

AFTER AIDS TOOK AWAY THEIR PARENTS



Meseret, 15, Besufekad, 11, and Tezerash Tilahun, 3, are orphans who live in Dire Dawa, a railroad town in eastern Ethiopia. Four years ago their father, who had been a guard at a pharmaceutical plant, died of AIDS. Their mother followed two years later. Left without any source of income, they were unable to pay the rent on their house and were forced to move in with a neighbour.

Two years ago Masresha Eshete, a teacher in Dire Dawa who had opened a center for orphans called the Masresha Maternity

Center, discovered the three siblings begging on the streets of Dire Dawa. She soon realized that their neighbour was using them for money, insisting that they go out and beg to earn their keep. Masresha arranged for them to leave and had them move in with another until she could find a more permanent home for them.

The children spent six weeks in a plastic covered makeshift hut while Masresha went searching for relatives with whom she could place them. Eventually Masresha found that they had a half-brother who lives with his wife in a two room home on the outskirts of Dire Dawa. The three children moved in with him, sleeping on straw mats on the floor of his tiny kitchen. It was not long before Masresha realized that this new situation was also untenable.

"The children spent around five months with their brother, but I saw that things were not good," Masresha said. "He is poor, and does not have steady work. He also drinks, and the children told me that he beat them. His wife made them work hard, and they had no time for school. Besufekad even ran away for three months. When we found him, he was working for a woman who sells tea in the town of Harar." (Harar is located approximately 55 kms south-east of Dire Dawa)

The Masresha Maternity Center is not an orphanage. Masresha believes that as much as possible children should grow up in an environment that they are familiar with, if possible with relatives or within the same neighborhood where they grew up. "The disruption in their lives from losing their parents is bad enough, putting them in an institution would be too unkind," she says. The center instead provides educational support (school fees, uniforms, books, etc.), clothing, supplementary feeding, counseling, tutorial sessions, and recreational facilities for orphaned children who live with family members, friends or neighbors of their deceased parents. Masresha decided to make an exception, however, in the case of the three children. Things came to a head when Masresha realized that their half-brother was making arrangements for Meseret to get married without her consent. Masresha packed up their few belongings and moved them into her own home where they have been living ever since.

"Their brother has been trying to get them back, however the children refuse to go to him," Masresha says. "The children fear that their half-brother will force them to split up. I have had to pull Meseret out of school, because we are afraid that her brother may attempt to have her kidnapped. Until she can be placed in a new school next year, in a different neighborhood, she is training to be a hairdresser.... Besufekad ran away again when he heard that his brother wanted them back. We found him sleeping with beggars outside a church in the middle of town."

The Masresha Maternity Center provides care and support for 35 orphans with assistance it receives from UNICEF through the Dire Dawa AIDS Secretariat. This number is down from a high of 40. Three of the departed orphans moved in with their older sister who lives in another town. The other two were sponsored by distant relatives and are now living in Djibouti.

"The assistance that we provide and the number of orphans that we are reaching is miniscule compared to those that need our help," declares Masresha. "We see new faces on the streets of the town, and hear more stories of children losing their parents to AIDS and being forced to drop out of school. I would love to be able to take care of all of them," said the teacher and mother of four, "but I have reached my limit and without additional support I cannot take on any more. I will try my best to raise these three together with my own children." Besufekad smiles and looks up at his older sister when he hears Masresha speak. The children are fortunate. They have found a loving family in a new home without having to split-up, which is not the case with all orphans. (Masresha made an exception for these three children, because she was unable to find a relative, neighbor or friend of their parents who could provide a suitable home for them.)

The situation in the town of Dire Dawa is symptomatic of conditions in other urban areas of Ethiopia. The HIV/AIDS epidemic is ravaging the country, resulting in alarming increases in the number of orphaned children. According to the Ministry of Health, there are an estimated one million orphans in Ethiopia today. That number is expected to double by 2014.

Care and Support for Orphans and Affected Families is one of the priority areas of the UNICEF HIV/AIDS programme in Ethiopia, along with Youth HIV/AIDS Prevention and Prevention of Mother-to-Child Transmission. UNICEF provides financial and technical support to AIDS secretariats established at the national and regional levels in response to the epidemic, who in turn support government, non-governmental and civil society organizations like the Masresha Maternity Center. The total HIV/AIDS programme budget for the period 2002-2006 is \$28 million, of which only \$6.7 million has been funded. An additional \$5.9 million is still needed to meet the funding requirements for the Care and Support for Orphans and Affected Families programme.

