both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree, also hopes to earn another.

"I want my kids to grow spiritually and mentally, to achieve a college education. I want them to have the best."

The Damessas are grateful to all of the generous and compassionate volunteers who have invested their time and energy into building their home.

"I don't have words," Mekonnen said. "I would thank them. I would bless them. Believe me; I am talking from the bottom of the heart."