

JOURNEY TO ETHIOPIA 2008 by Donna Berber

"There is a greater thread that connects all human beings to one another. This truth is ultimately the same regardless of country, culture, situation or circumstance. There is no separation and therein lies the gift"

Ethiopia, September 2008: I travelled from Addis Ababa to the Western Welega Zone in the far southwest of the country. The journey took 15 hours by car through majestic, lush and green countryside. Frame after frame of people in villages and markets walking through the streets in laughter, squalor, filth and poverty. It was life as we rarely get to see it.

We would slow down in amazement to watch the parade of women, one after another, young and old, walking for miles hauling 50lbs of firewood on their backs to market. Their feet swollen and muddy; their backs literally bent in half - an ancient cycle of life that depletes and eventually destroys them.



After we arrived, we visited an unprotected source of water where the local women and children would gather to fill their jugs. At the same time, a herd of cattle arrived and proceeded to enter the water to drink and do their business just as the people were collecting their drinking water.

We met one woman and watched as she poured filthy, brown, muddy water into her clay jug before strapping it on her back using a piece of rope that cut into her breastbone. We walked quietly with her to her home. It was New Years Day in Ethiopia - September 11, 2001 (there's a seven-year gap between the Ethiopian calendar and the one we use).

She invited us to come in to her mud hut with two dirt floored rooms - one for cooking, the other for sleeping. She lived with her six children including one grown daughter and two grandchildren.

They were hungry and extremely poor. They had almost nothing but what they had they offered us.

We stayed for a while before walking over to a nearby elementary school that A Glimmer of Hope had funded three years ago - two blocks of four classrooms for Grades 1-8. Her grandson Patience (literal translation of his name in Oromo) came with us - a

sweet little 9-year-old boy who slipped his hand in mine as we walked.

He had no shoes on his feet and his clothes - his only clothes - were tattered, torn and filthy. We walked into one of the classrooms, sat down and asked Patience what grade he was in.

"I don't go to school," he replied.

Given the school was only minutes from his home, we were shocked. He told us his family was too poor and that he needed to work. He fetched firewood and herded cattle during the day to contribute money for food; he brought home 70 cents a day.

We asked him if he would like to go to school and he said: "Yes."

Tears gently rolled down his face and he lowered his head; the shame of poverty overwhelming him like a dirt blanket from which he lay under.



His father had died from "the sickness" and his mother had tuberculosis. She joined us and told us that she wanted Patience to learn - so simple, so earnest and honest. This was helplessness, hopelessness.

And, this is a story that is repeated tens of thousands of times across Ethiopia. Children stripped of their childhoods, laboring, supporting families and doing whatever it takes to survive the day.

This is a story of shame and the silent, deafening sound of poverty. It starts with a mother - any mother, anywhere in the world - who cannot provide for her children and watches helplessly as their struggle for survival plays out every day.

I am a mother and I cannot imagine the pain, sorrow and guilt that would fill me and the helplessness that would erode my heart.

Patience has the right to a childhood, an education, to drink water that will sustain his life, not deplete it. He knows that an education is the only possibility he has for himself and his family to break this cycle so a different story can be told. He is a 9-year-old boy who carries a burden of the ages on his back.

It was 2000 when we first visited this part of the country - forgotten, rural and desperate - and decided to make it our pilot area, our model village. It was here, on this trip, that I would come to fully understand the level of impact our model of Rural Integrated Development is capable of producing.

We began by funding primary schools, water wells, veterinary clinics, health posts and a major rehabilitation project at the local hospital. At the time, it was on the brink of being closed down by the medical board as it had no surgeon, no anesthetics, no sanitation facilities and very few medicines. It had fallen into a sad state of disrepair where patients often left sicker than they arrived.

Eight years later, I felt tremendous joy as I saw the progress and the promise - a transformation from helplessness to hope that has been highlighted by the progress at the hospital.

Today, it has become a central hub for quality medical care where surgeries are performed and hundreds of people receive the treatment they need on a daily basis. It has also become a model for the way A Glimmer of Hope works in cooperation with local administrative structures; since we began working at the facility, the regional government has also invested over a million dollars.

The change in the area is also clearly evident in the projects we are implementing there today.

While we continue to invest in the basic societal building blocks like clean water, sanitation and basic education, we have begun a "next level" of programs designed to accommodate those who have reached the next level of need.

For example, the Dembi Dollo Teachers' Education College houses more than 3,000 students who, upon graduation, will be qualified to go out and teach at the middle school level throughout the entire Oromiya Region.

Also, a vocational and technical center teaches a range of professions including IT, accounting, auto mechanics, wood work, metal work and food preparation. There are almost 900 students at the center and a waiting list for those wanting to enroll next year. Another great example of the partnership we enjoy with local government.

We're now also funding microfinance initiatives throughout the area giving many an opportunity to break the cycle of poverty and create sustainable incomes for themselves as well as jobs for others.

The impact of implementing such a variety of integrated projects, in one of the most remote and challenging places in the world, has been profound.

With a little bit of help, the people of this area have lifted themselves from deep excruciating poverty to the fullness and the richness of health, hygiene, education, skills training and job creation.

They have created a cycle of prosperity to replace the cycle of poverty.

It's difficult to find the words to describe the joy of seeing such transformation occur in such a short period of time. The results have surpassed any and all of my expectations and hopes for Glimmer, our partners and the people of Ethiopia.

As always, I feel indebted to our people on the ground in Addis, our team here in Austin and, of course, the men, women and children of Ethiopia who live their lives with dignity, grace and humility despite unimaginable challenges.

You inspire me every day.



Donna Berber
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