

"Without the glasses, I would struggle to work": Eyeglasses Recipients in Harar describe the impact of near-vision glasses.

Rollo Romig

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Rollo Romig: Tell me your name and what you do for work.

Abdurezak Jemal: My name is Abdurezak Jemal. I do tailoring. It might be fixing damaged clothes or making new clothes, whatever work I can find.


Rollo Romig: When did you notice that you were having trouble with near vision? Was it affecting your livelihood when you couldn't see well?

Abdurezak Jemal: I noticed I had a problem a year ago. I had trouble using the needle. But since I received the eyeglasses I find it easy to work. It was taking me more time to thread the needle. I'd have to do it repeatedly. It took me longer than it used to.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the vision screening?

 **Abdurezak Jemal:** I heard about it from someone else who had received the glasses. I heard that people with eye problems can go and receive eyeglasses. That's when I went.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about what happened when you went.

 **Abdurezak Jemal:** They tested me with a vision chart. They told me to read, and I was able to read the larger text, but I couldn't read the small text. After that, they tested the glasses on me, and I was able to read. And they gave me the glasses.

Rollo Romig: How did you feel when you put the right glasses on for the first time?

Abdurezak Jemal: I saw the difference. Without the glasses, the words were blurred, and then after I put on the glasses, I was able to see them clearly, and I was very happy. Before the glasses, I was having a hard time finding the eye of the needle, and it would take me much longer. I struggled with that. But after I got the eyeglasses, I can do it much faster, and I can see clearly.

Rollo Romig: What did your family say after you got the glasses?

Abdurezak Jemal: My family was happy. But I do not wear it in the sun because it gives me some blurred vision. I only wear it when I'm working on near objects.

Rollo Romig: Have you told other people that they can also get glasses from the health extension worker?



Abdurezak Jemal: I have told people. There were people who were having trouble reading the Quran, and after I told them they went and received the glasses.

Rollo Romig: How do you think your life would be different if you'd never received the glasses?



Abdurezak Jemal: [If I hadn't received the glasses] I would have to work much, much slower. It would make me poorer. Without the glasses, I would struggle to work on one piece of clothing, and it would take me longer, so my income would be less.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Rollo Romig: What's your name, and what do you do for work?

Kemal Ibrahim: My name is Kemal Ibrahim. I'm a daily laborer.

Rollo Romig: What kind of labor is that?

Kemal Ibrahim: Construction and iron work.

Rollo Romig: When did you notice that your near vision was getting worse?

Kemal Ibrahim: It's been two years. I read the Quran, and I read other things, too. I know how to read Amharic, Afaan Omoro, and Latin. When I'm trying to read small letters, they blur together. And I can't read them for long.

Rollo Romig: Was the vision trouble also making it more difficult to do your work?

Kemal Ibrahim: I used to fix doors. But since my vision started decreasing, I haven't been doing that.

Rollo Romig: Because that's detailed work?

Kemal Ibrahim: Yes. Now, after I received the glasses, I can see small things.

Rollo Romig: So now are you able to do the door work again?

Kemal Ibrahim: No, I'd already stopped. Now the work I do doesn't need eyeglasses. So I just use it for reading.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the vision screening?

Kemal Ibrahim: I'm the village health leader. So the health extension workers told me about it. Then they came and screened in this village, and I got the glasses.

Rollo Romig: So that's actually part of your role, to help spread the word about this kind of thing.

Kemal Ibrahim: Yes.

Rollo Romig: So you've told many other people about the glasses?

Kemal Ibrahim: I've told a lot of people. People who use mobile phones were having problems seeing their phones. So I've told a lot of people who use mobile phones, and now they're asking to receive glasses.

Rollo Romig: And how do you tell people? Do you usually tell them in person, or do you message them?



Kemal Ibrahim: I tell them in person, not so much online. When I'm reading and people see my glasses they ask me where I got them and I tell them about it.

Rollo Romig: All four of your friends in this room got glasses. Did you tell all of them?

Kemal Ibrahim: They all heard from the health extension workers.

Rollo Romig: And when you tell people about the glasses, are they usually interested in it? Or does anyone have doubts or questions?

