

## *Growing in Community: Rahel's Story*



"I am Rahel Musa. Originally, I am from East Africa: from a small, tiny country called Eritrea – south of the Sudan, and north of Ethiopia. I left my country long ago to go to school, so I have been living in so many different places and different countries. I am a married woman, and I have three children and three grandchildren.

I had been working throughout my life as a social worker. First, I was working in Canada for many years working with refugees. I then went back to Eritrea to do mission work, and a great deal of my focus was on HIV/AIDS - I was rehabilitating former sex-workers. I developed menus with food that will help people boost their immune systems. I even worked for five years as a radio program producer in Kenya. I would produce religious programs in my language, and broadcast it back home. At that time, there were a lot of problems - due to the Communist regime of Ethiopia, people were not allowed to worship. So we were producing radio programs and sending them to Eritrea and Ethiopia. I then came here in Lansing in 2003 and worked as a refugee case worker with St. Vincent Catholic Charities and also with Lutheran Social Services Foster Care. So I've done a lot of different things! But, you know, I wanted my daughter to go to school and I wanted to take care of her, so that's why I stopped working.

But then I decided to try something new. My goal had been to make pancake mixes. I was not going to do any cooking of food, but I needed a kitchen for my mixes as well as to do some experimentation in products like my muffins and gnocchi. So that was the initial plug. Well, I was looking for an incubator kitchen. I was discussing with somebody, telling them my plan, and they

## *Growing in Community: Rahel's Story*

asked me if I had checked with Allen Neighborhood Center. I thought, 'Oh my goodness, it's right here in my neighborhood!' This was almost exactly year ago, in March. So I called, made an appointment, and came to Allen Neighborhood Center. We met with Joan, my brother and I, and we knew this was it.

There was an occasion here in Lansing - Be a Tourist in your Own Town. Joan asked me if I would be willing to make some of my products for the event, to sell in the Allen Market Place; I thought I would cook a traditional Eritrean meal. The people loved it! It was such a success that Joan invited me to cook for the Allen Farmers Market every week. I thought, 'Oh my goodness. Maybe this is an opportunity and this is what I am meant to do... I mean, I love cooking.' But you know, it just happened - that's how I started. If it was not for the encouragement or the invitation from Joan, I wouldn't have started cooking. If it was not for the Allen Neighborhood Center, I would not be where I am now.

Here, I cook traditional food every Wednesday for the Allen Farmers Market - we're called, Teff-Rific. It's food from Ethiopia as well as from Eritrea. First of all, we have injera. It's like a sourdough bread, but not like a regular loaf of bread - it's like a pancake, but not sweet. It's made with teff, one of the ancient grains. It is gluten free, high in iron and calcium, and good for your blood pressure and cholesterol; it has many health benefits. For the soup, or sauce, that I prepare, three of the dishes are vegetarian/vegan: two are lentils, one is spicy and one is mild, and then I have a vegetable dish with carrot, cabbage and potato - people love that one. And then I have a chicken dish, also. Traditionally, we make our food very spicy. But even I, an Eritrean, who was raised eating this food my whole life, I don't like it when it's very, very spicy. If you're going to eat food and enjoy it, you have to taste it without burning your mouth and suffering from the hot spice. So the way I prepare it is different - it's a very flavorful spice. At first, I was not sure if people would like it. But, now I have so many clients - I guess they do!

I have seen so much of what ANC does: I taught a class for the 'Eastside Cooks' series on how to make a traditional Ethiopian/Eritrean meal - we had to stop registration because over 60 people were interested in our 20 person class; I spoke at the Senior Discovery Group; I see the youth working in the kitchen; I took a workshop at the GardenHouse on raising chickens; I see the food pantry giving away healthy food for those who may need it; and the market - it's not only a market for the sake of selling things, it's community.

If I had never come to Allen Neighborhood Center, I would have never been aware of the talent that I have. I don't have words to express how grateful I am for all the people - it's been almost a year. I don't know. I have a shortage in English vocabulary to express the kind of people that I met here at Allen Neighborhood Center. This place has motivated me to change my life."