

April Update

My experiences at Hope for Children continue to help me grow and learn in ways I never would have imagined. I week ago I went with a group of people from HFC to Babile to help with Eric Gottesman's traveling photography exhibit. For the last six years he has been collaborating with kids from Hope for Children to document their stories and experiences. The exhibit is designed to be outside with large banner-sized photographs in metal frames that create a circle. Inside the circle is a display of smaller photographs and text. The exhibit was first shown in Awassa and it has been interesting to see how it takes on a different life in each location. Since Babile is such a small rural community it had a significant impact on the town. HIV/AIDS education is relatively new in the community (of which HFC is one of the only providers) and this was very apparent in some of the comments received regarding the exhibit. One man was outraged and demanded that he meet "HIV" to ask them why they are making these children suffer. We had to explain to him that HIV is a disease and not a group of people.

The highlight of the exhibit was the first evening after the sun went down. The exhibit officially opened with a traditional coffee ceremony around 4:30 pm. When the ceremony began there were dozens of children running around playing, not paying attention to the content of the exhibit. When the evening started to become dark we turned the coffee cups over and put candles on them to light up the photos inside the exhibit walls. This action changed the entire atmosphere. The kids settled down and began to look at the photographs and ask questions. When the questions subsided we sat in silence and enjoyed the ambiance and each other's company.

The exhibit was up for a week, which gave us a lot of time to interact with people in Babile. Yewoinshet is a very well respected figure in the community and we were invited to meals, tea, and coffee each day. One invitation in particular was very touching and personally significant for me. We were invited to the home of two of our sponsored children. With a few of their friends (who are also sponsored by HFC) they prepared a lovely afternoon. The kids, who are between 10 and 14, had pride written all over their faces as they served us coffee, bread, and popcorn (traditional coffee ceremony food). They are at the beautiful age where they are growing into adults, but still very much children. Their ceremony reminded me of the excitement I had at their age and my desire to be an adult before my time. The sad truth is that these kids (especially the girls) will, in fact, be pushed into adulthood and adult reality well before their time.

While we were in Babile Yewoinshet and I met with a group of community women to hear about the issues they and their daughters face in the community. Many young girls become pregnant or are forced to marry while they are still children. A significant number have become pregnant by traveling soldiers and are eventually abandoned when the soldiers change locations. The ones who are left behind or widowed have no other choice, but to prostitute themselves. This has become a serious problem because these young girls are working behind closed doors and are not given the traditional access to condoms and HIV/AIDS education that public prostitutes receive.

Because I always have my camera along most children ask me to take photos of them,

which inevitably turns into an impromptu photo session involving many people in a variety of poses. I love these interactions because it is a way for me to connect with the kids even though I do not speak their language. During this coffee ceremony I was particularly struck by the photo exchange that occurred. The girls I was photographing were very eager to appear a certain way, which was reflected by their choice of clothing (including multiple outfits) and their poses. They posed like models and rockstars and at first I wondered why, but I eventually realized that I was doing the exact same thing at their age. I started to see myself in them, an experience that I haven't had here in Ethiopia before. Growing up in a small Midwestern town is such a different world than their life here, especially for the children who are going through the traumatic experience of losing their loved ones. We forget that kids are also going through adolescence and the confusion and excitement of that time of life.

Although this was a small event during my time here I think it has changed my outlook on my work. Having realized that our lives aren't as different as I thought, I feel closer to the community and a little less foreign.

I have included a few photos to help illustrate these few experiences:



ViewingExhibit.jpg – This image was taken of one of the children on the street viewing the exhibit.



ExhibitCandles.jpg – The kids in this photograph have settled down and are viewing the images and reading the accompanied text.



Coffee Ceremony.jpg - Before I stepped onto the carpet I took this photograph of the kids and all the preparations they had made for us.