

American dream via a taxi cab

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Body

Driving a **cab** is almost a stereotypical way for immigrants and refugees wanting to get started in their new country to earn a living and put down roots. One who has done so successfully is Ezezew Biru, who left Ethiopia as a teenager and now runs a small **taxicab** company that is struggling against the system to get larger. Despite his frustrations, Biru is a happy man with a growing family - he just adopted three relatives from Ethiopia. We spoke in his small office at 4427 Geraldine Avenue in the city.

Ezezew Biru Position: Co-owner and operations manager, Metropolitan **Taxicab** Corp. Age: 45 Career: After leaving his native Ethiopia at 19 in 1982, he worked as a laborer in Khartoum, Sudan, until immigrating to the United States in 1987; hotel worker in Washington, 1987-1988; factory worker and **cab** driver in St. Louis, 1988-1995; founded Riverfront **Cab** Co., 1997; joined with fellow Ethiopians to create Midwest **Cab** Co., 2001; which became Metropolitan **Taxicab** Corp., 2004 Education: Studied computer science at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park Personal: Lives with his wife, Meselu Shumye, and three boys and three girls in St. Peters

How did you decide to own and operate a **taxi** company?

I was working as a part-time **taxicab** driver at the airport. Then I became a full-time driver and went to school at St. Louis Community College. I saw how the **taxicab** owners ran their companies. I looked at it and said, "I think I can do better than this at the airport."

What would you do differently?

I have two-way radios, dispatching and having contract with various commercial accounts. At the airport, we would wait in line for hours, get a trip and go back to the airport and wait for hours again. While I was sitting, I was thinking that if I spent more time looking for business, I would do better. At the airport, you have only one door to get business.

If I am out, I can be reached by the public and do better business.

It wasn't easy to start up. We had to hire a lawyer to help us get permits.

Was that difficult?

Yes, it was. They have a system that has worked for many years for few huge companies like County **Cab**, Laclede **Cab**, Yellow **Cab**. These companies didn't have much business. Most of their cars were not in service. When we applied, those people had permits they were not using. But we were trying to get started and we didn't have any permits.

Did you have to do any favors to get your permits?

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No, thank God, I am not such a person. That is not my lifestyle. But I had a very good lawyer. They gave us permits for 20. My other partner got permits for 10. We merged before we started in business with 30.

How do you get the cars?

We buy cars, but mostly they are owned by the drivers. They are independent contractors who work through our dispatching system.

What kind of cars do drivers favor?

I've always heard they like the Ford Crown Victoria. I like Dodge and Chrysler minivans. I like the Crown Vic, also.

I've heard that you can get 200,000 to 300,000 miles out of these cars. Is that right?

I had a '92 Crown Vic. I had almost 400,000 when it quit. It had over 100,000 when I bought it, and I keep maintaining it. You put in oil and do the tune-ups and check it.

What can you expect to get out of a taxi if you take good care of it?

If it's a Crown Vic, 300,000 (miles) easily.

Aren't these former police cars that may have been run pretty hard already?

You have to check. I do this myself.

How did you line up customers?

We contracted with school districts to haul children (under the desegregation plan).

Do you have commercial contracts?

We have contracts with some companies to take people to and from work sometimes.

Breaking into this business must be hard.

We are limited in advertising. We don't have enough cabs, so we cannot advertise more.

Does it seem a little strange that there's a taxicab commission that acts as a restraint of trade?

Yes. It is completely different than what I thought when I came here. The taxicab commissioners are the owners of the largest companies. They put a cap on (the number of permits I can have), so I cannot grow.

Is that the way it should be?

It shouldn't be, but it is. The taxicab commission is not strong by itself. But the way they structure it, organize it. ... There is a big problem with the taxicab commission. I don't think a lot of people know about it.

Does the same arrangement exist in New York or Chicago?

No, it's completely different. There, it is like a government agency.

Can you make a good living at this? You are making money off the fees you charge the independent drivers, aren't you?

Thank God, I cannot complain. When we are hauling school children, our cars have to be on time. If one breaks down, we have to get another one. There is a lot of pressure. I say, let us put out more cabs so we are not limited by other cab companies.

When did you leave Ethiopia?

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I left a long time ago. I went to Sudan.

Did you leave because of the war in Ethiopia?

The war was creating a lot of problems. A lot of people were trying to get out of the country.

What did you do in Sudan?

I was a laborer. My big goal while living in Sudan was to come to America. I was happy because I knew I was not going to live there forever. I knew I was going to come to America.

Did you come alone through normal immigration?

It took a long time. I had a relative here who was my sponsor. When I came here, I did the same thing; I became a sponsor.

Why St. Louis?

Because of friends.

Was it hard to get your commercial drivers license and then learn the area?

The license was easy. Then I had to learn the hotels and big commercial areas.

Are you happy with your success?

Yes. When I compare where I came from, when I compare how I started, I am satisfied.

What are your goals for your company?

To get more permits and more accounts and more advertising. We want to get bigger.

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Notes

Five minutes with • repps hudson

Graphic

PHOTO - Ezezew Biru was a laborer in Sudan who **dreamed** of coming to America. He did, and in time helped create Metropolitan **Taxicab**. PHOTO - Ezezew Biru

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