



'If these were my children ...'

Mulugeta Gebru's story of orphan care in Ethiopia

In the mid-1980s intensifying civil war in the Horn of Africa produced an infamous humanitarian crisis as 2.5 million frightened and hungry refugees crowded into Ethiopia from surrounding countries. Unfortunately, Ethiopia's countryside and border zones, normally dependent on small farming and agricultural production, had been suffering from a drought for several years. As refugees poured into the country seeking safety and support, Ethiopians themselves were abandoning their dry farms and villages. Refugees and these internally displaced Ethiopians died by the hundreds of thousands of starvation. Many children became orphaned or permanently separated from family in the resulting confusion and chaos.

Although Ethiopia has a long and rich Biblical history, starting with the Queen of Sheba's visit to King Solomon in approximately 950 B.C., many Americans had never heard of the second-oldest country to become Christian. We learned about Ethiopia as we sat around the nightly news watching the 1984 famine unfold with pictures of starving and dying children broadcast into our living rooms. Long before the realities of the HIV/AIDS crisis began to emerge on our radar, we knew that there were children dying in Ethiopia.

In the midst of this unsettling time in Ethiopia's history, concerned citizens in the capital city of Addis Ababa were motivated to save as many children as possible, in any way possible. Mulugeta Gebru was an Ethiopian man with a heart for the children of his country. In 1985 he opened six orphanages that saved the lives of 1,000 children.



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ship Development Project

Originally intended as an emergency response in desperate times, these orphanages became home to the children and Mulugeta became their “father.”

If Mulugeta’s story were to end there he would still be considered a great man. But the story does not end in an orphanage or with those 1,000 lives saved.

Mulugeta married and had children of his own. And as he watched his children with pride and a father’s love he began to recognize differences in the children he raised in his home and “his children” in the orphanages. The children in the orphanages, despite excellent care and loving staff, were sick, both physically sick and emotionally disturbed. Their lives had been saved and their needs taken care of but they did not have the consistent love, affection, trust or attachment that family provides. As Mulugeta’s biological children thrived, the orphaned children failed. They had no life skills and could not integrate into the community. Without ties to family they were essentially outcasts. Mulugeta describes the dawning realization as “uncomfortable” and he began to ask himself, “If one of these were my children, could I keep him/her here in the orphanage?”

This is a question all too often faced by parents and extended family living in poverty, not just those affected by drought, conflict or disease. Carrying the burden of finding a way to feed, clothe and educate their children, many families are faced with the unfathomable dilemma of keeping their children at home or placing them in institutional care.

POWER OF VILLAGE, EXTENDED FAMILY

Knowing the power of the African village and extended family, Mulugeta made a decision that was considered radical at the time. Ten years after opening the orphanages he vowed to find a way to reintegrate every child

back into extended family member’s homes, foster families, or independent living. He knew that there would be many risks and challenges, as well as skepticism from his staff. But the question kept coming back to him, “If these were my children...”

Mulugeta’s organization, Jerusalem Children’s Community Development Organization (JeCCDO) was well supported by enthusiastic international donors. This made a huge difference in his ability to hire social workers and community workers to support the plan. At that time, and even presently, reintegration of children out of orphanages

and into the community was seen as cutting-edge and was an exciting alternative to a life of care within the walls of an institution and the bleak future beyond.

The process of reunification and reintegration was organic at first and took several years to complete. During long vacations teenagers were sent to their origins to trace or visit their families. Before, they leave for vacation, the children were gathered and given information on their background, what little was

known about who they were and where they came from. They were asked to share this with the community. It was an intimidating proposition. Mulugeta encouraged them with these words: “This is your chance. Your chance to know. You will need this someday.” He knew that like most young people in Africa their future success in marriage, business, and society would be very dependent upon knowing where they came from, knowing their tribe and language and history.

During vacations, every Sunday these teenagers, shy and awkward, arrived at local churches and in the market to tell their stories. Standing in front of a group of people sometimes they would hear a woman cry out, “Yes, I do know you, I remember your mother”

