

## ***Dear Friends,***

First of all, thank you all for making possible my three-week journey to Ethiopia this June. Many of you financed my journey with your donations. Others made provisions for me or gave great advice. To all of you I dedicate the following:

My journey was one I will never forget. I expected the poverty and the disease that we witnessed within this poor country, but what I did not expect was the immediate and unconditional love that we received from everyone we met. To make a long story short -- that was the surprise revelation of the trip. To say that I am forever changed is hardly enough to express how I was truly affected.

I made daily entries into my journal for the first 8 days, then, somehow, I lost my journal! Nevertheless, some powerful and inspiring images have been forever imprinted. As I re-type this report, I do so like a journal entry in the hope that it will seem to you that you have journeyed with me. Sincerely, you have.

This was my first mission trip. Many people told me before leaving, "You'll probably get more out of it than you will give." Those people were absolutely right.



Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia, is a city of over 3.5 million people, but the majority live far below poverty level. We spent our time with the people who live in one of the poorest urban communities. They have tiny mud houses without plumbing or electricity. In these areas over half are unemployed. They want to work, but they have no education and there are no jobs for them. Most are undernourished and suffer from many diseases, including leprosy and HIV. There is almost no medical care available. They truly have no opportunity to change or better their own lives or the lives of their children. Because Ethiopia is one of the poorest nations in the world, government support is negligible. The situation is getting worse due to increasing population and global warming. Rainfall, crops and food have all been reduced in recent years. It's a vicious cycle that would seem to offer little hope.

**Despite all, these people cling to hope.**

## ***Day One:***

Our task was to visit HIV+ women and children daily, bring them food, give them encouragement and spread the good news of Jesus Christ.

Most of the white-skinned people that visit Ethiopia are from the U.S. or Europe. We "fringeers" are wealthy by any standard compared to the people we visited. Yet, instead of treating us with resentment, or being jealous of our wealth, these poor but happy people greeted us with smiles and open arms. They would invite us to sit in the best seat of their homes. In most cases this was nothing more than a wooden stool on a dirt floor. Ironically, they would offer to share with us whatever little they had. Some would offer to carry our bags to our next destination — all without expecting a thing in return. They were simply grateful for the compassion and the visit, which to them showed we cared. They understood what showing love to another person was all about. They were an example of the love that Jesus meant for us to show one another as brothers and sisters of this world.



## *Day Two:*

We arrived at our first HIV positive(+) home. It was dark and dreary like others we visited yesterday. The house was no bigger than a powder room. It was made out of mud, manure and straw. There were no windows. The door was the size of a typical bedroom door but it had no lock. Halle Jesus, our interpreter, motioned for us to sit down. I hesitated not wanting to sit on anything because earlier another bed we were invited to sit upon was soaked with urine. Ultimately, I sat down on wooden plank.



When Halle Jesus told us we could ask questions, I didn't know what to say to a mother dying of HIV. Her name was Egot and she seemed a bit shy. I thought she was beautiful. Her smile was sparkling.

Although she had been sick and bedridden for the last few days, she said she woke up that morning feeling great because, "God knew we were coming to visit her!" I tried to explain to her that it wasn't God who sent us to her, but rather it was God who sent her to us. She offered us some coffee – which is a very important part of her heritage. To roast the coffee beans over hot coals and then brew them over an open fire is a coffee ceremony of great honor. We refused her offering thinking, "How could we take something from a person who has so little?"

Egot's baby seemed a bit unsettled so she began to breast feed him. I thought, "What are you doing?? You are HIV+ and it will infect your child!!" But I also realized that Egot had been breast-feeding her son since his birth and that chances were already great that the baby had already been infected. We gave Egot food and her face beamed! She mentioned she had not eaten for days. We prayed for her and her son. Then I asked her to attend the Friday morning service for all the HIV+ people in her community. I told her I wanted to see her again. Egot did attend service on Friday and I was so glad to see her once more.

## *Day Three:*

The next day we went to visit Esther and her 2-year-old daughter named Rahwa. Esther's house was a longer walk – about 1-1/2 miles away. By now I was getting used to roosters, hens and donkeys running in front of me. Morning rains had turned the dirt roads to mud.



When we got to Esther's house I was surprised to see corn growing outside of her hut. Later I found out that it was the landlord's corn. Tenants, such as Esther, were not allowed to grow anything on the land.

