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For Mulu, a \$10,550 check to help recover from house fire



Mulu Bekele, center, receives a check for \$10,550 from Bill Beeby, president of the Chateau at Valley resident council, as Santa looks on

By Dean A. Radford, Editor

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RENTON – Christmas came a little early for Mulu Bekele and her family, whose house was severely damaged in a fire the early morning hours of Nov. 30.

And, it came as a surprise.

Last Wednesday, her supervisor at the Chateau at Valley retirement community, where she works as a housekeeper, told her someone wanted to talk with her at 2:15 p.m. It was a ruse, as the residents were planning their special surprise for that time.

That special prize was a check for \$10,550 to help Bekele and her family replace what was lost in the fire, which was almost everything.

The money was the result of a quickly organized drive by the residents of the independent and assisted-living community on the campus of Valley Medical Center. Through direct contributions of cash and checks, they raised \$5,275. The owners of the center, Chateau Retirement Communities of Woodinville, then matched that amount.

Earlier, Bekele had received a check for \$1,000.

At the appointed time, Mulu arrived at what turned out to be the Christmas party and started to help arrange the chairs. But the attention was on her. She wondered if maybe there was another Mulu there, she said. There wasn't. She never expected what happened next.

She was asked to say something. She relates how she was almost speechless. "I just said, 'thank you'," she said.

The residents where she works "are very generous people," said the native of Ethiopia.

The center has 126 rooms; on average the residents are in their 80's.

Glen Bollinger heard about Bekele's plight from another resident and discussed how they should do something to help.

"It just struck me as something I needed to do," he said. Checks and cash started flowing in. "I was just amazed at the reception we got. There are no millionaires here."

Bekele cleans rooms and common areas.

"She is so good-natured and does such good work," he said. "She is a real fine worker."

And, Bollinger pointed out, the single mom of four children is working two jobs to make ends meet.

Her oldest son, Habtamu, graduated from the University of Washington two years ago and daughter Saba is a nursing student at the UW.

Bekele was living in county-subsidized housing just off Benson Road. She's now living in a subsidized unit in Kent while her house undergoes repairs.

The cause of the fire in late November is unknown, she said, but it started by a shed, then spread to the house.

One of her sons had wakened her about 4 a.m. when he went to the bathroom, then they heard voices outside. "It was a huge fire," she said.

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