

## **Tom Difilipo, President and CEO**

### ***Joint Council***

I first met Zemzem in a southern village in Ethiopia. As we sat in her small store which proudly stood at entrance path to her village she told me about her sister who had died four years prior and of her struggled to raise her four nieces and nephews. With no income other than a monthly contribution from a U.S. based sponsorship program, she found caring for four children more than she could bear. With no government help available and no other aid other than the inadequate monthly stipend, Zemzem placed the youngest of the children in an orphanage and expressed her hope that another family would love and parent her niece. After months of languishing in the orphanage, her niece ultimately found an appropriate, safe, permanent family in the U.S.

As we continued to sit in the cramped space that was both her store and the home for herself and her now three children, Zemzem spoke with sadness about her loss, her longing to know how her niece was doing with her new family, and her decision to place another of her children in the orphanage. And yet despite the sadness in her story, Zemzem eyes lit up with a hope and pride I so often see in the families I meet in my journeys.

Why with so much loss and sadness did Zemzem's eyes light up? Because the NGO that facilitated the adoption of her niece began an innovative family strengthening program in her village. After one-year of training and two small loans, Zemzem has a thriving business selling much needed grains, bread and nuts to her community (with plans to begin wholesaling!). She now earns more than 3 times the monthly aid on which she had become dependent. With great pride Zemzem spoke of how she no longer needs the monthly aid on which she had become dependent. Her business produced more than 3 times the income of the stipend and she no longer felt the need to place any of her children in the orphanage.

Zemzem closed our time together with not only pride and hope, but also a bit of a sales pitch asking for investors in her business. But what I really saw in her was not only a savvy business owner, but a proud mother who with some one-time support, moved from loss and sadness to hope and fulfillment. Before there was a US Government Action Plan for Children in Adversity, Zemzem's life and story embodied it. Just like Zemzem and the programs that gave her the ability to put her family first, the Action Plan puts family first by enabling families to care for their children; prevent unnecessary family-child separation and promotes appropriate, protective and permanent family care. As just as Zemzem spoke with pride and hope built on sadness, we too should be sad that it took us this long to state the importance of family care for all children and yet filled with hope that the Action Plan will support evidence based programs; from family preservation to intercountry adoption, that make safe permanent family care a reality for all children.