Kemal Ibrahim: People are very interested in getting eyeglasses. They know they'll get a solution from the glasses. So they're very interested.

Rollo Romig: We talked to one woman who said she loves her glasses, but she doesn't wear them outside because she doesn't want people to make comments about her. I wondered, have you heard other people say this kind of thing, that they don't like to wear their glasses in public?

Kemal Ibrahim: No. Not many people think like that. But some people confuse it with having trachoma, because that's embarrassing. They get it confused. But most people know that the eyeglasses are not for that.



If we went to a private shop in the city, the 1.5 diopter is sold for 3,000 birr [around \$20 USD]. The 2.0 diopter is sold for 5,000 birr [around \$32 USD]. So we know how expensive it is and how useful it is. We know the solution it brings. We are very aware of it. My father has passed away, but previously he bought glasses for his brother. So I know how expensive it is, and I know the value of it.

Rollo Romig: What sorts of things have people told you about getting glasses? Has anyone told you stories about how it's helped them?

Kemal Ibrahim: People have told me that it's been very useful. It's been very useful for them to read their Qurans at home and to read other books. It's mostly reading that has been useful for them.

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Rollo Romig: Who else wants to talk about their glasses?

Sufi: My name is Sufi. The eyeglasses have helped me to read, mainly for the Quran and other books. And I can see small things clearly.

Rollo Romig: And what do you do for work?

Sufi: I'm a farmer.

Rollo Romig: Do the glasses help with your farm work at all?

Sufi: It's more for reading and the phone. It has helped us when we're looking at our phones.

Rollo Romig: Does anyone else want to say anything?

[several people speak]

Etsegent Arega: They said they want to read at night, after work, and the eyeglasses have mostly helped them to read the Quran and other things. That's been the main part for them. And it has helped them to see Facebook on their phone and to read things on their social media.

Third man: When we're reading the Quran, we're also praying, and we're praying for the person who has given us these eyeglasses.

Rollo Romig: Thanks very much.

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Rollo Romig: What is your name, and what do you do for work?

Kedija Tadesse: My name is Kedija Tadesse. I am a housewife. I don't have other work.


Rollo Romig: How many children do you have?


Kedija Tadesse: Seven.

Rollo Romig: When did you realize that you were having trouble seeing close up?

Kedija Tadesse: Earlier, I had gotten my eyes checked before at a hospital, and I had some kind of early cataract. They gave me medicine. Then later, when I was reading my Quran, I found that I couldn't read the small words. It was very recently, around two months ago, that I noticed that. And when I was trying to sew something, I couldn't use the needle properly because I couldn't see it clearly. My son would joke around saying I'm getting older. And I told him I'm not. But after I got the glasses, I've been able to see the needles.

Rollo Romig: How did you hear about the eyeglass screening?

 **Kedija Tadesse:** While I was walking around this area, one of the elders said, "Come, you've been saying you have eye problems." And I said, "What do you have in the village for my eyes?" And he told me, "Come and get checked, and then we'll see." And then he took me to the health extension worker.

 At the health post they checked my distance vision in both eyes, and I was able to see the letters. Then they sat me down and they showed me the near vision test, and I couldn't see part of it. Then they gave me eyeglasses and tested it, and I was able to see with the eyeglasses. And then they told me not to use the glasses anywhere else, only inside or for near vision.

Rollo Romig: What was it like when you first put the glasses on? Were you surprised?

Kedija Tadesse: I was very happy when I put on the glasses and was able to read the small words. I came back and told my son I can read again. I was very happy. It's clear now.

Rollo Romig: How have things changed for you since you got the glasses? Are you able to do your housework more easily also?

Kedija Tadesse: It has made things easier for me. I can read my Quran myself. I can differentiate the grass from the greens myself. I don't have to use another method, like putting it in water. And when I sew now, I do not have to ask my children for help anymore. I can do it myself because I can see.

Rollo Romig: And have you told other people about the screening, like your neighbors?

