

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

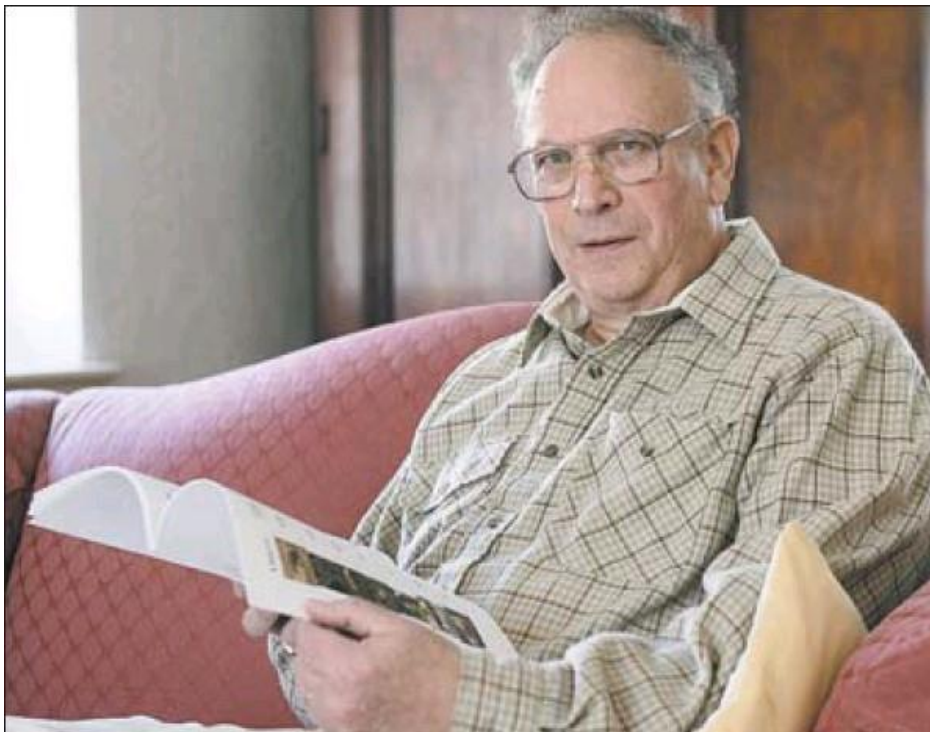
## *For Eritrean refugees, an angel in Delco*

by Michael Matza, Inquirer Staff Writer

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**The program aids hundreds who arrive here fleeing dictatorship.**

Wallingford's lush hills are a world apart from the arid Horn of Africa. But a trim stone Tudor in the Delaware County suburb is a humming hub of help for refugees from one of the world's most repressive regimes.



*AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer*

**John Stauffer of Wallingford co-founded the America Team for Displaced Eritreans. He served in the Peace Corps years ago in Africa.**

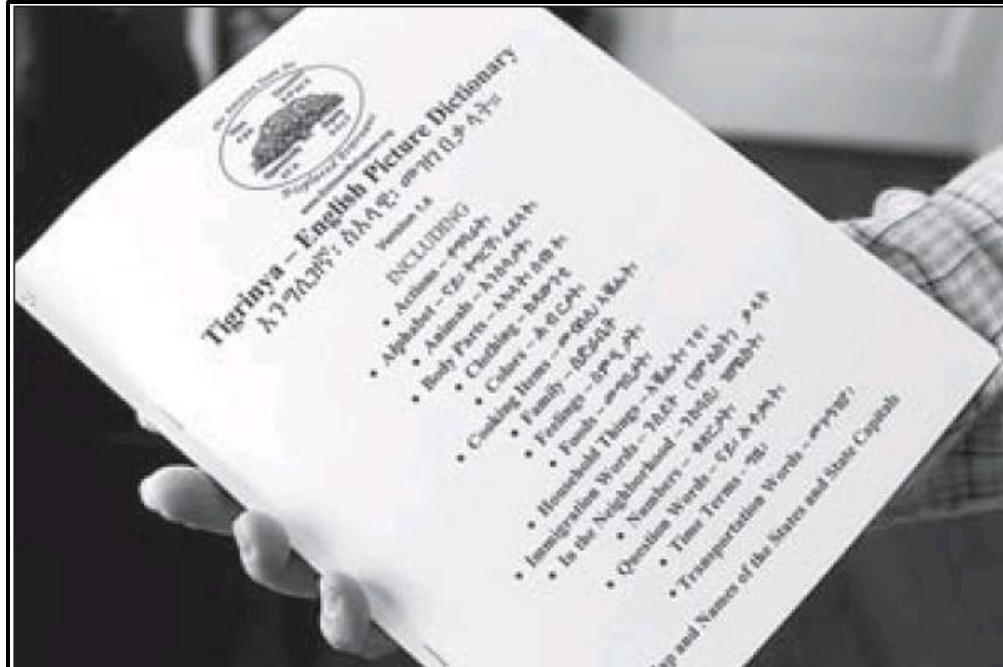
Since the birth of Eritrea as a nation in 1993, more than 200,000 of its people have fled the dictatorship of President Isaias Afewerki. Under his government, Human Rights Watch monitors say, "arbitrary arrests, torture, and forced labor are rampant."

Something had to be done to make this stop, John Stauffer resolved.

So, in 2010, he cofounded the America Team for Displaced Eritreans, an all-volunteer effort that he runs from a spare bedroom in his 75-year-old Wallingford home.

