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Titans' Story Time Initiative Takes Local Children Around the Globe

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— A group of preschoolers who gathered around Ruth Tadesse stroked the intricate embroidery on her dress and peppered her with questions about the handwoven garment called a *habesha kemis*.

"We wear these dresses anytime we want to be a little dressed up," said the native of Ethiopia, a first-year student at Illinois Wesleyan University. "We want to represent our culture at weddings, graduations, or any event where we want to be festive."

Tadesse was wearing the *habesha kemis* and introducing local children to her Ethiopian culture during Global Story Time at the Bloomington Public Library. The initiative brings together an IWU [international student](#) with Titan classmates majoring in elementary education and in International Studies. Students present stories, songs, dances and crafts from various countries on Saturday mornings at the library.

Director of [International Studies](#) Scott Sheridan, who initiated the project, said the cooperative effort takes advantage of the wealth of cultural resources and experiences of international students, international studies majors who want to share their experiences studying abroad, and elementary education majors who seek additional experiences in teaching children.

"Global Story Time not only highlights the dynamic programs of Illinois Wesleyan, but it allows local children to be exposed to and appreciate the diversity of our world's cultures, languages and rich oral traditions," said Sheridan, who is also associate professor of French and Italian.

Tadesse introduced crafts and stories relating to Ethiopia along with fellow Titans Lizzy Mavrogenes '17, an International Studies major from River Forest, Ill. and Amy Sanchez '17, an elementary education major from Waukegan, Ill. Tadesse described the long journey that takes 24 hours of travel by plane to get from her home in Addis Ababa to Bloomington. She told the children that more than 80 different languages are spoken in Ethiopia, and also referenced a ubiquitous coffee chain to talk about her country's most important export product.

"You know Starbucks where your parents get their coffee?" Tadesse asked the youngsters. "It's likely the coffee beans came from Ethiopia."



From left, Lizzy Mavrogenes '17, Assistant Professor of Educational Studies Pennie Gray, Ruth Tadesse '19 and Amy Sanchez '17 examine Ruth's dress.



Amy Sanchez '17, elementary education major, reads to children as part of Global Story Time at the Bloomington Public Library.

teach kids about the world," she said. "That's a big thing for me, so I was really honored when Professor Sheridan asked me to be a part of this."

Sanchez said she was interested in leading a Global Story Time in order to learn as much from the experience as she hoped the children would. "It's important to expand my horizons so I can take that into my classroom and teach my students to be more inclusive about different cultures," said Sanchez. "It also ties back to the IWU mission of commitment to social justice. This is just one way to portray that."

Coffee beans were also used in a craft project designed by the IWU students. Children colored a paper turtle and glued coffee beans to the paper to represent the turtle's shell. Tadesse then wrote each child's name in Amharic, the official working language of the country. In a truly international moment, Sanchez spoke about Ethiopian coffee beans to a Spanish-speaking toddler and his mother living in central Illinois.

Assistant Professor and Coordinator of [Elementary Education](#) Pennie Gray has organized the student presentations, which have already covered Bulgaria, Japan, China, Nigeria and Vietnam.

"Scott's idea was such a nice way to bring students together from different academic departments," said Gray, noting even she has learned fun facts about each country on Global Story Time mornings. "These students might not otherwise have an opportunity to work together."

Mavrogenes agreed. "I have been able to travel a lot with my family, so I wanted to share the experiences I've had and help