Kedija Tadesse: I'm not telling anyone, because I think it's embarrassing. People will say you're not old, you're not holding a cane. Why would you be wearing eyeglasses? So I don't want to tell anyone. I feel embarrassed to wear it at the mosque when everybody's gathered. But when I'm unable to read the part they're reading in the Quran, I come back home and read it with the glasses.

Rollo Romig: Do you ever see other people wearing near vision glasses at the mosque?

Kedija Tadesse: There are people who wear glasses at the mosque, but some of them have had a doctor's prescription for many years. It's okay for those people to wear glasses, but if I just start wearing them now, I feel like people might start saying things, like I'm just doing it for luxury. People might not understand, and they will have different opinions. I don't want to hear those kinds of comments from people. I do take the glasses with me to the mosque, but I do not take them out.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Rollo Romig: What is your name and what do you do for work?

Edris Yusuf: My name is Edris Yusuf. I am a farmer.

Rollo Romig: What kind of farming do you do?

Edris Yusuf: Livestock farming. I have cows.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about when you noticed that you were having trouble seeing close.

Edris Yusuf: I started noticing that I had problems two years back, while I was reading my Quran and I was having a hard time.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the glasses? Tell me about what happened when you went to get them.



Edris Yusuf: We heard about the eyeglasses when we were in the mosque. The health extension workers went there and told us about it, and then the health extension workers did the screening in the mosque, and that's how I received the eyeglasses. It wasn't just me; there were others who also received glasses.

Rollo Romig: What was it like when you put the glasses on and you could see clearly again?

Edris Yusuf: Before I had the glasses, I was only able to read from a Quran that was written in larger type. But after getting the glasses, I'm now able to see the smaller type, even in the house, and even when it's darker. I don't have a problem reading smaller type and reading smaller Qurans.

Rollo Romig: Does it help you with other things, too? Does it help with your work?

Edris Yusuf: I don't use them while I'm working, because they told me not to. I only use it when I'm reading and sometimes when I'm eating.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Rollo Romig: Tell me your name and what you do for work.

Aschalew Tadesse: My name is Aschalew Tadesse, and I work as a driver.

Rollo Romig: And tell me what you've been doing this week.

Aschalew Tadesse: I've been working with Last Mile Health throughout the week on the work that they're doing providing eyeglasses to the community. I was driving, and I was also happy to help with unloading the boxes of eyeglasses.

Rollo Romig: Tell me what happened on Tuesday.



Aschalew Tadesse: On Tuesday, we were driving around Dire Dawa to different health center health facilities. Since I have an eye problem, I asked Dr. Etsegent if I could also take eyeglasses. And she told me that I could get screened, and if I needed the glasses I would be able to take them. So at the health post I was screened for distance vision and near vision, and then I was given near-vision glasses.

Rollo Romig: When did you first notice that you were having trouble seeing things up close?

Aschalew Tadesse: It's been almost a year since I noticed that I was having problems reading small text, and even when I was using my phone, I had to increase the text size, because if it was smaller, I wasn't able to read it on my phone.

Rollo Romig: Has this near vision problem made it more difficult to do your work?

Aschalew Tadesse: It's just for reading. It has not affected my job.

Rollo Romig: What about looking at maps when you have to plan a route?

Aschalew Tadesse: I've been working as a driver for this agency for a while, so I normally don't have to use maps. I know most of the routes.

Rollo Romig: Is there any part of your job where you have to look at things up close, like when you're filling out invoices, for example?

Aschalew Tadesse: When I can't read the kilometers to record it on the invoice, what I do is I take a picture of it, and then I zoom in to see what it says.

Rollo Romig: Is there anything else related to your job where the glasses would be helpful?

Aschalew Tadesse: For example, there's a form we have to fill out, and some of the text is very small. It's fine when I'm writing, but I can't read it. So I take a picture and zoom in on the picture and read what the paper is saying.

Rollo Romig: What did it feel like when you put the glasses on for the first time and you could see close properly again?

Aschalew Tadesse: When I put on the glasses, I could read all the letters very clearly. If someone was wearing short sleeves, I felt like I could count the hair on their arms. It was that clear for me after wearing the eyeglasses, and I understood how useful the glasses are.

Rollo Romig: Thank you so much.

