



## Inspired to Make a Difference

BY GWEN NEWMAN

**L**aelaye Shimeles is one of the few students at the Dental School to wear a full set of braces on his teeth. But it was a friend's mouth, not his own, that was the catalyst for Shimeles' interest in the field of dentistry. As a young boy, Shimeles was an avid soccer player in Ethiopia when he and a teammate collided—his forehead into the jaw of a classmate.

"I was a kid. I didn't treat it as a big deal at the time, but it was serious," says Shimeles, 27. "My injury caused an infection that required two minor head surgeries. I recovered within six months. My friend, however, ended up having his broken tooth removed and was unable to have it replaced due to a lack of dental expertise in our country."

Both the appearance and the eating habits of his childhood friend were drastically affected by his broken tooth. He also encountered frequent taunting. "My friend was left with a permanent deformity," says Shimeles, a third-year dental student. "The fact that he couldn't do anything about it made it all the worse.

"It instilled in me the desire to educate myself in dental medicine, with the belief that I would be able to make a difference for those in need of dental care."

His inspirational beliefs have only been enhanced by his years at the Dental School.

"My experience at the University of Maryland has been exceptional," says Shimeles, who was attracted by the University's proximity to his home in Washington, D.C., its large and diverse student population, and well-respected Dental School.

"The curriculum during the first two years provided me with a strong base in the biological sciences and an outstanding

clinical education. The new Dental School building offers high-tech clinical simulation units and facilities that greatly enhance the learning experience.

"In addition, I have had the opportunity to care for a diverse patient population—pediatric, emergency, and medically compromised patients. Without a doubt, I encourage students with the desire to pursue dentistry to choose the University of Maryland Dental School."

Shimeles' parents, who are both health care professionals, immigrated to Washington, D.C., in 1995 with their four children. Shimeles graduated from Cardozo High School in 1998 and received his undergraduate degree, majoring in chemical engineering, from the University of Maryland, College Park in 2003.

"The fact that I went to an underprivileged high school did not limit my potential," says Shimeles. "I realized I would have to work harder than the average high school student. And I believe that being less fortunate is not an excuse for failure."

Since his move to the United States, Shimeles has reconnected with his long-lost soccer teammate who now lives in Canada. "When we talked, the first thing he said was, 'Guess what? I got the tooth fixed.'"

Shimeles, who anticipates the removal of his own braces just prior to graduation, is now married with a 1-year-old daughter. He has many dreams—to pursue a specialty, give back to his profession, and return to Ethiopia.

"I want to help people where I came from and have some positive influence and impact in dentistry. There are so many things you can do in dentistry," says Shimeles. "It is amazing." □