

Elena Rue Update

Babile is a small town in the Oromo Region (Eastern Ethiopia) where Yewoinshet was raised until she attended boarding school and where her family still lives. HFC has just recently started conducting programs there and opened its first group home a few months ago. When I was told about the town's relationship to HIV my heart broke. Yewoinshet said that just about every family in the town has lost someone, and many have lost several. Everyone has been affected by it. To make matters worse there is a tremendous lack of knowledge and education about HIV/AIDS, but in the few months HFC has been present there has been a drastic change. Our volunteers said traffic is sometimes stopped along the roads because people are talking about HIV. This is due to the tremendous energy put forth by the peer educators and home-based caretakers. Almost all of our volunteers are HIV positive and have made it their mission to educate their friends and neighbors. They go to the public water taps, where people gather in droves every morning, set up coffee ceremonies, and begin to engage people in discussions about AIDS. In the last 3 months they have reached over 3000 people and they have just begun. Eventually they want to go out into the isolated rural areas with their message and inform as many people as possible. It was so inspiring to hear their ideas and see their enthusiasm.

While I was there I was asked to take photos of two peer educators who want to have posters made with a message about AIDS. One woman, Hirut, has two children and wants get the message across that you can still be a good mother even if you are positive. Another man, Mohammad, chose to have his poster say that you can still get AIDS even if you are Muslim (there is a myth that Muslims can't become positive because they drink camel's milk). It will be interesting to see the response from the community.

While we were in Babile two of our Addis staff started a puppeteer group with some of our sponsored kids. Puppeteering is used as a way to get messages about AIDS, safe sex, etc across to a wide audience in a way that is engaging and entertaining. It has been a huge success in Addis and will no doubt be just as effective in Babile. The selected kids met everyday and started making the puppets from scratch. They were quite unruly at first, but by the end of the week they were completely different people. They had a tremendous sense of accomplishment from making the puppets, writing scripts, and performing them to the community on our last day. It was amazing to see how quickly they matured when they were given something meaningful to become a part of. Now they have the means and the skills to continue on their own and I'm sure they will do wonders for the community.

Babile is located in the heart of chat country, a plant that people chew to get high (from what I understand it is stronger than Marijuana, but less dangerous than Speed). Unfortunately the government encourages the growth of chat (for economic reasons) so the consumption is accepted as well. Almost everyone partakes, including local government officials and administrators. Yewoinshet is

hoping to start more programs and activities in Babile that encourage people to take responsibility for their lives and bodies. She already has plans to start scouting and dance groups, two programs we have in Addis that are also very successful.

The expansion of HFC is on a very fast track. So much so that we're all having trouble keeping it all straight! At the moment we have funding (or are waiting for funding) for three more group homes (one in Babile and two in Addis), a play therapy clinic, hospice center, kindergarten, youth centers (Addis and Babile), and possible expansion into three new towns (Jigiga, Mojo, and Awassa). I'm not sure if it will all happen while I'm here, but it's exciting to be a part of the process.



BabileCoffeeCeremony.jpg – Mohammad, one of the Babile peer educators, engaging people in a discussion about HIV/AIDS. [This particular coffee ceremony is held at the water spout in the center of town]



BabileGroupHome.jpg – Babile group home mother and three of the six kids living with her. [HFC sponsors over 600 children, but only about 40 of them are actually living in group homes. When at all possible children are placed with remaining parents, family members or close friends in the community. When this is not possible they are placed in group homes that mimic traditional Ethiopian family life. There are 6-8 children in each home (the average number in most households here) with one group home mother that cares for them and provides them with anything they need.]



DanceGroupAddis.jpg – Dancers in the HFC Addis group giving a performance at a special luncheon provided by Eric's parents during their visit. [The dance program is a way to give older kids meaningful and self-esteem building activities to participate in.]



Puppets.jpg - HFC community members watching a puppet show. [Most of the shows include information about HIV/AIDS and promote abstinence and safe sex in an entertaining way. They also try to dispel myths and break down sources of stigma in the community.]



Candle3.jpg – This photograph was taken in one of the Addis group homes. About once a week I spend the night at one of the group homes as a way to get to know the kids better. [This particular evening the power went out for a few in the neighborhood so the kids and I sat around a candle, sang songs, and danced around.]