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Rollo Romig: Tell me about your work for Last Mile Health.

Gebre Alemu: I've been working with Last Mile Health as a driver. And I was having a hard time reading. I even used to have trouble putting numbers in my phone. But since I received the glasses, I am able to do that and read clearly.

Rollo Romig: Tell us the story of how you ended up getting glasses.



Gebre Alemu: We were delivering eyeglasses to different health posts, and during that time, I informed them that I also had trouble reading. Then I was screened, and I was provided with eyeglasses.

Rollo Romig: What did it feel like when you put the glasses on and could see properly again?

Gebre Alemu: Since receiving the glasses, I have been able to see small things, and I'm very happy. I've been very happy to receive the glasses. I've also heard other people being thankful for receiving the glasses.

Rollo Romig: What sorts of things did you hear from other people who received glasses?




Gebre Alemu: Some people, especially from Harar, have even called me to say they're able to see and that they're very thankful. I've also had people calling me from Harar to ask when the Last Mile Health team is coming back to give more glasses.

Rollo Romig: Have the glasses helped you do your work?

Gebre Alemu: They have helped me in my work when I'm driving and I need to read things from my mobile phone, and when people call me. It has been very helpful for me to see and read from my phone. It's also been helping me fill out forms when I go to the bank. I can now see clearly and write clearly. Before receiving eyeglasses, I wasn't able to see it clearly.

Rollo Romig: Have you been telling other people about the glasses screening?

 **Gebre Alemu:** Yes, I've also been informing people. People are still calling me from Harar, and people in Dire Dawa are also telling me that they want to be screened. And I've also planned to bring some people to get screened and get this opportunity.

Rollo Romig: Why didn't you purchase near-vision glasses earlier?

Gebre Alemu: I wasn't checked before because I didn't have time, and I've been busy with work. But if I had been checked and was given the diagnosis, I would definitely buy the glasses. I bought a pair before, a few years back in Addis Ababa, for 2000 birr [about \$13 USD]. I knew I had the problem. I just didn't have the time to get screened.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

Rollo Romig: What is your name, and what do you do for work?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: My name is Nuriya Dure Ibrahim. I am a shopkeeper and a farmer.

Rollo Romig: What kind of farming do you do?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: I plant barley.

Rollo Romig: When did you realize you needed glasses?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: I knew a long time ago, but I only got glasses during distribution. Before getting the eyeglasses, I struggled to sort seeds. Now I can see perfectly. Before the glasses, I couldn't even see these small dirty particles while picking through them. The glasses have really helped. I can see clearly now.


Rollo Romig: What challenges did you have before getting the eyeglasses?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: I had blurred vision. So it was difficult to work.

Rollo Romig: Which activities were difficult?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: Farming, sorting seeds, and removing chuff from lentils.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the screening?

 **Nuriya Dure Ibrahim:** I heard about it from the extension workers at the health bureau. They asked people who had vision problems to come and get glasses.

Rollo Romig: What was it like when you put the glasses on for the first time?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: I felt very happy and excited.

Rollo Romig: How is life different now that you have the glasses?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: There is a big difference. My life is much better than before.


Rollo Romig: Do the glasses also help you run the shop?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: Yes, very much.

Rollo Romig: What does your family think about the glasses?

Nuriya Dure Ibrahim: They are excited, too. They say they are happy that I can now see clearly.

Rollo Romig: Have you told other people about the glasses, so that they can also get them?

 **Nuriya Dure Ibrahim:** Yes, I have. We told many people, not just those living here; people came from faraway villages to get the eyeglasses. It is really needed. You should distribute more so that it reaches everyone in the community.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

Rollo Romig: What's your name, and what do you do for work?

Remzi Ibrahim: My name is Remzi Ibrahim. I am a general science teacher at Dire Teyara Primary School.

Rollo Romig: When did you notice that you had trouble with your vision?

Remzi Ibrahim: I take physics courses in summer at the university. My eyes get watery and I feel fatigued when I try to read. I also got a burning sensation in my eyes, and after a while I was unable to read texts in smaller fonts. I have had the problem for two years.

