

The National Medal for Museum and Library services is the nation's highest honor for libraries and museums that are serving their communities in exciting ways. Hill Museum & Manuscript Library director Father Columba Stewart and community member Dr. Getachew Haile traveled to Washington to receive the national medal and spoke to IMLS about how the library impacts the community.

Father Columbus Stewart: So we are a sponsored program of St. John's Abbey and University which was founded by Benedict of monks in 1856. And in the 1960's some of our community began to be very worried about what would happen to monastic libraries in Europe. There had been two world wars; there had been a lot of loss. It was the time of the cold war monasteries in places like Austria and Germany were potentially on the front line of a nuclear war. And so the idea was to apply what at that time was cutting edge technology, 35mm micro film, to go and photograph these manuscripts, just in case. But very quickly the value of the project was evident for other places. So we started work in Ethiopia before its revolution, because you had this incredible Christian culture little studied and then the wisdom of the project was proved when the country was engulfed in revolution, dictatorships, civil war and many of the manuscripts we photographed disappeared.

Dr. Getachew Haile: I left Ethiopia because of political situation there. At that time it was a military junta which was ruling the country. And there was no freedom of speech there was no freedom at all so we started revolting against, protesting the oppression. So that is why they attacked me and left me on a wheel chair. So I left the country to come here at St. John's University to catalogue the manuscripts they have. They have scholars of Christianity who would like to know what books that have been translated, if any of them have been lost in other countries; they might be found in this translation in Ethiopia. The project, the principal of the work is to go to the monastery, microfilm them and leave the books there, bring the microfilm here.

Father Columbia Stewart: In more recent years we have done two things. We have switched to high color or high quality color digital imaging. So Getachew came to St. John's in the 1970's to work with microfilm. Now we have people in locations around the world simply working with digital images and sending in their catalogue and data that we can put into our database. All of these places are remarkable in different ways, many of them are known to western scholars or the existence of their manuscripts is known, but they have been inaccessible. And we've had the experience of finding manuscript collections that people have forgotten about. Manuscript collections had been moved and nobody had seen for decades or in some cases over a century ago.

And then finding collections that no one in the west at least ever knew existed. So we are expecting all kinds of discoveries from manuscripts we're photographing in Syria, Iraq, India comparable to what Getachew's found in the Ethiopian manuscripts, text previously unknown, the oldest known copies of books of the Ethiopian Bible. We are finding things like that in Syriac, in Armenian, in Christian Arabic and it's only when the catalogers sit down and do this patient work that Getachew does, that these manuscripts speak again. And there could be remarkable things there. So we microfilmed 93,000 manuscripts until 2003. Getachew is still working on the 8000 Ethiopian manuscripts

that were microfilmed in that time. Since 2003 we have photographed over 30,000 manuscripts in high quality digital imaging. So that's what we are going through now. And what we are going to find there? Who knows, but it's surely going to be remarkable.