

*A report from the field by **Elena Rue**, who is working with the Hope For Children in Addis Ababa as a Hine Fellow, part of a collaborative project between BvLF and the Lewis Hine Documentary Fellows Program*

During the first week of June I traveled to Babile with Yewoinshet Masresha (the founder of Hope for Children) and Jacqui Gilmour (the founder of Hope for Children Australia, one of HFC Ethiopia's largest support networks). Babile is HFC's second office located in the Eastern Region of Ethiopia. It was opened last year and is in the beginning stages of developing programs and HIV awareness. When we arrived in Babile we were met with very sobering conditions. We were told that there have been funerals every week mourning the loss of community members who have died from the virus. Through informal inquiries HFC has found that many community members have not been tested or are tested very infrequently leading HFC to believe that the mortality rate from HIV/AIDS is much higher than previously thought. Although there aren't any reliable statistics on the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in Babile a few HFC employees estimated it may be as high as 50 - 60% of the population there. During our time in Babile the dire circumstances of the town presented themselves in several ways.



Upon our arrival we were told about a woman who was dying of AIDS and in need of direct assistance. The woman was unemployed, homeless, and dropped off in an alcove just inside the gates of the town administrative compound. Yewoinshet and Jacqui cleaned her, gave her new clothes, and arranged to have her transported in our car to a hospital in Harar (30 Km away). This situation has tragically become commonplace in Babile. This woman was one of the many women who had been infected while working as a cook or maid for the military men in the area surrounding the town. The presence of military is one of the major obstacles that Babile faces in the fight against the spread of AIDS. At the end of our trip we visited the woman in Harar, but unfortunately her condition had worsened and she had passed away that evening.

Another example of Babile's desperate state is the skyrocketing number of children and families seeking sponsorship support from Hope for Children. HFC's biggest program is sponsorship of children by individuals in Ethiopia and abroad. When a child is sponsored their family receives monthly support to cover food, shelter, and educational expenses for

the child. Since Babile is such a small community the news of HFC's presence and financial support had spread fast. HFC currently sponsors close to 30 children, but in the few days we were in Babile we collected 60 more profiles for sponsorship. We eventually had to turn people away so as not to collect more profiles than we can possibly find sponsors for. This is will prove to be one of HFC's biggest obstacles with their work in Babile. Yewoinshet, who grew up in Babile and still has many ties there, has described her own her personal struggle to balance her sense of obligation towards certain people in the community and those who are most desperately in need of support.



My and Jacqui's presence as foreigners also caused some confusion among some of the community members. Since we were helping collect profiles and photos of each person some people believed that we were intending to take some of the children back to Australia and America with us. Once we were informed of this misconception we had to explain to everyone that no one would be taken from the Babile community.

The stigma attached to HIV/AIDS is apparent everywhere in Ethiopia. HFC is a great haven in the Addis Ababa community and helps children deal with being shunned by their neighbors and relatives. Since HFC's work is relatively new in Babile most of the focus has been on getting children off the streets, and providing them with food, clothing, and education. Attacking the problem of stigma is one the next challenges. For instance, we were informed this week of a decision made by some community members that get together to discuss HIV/AIDS related issues. They decided that the best thing to do with children who have the virus is to take them away from Babile because they believe the children will be killed if they remain in the community. We were all saddened by the severity of the stigma in Babile and distraught at the thought of subjecting these children to further trauma by shipping them away. The committee hasn't taken any measures to begin to remove HIV children and HFC is hoping to find an alternative before the committee begins the process.

The events of this week were quite heartbreaking for everyone on our trip. Yewoinshet and Jacqui have been doing this work for many years and have heard countless stories of poverty, disease, and desperation. It was clear by their distress that witnessing circumstances like those in Babile does not get easier with more exposure. On the other

hand they have also seen and created many changes and are able to see potential that I am just beginning to understand. Talking to them made it much easier for me to process my experiences and think positively about the future of Babile and Hope for Children. Already the work that HFC does is having a tremendous effect on the communities it works in and each individual within it. This is reflected in a quote by one of the children in an Addis Ababa group home. Earlier this year Jacqui interviewed several of our beneficiaries to see how they are doing. When she asked one particular six years old boy his age, he claimed that he is only four. He said, "I am only four because my life didn't start until I came to Hope for Children."