Rollo Romig: Was that making it difficult to do your work and study?

Remzi Ibrahim: Yes, it was difficult. It was difficult for me to read the formulas written in smaller fonts.

Rollo Romig: How did you hear about the eye screening?



Remzi Ibrahim: Health workers came to a party meeting and told us we can do the screenings and get help. I had been looking for this, even though it's not common. We did the screening at the health post.

Rollo Romig: Tell me what happened when you went to the health post.

Remzi Ibrahim: There was an eye screening chart posted there in smaller fonts. I identified what I could see and I couldn't. It didn't take them long. They gave it to me quickly.

Rollo Romig: How did you feel when you put on the glasses for the first time and you could see properly?

Remzi Ibrahim: When I put them on for the first time, I felt a tension, but I got used to it after a week. Now I am using it properly.

Rollo Romig: How do you feel that you can see and read properly now?

Remzi Ibrahim: I feel happy. I feel very happy.

Rollo Romig: Did your students notice your new glasses?

Remzi Ibrahim: No. I use them at home when I read. In the classroom I take my notes in a way that I can read them properly, so it is not hard when I teach.

Rollo Romig: How would you summarize the benefits of having the glasses?



Remzi Ibrahim: There are teachers who are older than me who have the same issue. Many of them needed this. It is the first time an aid organization is giving eyeglasses. Previously people would pay higher prices for this service, and people can't afford to pay that. They just used to live with the challenges. But now my fellow teachers and I got the glasses together. We are happy.

Rollo Romig: Could you have afforded to buy the glasses?



Remzi Ibrahim: It is 9,000 birr at the clinics (around \$57.80), and my salary was too little. We just got a salary improvement. I have a family to support and rent to pay, so it would have been a challenge. Even if I got screened, I couldn't have afforded to buy the glasses. Now I appreciate this kind of aid organization.

Rollo Romig: Do you use the glasses at home?

Remzi Ibrahim: I am a science department head, so I use them in my office. I use them to mark the tests, do lesson plans, write notes, and review teachers' reports.

Rollo Romig: Was it challenging to do these things before?

Remzi Ibrahim: It was hard to read student assignments. I used to try to find a spot with enough light. But now the glasses are helping. Before getting the glasses, I used to make mistakes when marking tests. I can only mark what I can see. I used to skip over correct answers. That created a problem with students. Now this is helping me.

Rollo Romig: Tell me more about the problem with students.

Remzi Ibrahim: I instructed the students to give their answers in capital letters for multiple choice questions. However, this student from grade seven wrote some of his answers in small letters with a thin-tip pen. I marked the ones that were written in capital letters and skipped the others. The boy came to me and told me the answers were correct. I asked him why he didn't follow the instructions, but I finally gave him the mark.

Rollo Romig: What do you love about teaching?

Remzi Ibrahim: I love sharing my knowledge with the kids, I feel happy seeing them grow in their views and behaviours. I feel happy seeing them learn and give back from what I trained them.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Rollo Romig: What is your name and what do you do for work?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: My name is Sufiyan Abdullahi. I am a farmer. I was born and raised in Dire Teyara. I am 55 years old.

Rollo Romig: What kind of farming do you do?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: I farm fruits, vegetables, and other food products.

Rollo Romig: Tell me when you noticed that you needed glasses.

Sufiyan Abdulahi: It's been around five years since I realized I needed eyeglasses. I could not see up close, so when I read the Quran, I couldn't see the writing. When I tried writing, I also struggled unless I moved the paper far from me. When I went to the bank, I couldn't see clearly. I did not go to the hospital to get checked.

Rollo Romig: Did you also have problems doing the farm work?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: Yes, I faced challenges sometimes.

Rollo Romig: Tell me about what was difficult with the farm work before you got the glasses.

Sufiyan Abdulahi: It wasn't that bad while farming, but I had blurred vision.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the eyeglass distribution?



Sufiyan Abdulahi: Health extension workers were moving around the village, screening people to determine who had eye problems. They showed us letters and asked what we could see. After that, they gave us eyeglasses.

