

Abel's Journey

The gates of St. Mary's Language School were slightly ajar. We pushed our way in treading lightly under the dim gray-white of the street light and holding the hand of my unsteady mother, setting foot on larger stones to avoid falling into the deep holes in the ground. We came to visit Abel Ayelew. The roots of trees slithered across the soil. Past the roots and around the corner were steps to climb with a drop off to several feet and no handrail. Finally we came to yellow wooden door with the number 12.

Now I would spare you the details, but I want you to imagine walking to door #12 completely blind. Abel is 16 years old and came to Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia on a bus from his town of Gojjam 300 kilometers away. He came to the city, on his own, without anything determined to find a school that taught Braille.

How did we meet Abel? On our last visit to Ethiopia we were on our way home from a visit with an HIV affected family. (People here do not say HIV, they say "The Virus" in a whisper). As we were driving my mother saw a boy with a cane and his teenage friends swaggering down the street.

Mom said "WAIT! Stop the car." She got out and embraced him in a big hug. I sat thinking, *my mom is nuts*. We had stopped the car in the middle of a dirt road in a community unknown to us; surrounded by corrugated aluminum roofs and mud houses held together with hay. Dusk was arriving.

Abel had two white moons in his eyes, they were cloudy. He was completely blind. I got out of the car and took Abel's hands. I took both of his hands and held them in mine. "Love is not something you have to see, you can feel it," I said.

He squeezed my hands back and said, "I feel it."

That was a year and a half ago and Abel only spoke the local language of Amharic.

That love transcended the miles and oceans between Africa, Boston, and Hawaii. Over the months we sent emails to each other. Abel would go to an internet café and ask the waitress to help him type an email.

Abel's dream was to learn English and become an advocate, a lawyer. With the help of the NGO Hope for Children Organization, Abel registered at St. Mary's to study English five days a week. He attends high school classes during the day and English class at night, the youngest pupil in his class. How he walks everywhere and knows the distances between places, is beyond me.

When I met him earlier in the day he was carrying a few sheets of heavy white paper, our emails from over a year ago and a black folder that had holes in it. Then he put his hand in his pocket. "This is my pen! he declared" It was a short, conical instrument that had a metal pin which he would stick through the holes of his folder to spell things out in Braille. Dot by dot.

Abel turned to me. "It is a difficult learning system for a disabled person. For example, there is a lack of Braille paper. It is very expensive. There are no Braille books...and I live alone."

Abel saves his Braille paper for his exams. He has a professor who is blind at his local school. Abel listens to the exam questions and writes his answers in Braille. His blind teacher grades his examinations.

"How do you take notes?" I asked him.

"I listen." He grinned.

"But how do you remember everything, if you can't write it down?"

"I catch it on my brain." His grin became two dimples.

Tonight we made a surprise visit to Abel's English class to thank his teacher. There are 25 students sitting at old wooden benches about seven students squashed into a bench barely any space between them.

My mom who manages to find a flower to put in her hair no matter what country we're in was wearing her Hawaiian mu'umu'u dress. She opened with "Hello everyone. I am here to visit my son's English class."

The room was silent, but you could hear the joy. Then mom said, "My Abel, you are seated next to two beautiful women! How did you manage that?" The classroom roared with laughter.

I introduced myself and said I was from Hawaii. "But you look Ethiopian," someone in the back responded.

We laughed, asked and answered questions, and --I danced a short Hawaiian hula for everyone. I enjoy sharing the gift of Aloha.

Someone raised their hand and asked the question: "What is the difference between Ethiopia and America?"

"The Ethiopians have an open heart and wear their soul on the outside," mother said.

Abel closed the class thanking the teacher and saying how happy he was to have this opportunity. Abel wears his soul and it is cloaked in the vision of his dreams. His courage as tall as the mountains.