Esther hair was still dripping after a washing in a bucket of cold water. She complained about her head and said her stomach was hurting. I asked EnDale, my interpreter for the day, if I could give her some medicine. He said, "Sure," so I gave her some Advil and Tums – medicines that were readily available to us any time. She was so happy that someone was able to help her.

Shortly after we started talking to Esther, we realized that she would die within the week. The HIV virus had spread throughout her liver and had attacked her brain. I couldn't hold back the tears as I thought about what would happen to her daughter after Esther's

passing. I moved closer to Esther. She sat up and leaned in toward me. I asked her if she knew Jesus Christ and she gave me a blank stare. I began to witness to her about Jesus, telling Esther that He had come to take away all the pain, and for her to rest in peace with Him. EnDale helped, adding comforting words in their native tongue. She sobbed as he prayed for her.

The last time I saw Esther was at the Friday morning service for the HIV victims. She heard the message of Salvation and came forward with her daughter on her back. When I saw her walk up front I stood behind her and held her as she sunk into the wooden pew with exhaustion. She was finally going to be free.

Our missionary, Shelly, told me I could take one of our quilts to Esther's house to wrap her in when she dies. I am so blessed to have been able to meet her. I will never forget the courage she showed that day. My prayer now is for Esther's daughter, Rahwa, to be adopted, have a wonderful life and find the same love of Jesus as her mother did.

### ***Day Four:***

The children I saw on the streets of Koray had smiles from ear to ear. Koray is a district known as "the poorest of the poor." It is populated with more lepers and HIV victims than any other area in Addis Ababa. I don't think those smiling children had an idea that their future was so grim. As soon as I took a picture of one child, fifteen more came running up to greet me, hoping that they, too, could have their picture taken and see it on the back of my digital camera. I have some beautiful shots of these children.



## ***In Conclusion***

I spent 3 weeks in Ethiopia. That includes 8 days with the lepers and HIV positive community and the rest of the time to help open our transition home, called "House of Hope," for Children Hope International, the adoption agency I work for in the states.

I have truly seen the homeless in this third world country, the street people who sleep all day long on the tiniest bricks possible because if they fall asleep in the evening they are in fear of being raped or robbed of the simplest possession like their plastic covering they use to keep them dry when it rains. There are people who beg on a daily basis to be able to just get the basics in life – a roll of "dabo" (bread) might be all they eat on any given day.

There are no TV's, Gameboys or even PS2s in peoples' homes. Rather, the streets are filled with people visiting each other and fellowshiping. Children play ping-pong and fozzeball on the side of the road as if the street was an arcade where our children would go in the states to hang out with friends.

Lepers walk on there hands and knees because their legs have become crippled in the most unusual contortions and that is the only way they can get around. Many have wooden planks strapped on there hands to prevent the skin on their palms from wearing away. Other people on the side of the road are struggling to make a living selling chickens they have just killed. Arms stretched out, they hold up the dead birds hoping someone will stop to buy them .... This is all REAL...



Many of you have asked if the trip to Ethiopia was fun. Our group did laugh a lot and we enjoyed meeting the dedicated ministers of the church in Addis Ababa. We also met and spent a lot of time with our missionary Shelly's soccer boys. With them we shed tears of joy along with tears of sorrow. One thing I can say for certain: we did NOT have fun.



What we experienced was real.

Real **HUNGER**

Real **HOPELESSNESS**

Real **SUFFERING**

And Real despair for the most extraordinary people God has created in His likeness.

I want to make sure you understand that the attached pictures won't ever be on TV or in a pamphlet asking you to feed the starving children because they aren't really pictures at all....they are lives.

These are the people I've hugged...people I've kissed... people I've served and people who have served me.

The people of Ethiopia showed me that it is not what you have, not where you live, not even how healthy you are...but it is the ability to share — serving and loving others — that brings one true happiness. Bringing my mission to Ethiopia back to the home front, I'm going to practice what I learned from the people of Ethiopia and try to spread the love that I received from them. They have changed my life and showed me how to be a better person. There is no better testimony to their love for us than to spread that love to others.

Thank you for helping me help the people of Ethiopia. I sincerely hope you feel the love they gave me.



~ ***Toni Lynch***