



Ananda Foundation

Field Notes: Ethiopia

ETHIOPIA: WEAVING NEW TOMORROWS FOR HIV CHILDREN

In March, 2005, Levani and I were in Gullele, a large sprawling slum in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The houses, most of mud and straw, were lined up precariously, and stacked like dominoes, one behind the other. They share a water faucet and mostly use lanterns to light the dark, starry nights of an African sky. Most homes and offices are hidden behind a dented chipped gate of galvanized aluminum, with a rusty lock and an aging guard stationed nearby.

We toot the horn, and an old man shuffles his bare feet to creakingly open the gate. Inside are the modest offices of Hope for Children, friendly staff are waiting to welcome us with warmth and smiles. On each desk, there are large heavy scrapbooks that list the children who may be sponsored.

Each page of Hope's history comes with a small black and white photo and is written in a precise hand. Each tells a similar story: "Yednekachew" (who is five years old), lives with his mother. Yednekachew lost his father due to The Virus. His mother lives with The Virus...she was a craftswoman, but the money which she got was not enough to feed her three children and to get their school material and also school fee. Sometimes the children went to school without having breakfast."

Hundreds of widows and sometimes aunties or grandmothers bring these children to Hope for Children, hoping for a monthly living stipend, or in cases where the child is orphaned, placement in a Group Home.

Just behind the office, a narrow alley leads to Group Home Number One. Across from the dark, tin-covered brick shed, where food is cooked in a blackened pot, there are eight tubs or clay pots with dirt and flowering nasturtium, and other flower plants, one for

each of the eight children, seven boys and one little girl in a denim jacket.

We eagerly approach with big smiles. Radet looked up, her eyes curving into black almonds under neatly braided hair, and my heart swells like an old Emily Dickenson poem. I hug all the boys first and then, Radet and I practically jump into each other's arms. At seven years old, she has lost both parents, a sensitive, poetic girl who once composed a song last year about a girl who wakes at dawn to find she has only arms and legs. A little bird has flown away with her heart. The girl in the song says her body is healthy, but she misses her heart and asks the bird to return it.

Anxious to play 'hostess,' Radet takes my hand in hers and leads me to her room. The beds are neatly made with faded sheets, and the concrete floor swept clean. Radet has a bottom bunk and a housemother who sleeps opposite her. Much to the delight and amusement of everyone, we dive on the mattress laughing. When I exhale -- big snorting snoring sounds, the other children giggle with glee.

Since 1998 there has been an ongoing government campaign to educate the public, to dispel the cultural taboos that makes the AIDS victims shunned in some segments of the population. The Virus, as it is commonly called, affects hundreds of thousands of Ethiopian mothers and children; the Ethiopian Ministry of Health estimates that 750,000 children are orphaned by AIDS.

In this silent quiet neighborhood, we cannot imagine how AIDS has penetrated so deeply into such an impoverished community...

The housemother at Group Home One is Worsene Mara, who easily fits into her role as mother to seven boys and one girl. Wearing a hand-me-down ski sweater, she has a high forehead and a big toothy smile in a sweet, heart-shaped dark face. We love her

immediately. In each of the four group homes, there are women like Worsene, gracious, hard-working and without a nick of doubt; they share themselves selflessly, bringing stability and hope to these special children.

With great joy, Ananda Foundation will sponsor nineteen children, most are still living at home in Gulele with a HIV-positive mother or aunt. Each family welcomed us to their homes, one room of thickly-patted mud and straw. On the wall, the children have taped photos of Jesus and Mary, and portraits of their own deceased family members, carefully mounted on the mud walls, bulwarked with plastic and cardboard.

A monthly stipend of Birr 110, (about \$US250.00 per annum per child) distributed by the caring staff at Hope for Children Organization, will be shared by that child to help feed a family of four or five and alleviate at least part of the living expenses for the family.

Small groups of caring Ethiopian citizens are creating tiny self-help groups all over the city. We visited a project geared to help the firewood carriers. Here smiling women work at primitive looms, creating shawls and placemats to sell. Once bent over under the weight of 50lb.of gathered wood - - for which they received about \$US12 a month., their weary bodies have been “reclaimed” - - to weave joyfully every day in the beautiful colors they spin and card and dye themselves.

All of these newly created families are working on a similarly shared loom in Addis Ababa, weaving a new tomorrow.

**Notes by Sheree March 2005*

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