

*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*

As the number of HIV/AIDS infected people rises across the globe families and communities are forced to deal with the harsh effects of the disease. After the initial shock of finding out their status, the next step is to think about the people they will be leaving behind, most importantly their children. Many communities in Africa have come up with effective and culturally appropriate ways to provide for children who are orphaned by the virus. In Ethiopia, Hope for Children's model of sponsorship and group homes is one of the successful ways in which children can be cared for in their parents' absence. Instead of taking children away from their communities, HFC's sponsorship program (where each child is given monthly support from a designated sponsor in Ethiopia or abroad) allows them to live with their relatives, neighbors, friends, or remaining parents. When the children are left with no support they are placed in group homes (the size of a normal Ethiopian family) where they live with other children from similar backgrounds. In addition to the provision of daily necessities HFC also addresses psychosocial and emotional needs through various programs, activities, and education.

Even though these innovative projects exist and offer a solution to many of the problems communities face, many infected persons react to their status in desperate ways. One such instance occurred in Babile this summer. Babile is a small town in the Eastern Region of Ethiopia on the route from Harar to Jijiga. Its location makes the town susceptible to heavy truck traffic and military presence, and consequently, the people vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. Hope for Children has been operating in Babile since 2005 and has made great strides in the community. During HFC's first six months the HIV peer educators were able to reach nearly 3,000 individuals in the community and surrounding areas. People have now begun to talk about HIV and are slowly coming forward to announce their status, braving the wrath of community and the stigma that is attached to the virus. The children who were once on the street because their families could not support them are now in homes, going to school and have become role models within the community. Even though the future is brighter today than it was 18 months ago for positive persons in Babile, the inevitability of their death remains the same.

In early June, Hope for Children learned of one very desperate attempt to provide for the children in the community who are destined to become AIDS orphans: international adoption. An adoption agency representative from Europe approached positive members of the community about sending their children abroad. Given the current popularity of international adoption from Ethiopia to Europe and America this does not come as a surprise, but the particular conditions of this arrangement are shocking. In a matter of days several parents were persuaded to give their children away. In most cases just one of several children that was sent and the majority of them were over the age of five. Parents were told that their children would have a better life in a developed country and would have a chance at success.

During my last trip to Babile I noticed a big change within the community. In addition to the already underlying sadness from losing loved ones weekly to the virus, there is now a

hole where happy and healthy children once lived. Their absence is visible on the faces of each community member.

There are a few cases in which parents in the community were able to ask for their children back before they departed for Europe. One woman gave away her two children because she wanted the absolute best for them and was convinced that they would have no chance in life once she passed away. After her children left for Addis Ababa the woman could not bear to have them gone, no matter how much she feared for their future. After a week they returned to Babile and they live together again. When I asked her how she felt when they were away she said there was nothing left for her to live for and the virus was going to take her away. Even though their situation in Babile is difficult she is overjoyed that she was able to save her family.



(This photograph is of the woman in the story who gave her children up for adoption, but later begged for them to be returned to her in Babile.)

Hope for Children is strongly against what took place and in the months following has tried to rectify the situation. By talking to the community about the consequences of such actions and the trauma that is created when families and siblings are suddenly separated, they hope to prevent more children from being sent away. However, for those whose children are living with other families in Europe, nothing can be done to ease their pain.