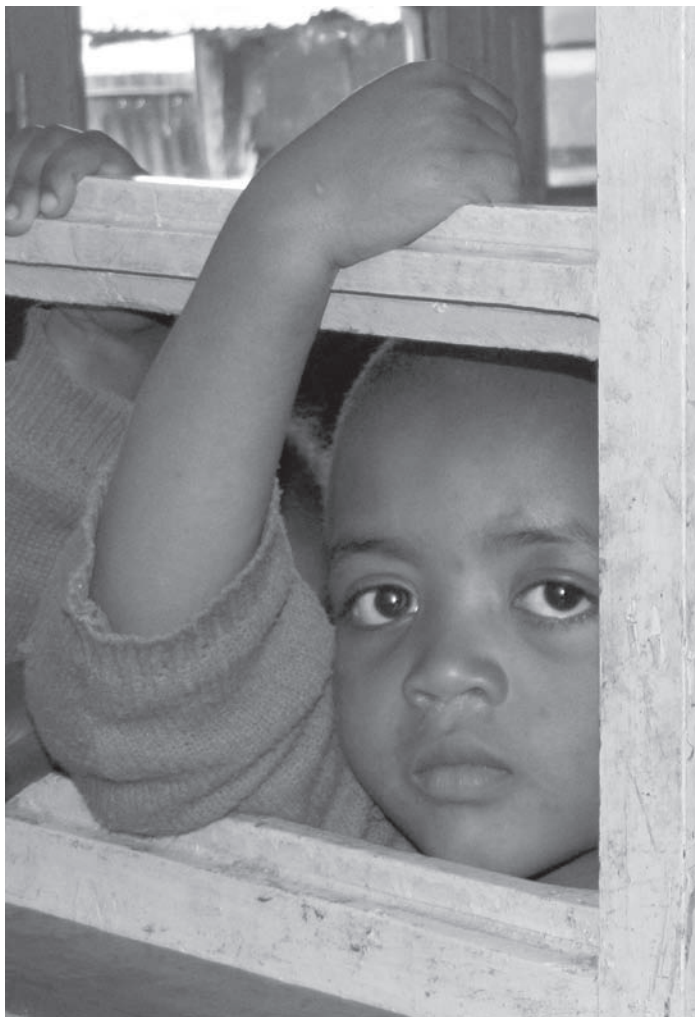
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or “I can show you the village where your auntie lives.” As the clues and information poured in social workers were sent out, by bus, bike and donkey, to every village to ensure that the right matches were being made and assess the possibility for future reunification.

Through this process more than 120 children were reunified and their families were provided with training and economic support to help prevent disintegration of the placement. As children were reunited with family members once believed to be lost or dead, they began to understand the value of what they had been missing. It was not an easy transition and it required support staff and correct timing, but it was a necessary step toward a healthy and whole life. For younger children there was a process of family assessment and visitation that took place before the final match or reunification was made. For older teenagers who had not known family life for more than 10 years, the bonding with families they could not remember was more difficult. More than 700 children of this group were able to establish independent lives in the community and were provided with vocational skill training or higher education sponsorship. For every child a plan was set in place for the family’s income and for the child’s education or training and the placements were monitored.

FAMILY FOCUSED CHILD CARE

By 2000 all six orphanages had been closed. Together with the reunification and reintegration program, the organization started cost-effective and sustainable community-based and family-focused childcare and com-



munity development programs. And with the money previously spent to support one child in the orphanage (\$50/month) the organization is able to support five children in a family as well as provide important resources for the children’s communities.

Of course the story doesn’t end there. Ethiopia is once again in the news with headlines about HIV/AIDS, the resulting orphan crisis, and the growing burden on extended families and communities caring for children. But JeCCDO learned long ago something that many of us know instinctually – children grow best in families. Their response now is a holistic one that takes into consideration both the reason for orphaning or abandonment and the needs that children have in order to grow into healthy and functioning adults.

In the West we often see disease or conflict as the worst disaster but Mulugeta explains that to children "...the orphanage is just another disaster. An orphanage is an island - it is easy and sometimes very good-looking. But what is easy is not always right."

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

In response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, JeCCDO works in several areas of the country to help form and strengthen community-based organizations in support of orphans and vulnerable children. These organizations identify families in each community who are at high risk (caring for a sick or dying parent) or who are caring for orphans. The most vulnerable families receive support from the organization and from the local government. The hope is that through this community-based volunteer system, no child will be left behind. Support group networks, women's training programs, micro-credit projects, day cares, and urban agriculture support all work in tandem to create a safety net for families struggling with poverty or orphan care-giving and ensure a working system of family and community-based care.



Mulugeta Gebre at the nonprofit organization he founded to empower communities for sustainable development in Ethiopia.

As we consider our own response to the 132 million children worldwide who have lost at least one parent, and the millions more who are vulnerable in the face of poverty, isolation, disability, or war, it is essential that we remember how our Father in heaven cares for even the "least of these." He created humans in unique relationship to God and instilled in us instincts that crave and desire family life and group relationship. We are children of God, meant to demonstrate that same agape style love here on earth. As we consider how to take action on behalf of little ones in need, we must hold in our hearts Mulugeta's question: "...if these were my children...?"



Mother and Child Reunion

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