I had a successful legal career but found my passion in Ethiopia! In late 2007, my husband, Irving Fish, M.D., his former resident, Dr. Tesfaye Zelleke, and I established The Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative (ESRI), a pre-school program in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

ESRI is a comprehensive, high quality pre-school program that enables disadvantaged children of Ethiopia to succeed in school. The program began with 80 students and now has over 5,000 pre-school students, ages 3–6, within the public school system in the most disadvantaged areas of Addis Ababa. In partnership with the Bureau of Education of Addis Ababa, ESRI operates a free pre-school program in close to 100 classrooms within the public school system. ESRI has created curricula for three age groups: 3–4 year olds, 4–5 year olds and 5–6 year old children.

ESRI’s primary learning goal is reading readiness. During our most recent visits in March 2012 and 2013, we were amazed to see a 6-year-old ESRI student read fluently in front of her class. This exceeded our expectations and sent chills down our spines! In fact, our teachers report that over 50% of the six year old children are able to read by the end of the school year.

The success of the program's students is truly remarkable when you compare them with a study done by the United States Agency for International Development that found that the literacy rate for 3rd grade children in Southern Ethiopia is about 30%.

However, ESRI is more than a reading readiness program. One of the students, a 5-year-old boy, was hit by a truck and lost a leg while standing with his mother at the side of a road. The mother was overwhelmed and could not cope. Menelik Desta, MD, Ph.D., the Director of our licensed affiliate in Ethiopia, along with our full time nurse/ community organizer, worked with the mother and arranged for the boy’s necessary treatment, a prosthetic leg and therapy when he healed. Fortunately, he has returned to the ESRI program, and has resumed his education. He is on his way to success in school and will not be doomed to a life of begging or worse.

Parents and caregivers receive parenting education. In partnership with Plan International, a daily nutritious meal is provided to the neediest children. All of the children are dewormed annually, children are given a health screening and those who require it are referred for medical care. This year ESRI has created an innovative program with Resource Rooms, which give the children access to an age appropriate enrichment program in the Arts and the Sciences.
In addition to the Reading Readiness program, I have helped establish a vocational training for mothers of our pre-school students so that they can provide for their families. The women were divided into three groups. The first is a licensed tailoring cooperative of 14 mothers; the second is a catering cooperative formed by 12 mothers and the third is a group of 5 women who operate the canteen in the Kebele (district) Administration offices selling coffee, tea and small food items. The women were trained at the General Wingate Vocational College and received equipment necessary to their jobs. All of the groups operate in rent-free space and receive ongoing mentoring services from the Small Business Entrepreneurship Agency of Addis Ababa. Also, in another very disadvantaged district Ilene helped to establish weaving and pottery cooperatives for mothers. The pottery cooperative was provided with training, pottery wheels and funds to build a new kiln. As a result, they have tripled their income. The weavers have a big new space, good looms and a thriving business.

When Irving and I were the subject of a column in the Wall Street Journal in April, 2013, I was quoted:

"You go over there and your heart just fills. Every time you go into one of these classrooms and you hear and you see one of those children, you just know it is something you have to do. You are changing lives, you are absolutely changing lives."

This feeling only grows stronger each time I go back to Ethiopia.

If you want to know more about the Ethiopian School Readiness Initiative (ESRI), go to www.ethiopianschoolready.org or contact me at Ilene02@rcn.com.

Ilene received the Aspire Award from Cardozo in 2012 and is an active Cardozo Alumna. She is currently a Vice-President of the Executive Committee of the Alumni Association as well as the Chair of the Nominating Committee and Chair of the CLE Committee. She says that the Cardozo Alumni Community demonstrates the warmth and high ideals that Cardozo instills in its students.