With a board of eight Eritrean immigrants and two Americans, and \$35,000 in private donations annually, the group has provided cash assistance, clothing, household goods, and advocacy for hundreds of Eritreans in America. Since 1994, an estimated 12,575 Eriteans have moved to the United States, with from 50 to 60 currently in the Philadelphia area.

The group's network of supporters in seven mostly East Coast states supplies translators and expert testimony in asylum cases. Its website, [www.eritreanrefugees.org](http://www.eritreanrefugees.org), is a news clearinghouse. Slightly larger than Pennsylvania, the country of nearly six million people is bordered by Ethiopia, Sudan, Djibouti, and the Red Sea. But Eritrea was a province of Ethiopia 46 years ago when Stauffer, freshly graduated from Juniata College, served there with the Peace Corps. He fell in love with the place.



*AKIRA SUWA / Staff Photographer*

**John Stauffer's team devised a picture dictionary  
to help Eritreans once they reach America.**

In 1968, he returned to the United States to work at Rohm & Haas, marketing chemicals used to manufacture paint. He retired in 2006 and incorporated the nonprofit America Team four years later.

On a typical day, Stauffer, 68, posts news about Eritrea and works the phones, sharing information with aid groups and government agencies. He recently highlighted the 2012 Reporters Without Borders index ranking Eritrea dead last among 179 countries in press freedom. In December, he posted news about economic sanctions the United Nations imposed on Eritrea for allegedly arming Somalian warlords.

Among Stauffer's ongoing concerns is fallout from the Arab Spring — specifically, the plight of Eritreans fleeing to Israel via the Sinai, where Bedouin bandits have held them up.

Israel's Interior Ministry reports that 20,000 Africans, mostly Eritreans and Sudanese, enter Israel annually seeking jobs and safety. Israel says it does not deport them because the human rights records of Eritrea and Sudan are so abominable.

In concert with the Hebrew aid group HIAS and Council Migration Service of Philadelphia, Stauffer tracks the movement of Eritreans held hostage in the desert.

"When Eritreans are going through difficult times, in Libya, Egypt, or anywhere, [Stauffer] is always the first to come out and say, 'Please, please try to help,' " said Eskinder Negash, who was born in Ethiopia to Eritrean parents and whom President Obama appointed director of the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement in 2009.

Stauffer reimmersed himself in the struggles of the small African nation in 2003, when he helped bring to America an Eritrean he knew from his Peace Corps days teaching English, science, and art to Eritrean teens. Prompted to reconnect with the man after hearing about him from an immigrant friend they had in common, Stauffer reached out by e-mail and telephone.

He arranged for the man to get a visa to the United States, and personally paid for his plane ticket. He supported his successful application for asylum. Today, the man, his wife, and two daughters live in Florida. He is business manager for the America Team.

Among Stauffer supporters are fellow members of Wallingford Presbyterian Church.

"In a world of need," former pastor Suzan Hawkinson once wrote, his team "is a remarkably effective conduit of assistance and hope."

The Eritrean community in Southeastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey is very small, said Juliane Ramic of the Nationalities Service Center, the Philadelphia agency that has resettled most of the refugees who live in the region. Of 1,980 who arrived in the United States last year, 55 entered in Pennsylvania and eight in New Jersey.

Eritrea has a "diaspora tax," under which Eritreans living abroad pay 2 percent of their income to its government. Those in the United States often speak of being followed or visited by people they suspect are Afewerki agents, Ramic said. "They don't know who to trust."

As recently as last Thursday, Stauffer said, "I exchanged e-mails on [intimidation] with the State Department."

Eritrea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the accusations against its government "malicious distortions" and "outright lies."

Interviewed Friday, Dawit Haile, a spokesman for the Eritrean Embassy in Washington, cited numerous satellite dishes and Internet cafes in his country as proof that free expression is valued. The United States and United Nations demonize Eritrea with "propaganda," he said.

Brushing aside such arguments, Stauffer provides technical assistance and training for Nationalities Service Center staff, to aid its communication with Eritrean clients. He inscribed staffers' names on ID badges using the Ge'ez alphabet used in Eritrea.

English is difficult to master for speakers of Tigrinya, Eritrea's main language. So Stauffer team created a pamphlet-size Tigrinya-English picture dictionary that shows how to write and pronounce common actions like walking and running, as well as body parts and foods.

It includes words useful for immigrants: Next to a picture of a robed man in a courtroom is judge.

The United Nations awarded Eritrea, a former Italian colony, to Ethiopia in 1952 in a post-world War II realignment of Africa. A decade later, Ethiopia annexed Eritrea, triggering a 30-year war for independence that ended after rebels defeated government forces and Eritrea became a nation.

Along with civil strife, Eritrea is plagued by frequent droughts and locust swarms.

National service — including military duty with no time limit — also drives young people to leave, adding to the refugee crisis. More than 42 per cent of the population is under 14.

U.N. monitors have found evidence that high-level Eritrean officials facilitate escapes for cash, charging about \$3,000 per person to leave a country where the average annual income is \$710.

In a cable published two years ago by Wikileaks, the U.S. ambassador to Eritrea described Afewerki, a former hero of the country's independence, as "cruel ... defiant" and "unhinged."

"It's a classic case," Stauffer said, "of someone who has gotten into power and takes every nondemocratic effort to sustain it."