Rollo Romig: What was it like when you put the eyeglasses on for the first time?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: When I first put on my glasses to do other things besides reading and writing, everything felt unstable, like the ground was moving and I was falling. But if I put it on to read the Quran, I can see perfectly. I just cannot walk in them.

Rollo Romig: How are things different now that you have the glasses? How has your life changed?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: After the eyeglasses, I can easily read and write.

Rollo Romig: What did your family say when you came home with the glasses?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: They were happy I could finally identify words and read the Quran. They were excited for me.

Rollo Romig: Have you told other people that they should get the glasses?



Sufiyan Abdulahi: Yes, I have. I recommended people who had eye problems like me to get them. I advised them on how they can get glasses and the benefits it has.

Rollo Romig: Is the farm work different now with the glasses?

Sufiyan Abdulahi: I did not struggle much on the farm. The main problem was reading and writing. I put my eyeglasses on when I am using the phone because I cannot see the small fonts without it. But on the farm, there is no problem.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Rollo Romig: What is your name and what work do you do?

Zebiba Ibro: My name is Zebiba Ibro. I am a farmer. I keep livestock too. I take care of cows and goats. I keep cattle for milk, but I also farm khat.

My work was hard because of my eye problem. I could not see much. I had difficulty sorting and reading the Quran. I couldn't even put a thread in the needle. When I tried to sort seeds, I couldn't see. Because of this, I lacked motivation to do anything. But after I went for the screening and got the eyeglasses, I can recite the Quran very well and see everything clearly. Now I see perfectly well. They told me to only use it indoors, but I would love it if I could use it outside too. Now I am motivated to do everything.

Rollo Romig: How did you find out about the vision screening?

Zebiba Ibro: We were asked to come by the extension health workers. When we got there, they screened us. I was asked to check some letters, which I couldn't identify. When I got the eyeglasses and got my sight back, I could finally read what they were asking of me. I was very excited when I got a solution for my eye problem.

Rollo Romig: What did that feel like when you put the glasses on and saw clearly?

Zebiba Ibro: My sight was blurry before. With the glasses, I could see the light. I could also see people's faces clearly. Before, I couldn't identify people well. Now I can identify everything.

Rollo Romig: How is your farm work different now that you have glasses?

Zebiba Ibro: I can now work very well. However, they told me that I cannot use it outside in the sun while walking because it will have a side effect on my vision.

Rollo Romig: Are you able to get more work done now that you have glasses?

Zebiba Ibro: Now I can see everything. However, they said I cannot walk in them. I wish I could work during the day just like I do at night. I can see clearly when reading both during the day and at night. Previously, this was not possible. Even people's faces were too hard for me to identify. Now there is a significant change. The only problem I face is using the glasses during the day, and it is my fault because after I got the glasses, the health workers asked me to go to the hospital for further check-up. I went twice and I didn't get any service, so I gave up.

The health workers who gave us the glasses told me that these glasses are not suitable for active outdoor use, so I stopped using them outside. They said I should use them while doing chores around the house, sorting seeds, and reciting the Quran. It has made my life easier.

Rollo Romig: What have you been telling your family and neighbors about the glasses?

Zebiba Ibro: I tell my children and neighbors that my eyes can finally see. I tell them that after I got the eyeglasses, my eyes are clear and beautiful. What else can I say? When they ask me how I got my vision back, I tell them the eyeglasses made it possible for me to heal and see clearly. Previously, I would not even walk around. Now I do. And I tell them about the eyeglasses and how they have helped me.

Etsegent Arega [Last Mile Health]: If these glasses were being sold at the shop or the pharmacy, how much do you think they would cost?



Zebiba Ibro: They are expensive. Some are 700 birr (around \$4.50 USD), others are sold for 7000 birr (around \$45 USD). We go to the hospital for checkups, but we never dreamed of buying these glasses. But now we got these glasses for free, and we are filled with gratitude.

Rollo Romig: Thank you.

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Regulation



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Screening

Rollo Romig is the manager of Solutions Insights Lab. He is the author of I Am on the Hit List: A Journalist's Murder and the Rise of Autocracy in India, which was named a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in General Nonfiction.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*