



July 5, 2011

### Dear Family, Friends and Supporters!

Another school year has passed, on July 7<sup>th</sup> we will be handing out report cards and tell the parents of our children how proud we are of their little ones' accomplishments. There is some truly remarkable progress to be reported, especially in the grades: Genet, who only a year ago, at 6 years age, couldn't count beyond three and didn't know more than a handful of Amharic letters, now counts fluently to 100, reads stories and answers comprehension questions in writing. Haileleul, who only joined us a year ago and, at the beginning of grade 2, didn't know the Amharic alphabet at all, now reads and writes fluently. And Mihiret, who only a year and a half ago nearly died from a badly infected burn wound on her back, has become an outstanding student of Grade 1.

In the KG, I'm especially happy to report about Jony's progress: although he is still slow and rather quiet, his vocabulary and speaking ability have improved dramatically, he can count up to 3 and has learnt to read and write some of the Amharic letters. Consequently, and because he will be 8 this month and really wants to go to 'real' school, he will be promoted to Grade 1 next year. He might take some years there until he can master everything he is supposed to learn in the first grade, but it will be a challenge for him and encourage him to become more serious and less of a baby. For as cute as he is with his big eyes and baby-talk, sooner or later he'll have to leave our project and fend for himself, and the ultimate aim of our project is to make all our children as independent and self-reliant as possible.

In the past three months, Mr. Mangesha has taken over from Miss Aynalem, who is on maternity leave, as grade 2 teacher. Although he is still getting used to our method of teaching, he has been trying his best. He will be taking over next year's grade 1 class this September. In the afternoon creative period, when he teaches both grade classes together, he has encouraged the students to do

crocheting, and some of the youths have produced some rather large and pretty round pieces. If they continue like that, they'll soon be able to crochet sweaters for themselves!

The biggest challenge we've faced recently has been tuberculosis. Three of our children have contracted this very serious illness and are now on medication for it, and in order to prevent more children from catching it, we've pushed the hospital to provide TB prophylaxis for some of our children at least. The hospital is reluctant to give out the prophylaxis because it has to be taken without defaulting even once for 6 months, and their – as well as our – experience shows them that many patients will not be responsible enough to follow through the program. Especially children like Sara, who is not on anti-retrovirals yet and is therefore both unused to taking medication long-term and especially vulnerable to catching TB, therefore need close follow-up with their medication. Sara now actually comes to our social worker's house on weekends in order to take the TB prophylaxis, so that there will be no defaulting.

Bruk, who has been not well for quite some time, was finally diagnosed with TB in March. Before being transferred to a hospital in Awassa, 25 km from Shashamane, he had lost a lot of weight and all his appetite, and the usually active and happy student had become very quiet and tired. He is now on both TB medication and anti-retrovirals, and although his body is improving, he worries a lot about his health and his skin condition, which has not improved with the initiation of ART. When I returned from abroad in May, I found him sitting in class listlessly, wrapped in layers and layers of clothes in order to hide the rash that covers his face and arms, and generally very depressed. I spent a whole day with him in the garden, and then some more time the next day and the one after that, trying to make him unfurl from the tight knot into which he had curled himself; we did some exercise together, I then gave him a bath and put oil on his skin, encouraged him to let some air and sun get to it. We did some guided meditation where I told him about the angels of air, sun, earth and water who bring health and well-being, and then I took him to town to buy some new (second-hand) clothes for him and have a juice. I can understand his problem: every person we met asked about his skin condition, what is this, won't it go away, is it catching? All in front of the boy, who would have wrapped himself in a tight cocoon again if I hadn't held his hand and told everyone who talked to shut up and mind their own business. Growing up in Europe, I was taught not to stare at people who are physically different from others; here in Ethiopia, people don't seem to realize, until told so directly, that a 10 year old boy will feel bad if his 'abnormalities' are pointed at constantly. Although much more work needs to

be done, I was very glad to see that after only a day of intensive care, Bruk walked out the school with his head high and his shoulders straight and a smile on his face.

Aschalew, the boy who is infected with Hepatitis B, spent five months, from February until June, in my house. As his liver functions had deteriorated, we had to put him on a fat free diet, which would have been impossible to ensure if he had stayed at home. Also, we gave him Chinese herbal medicine, which did not cure him from the Hepatitis virus, but restored his liver to normal functioning level. When he went back home, he asked for a toothbrush and toothpaste, and for the last week at least he has kept up washing himself every night and putting on fresh clothes in the morning. We had a serious talk with his father, advising him to take his fatherly responsibilities more seriously, so that the boy would not return to his former completely neglected and dirty state.

After a period of 3 months without a drop of water in the pipes, during which time we had to travel a couple of kilometers daily to fetch water from another part of town, our area was finally given pipe water once more. It is full of chlorine and still not very safe for drinking, but, as the saying goes, 'You miss the water (even polluted chemicalized water) when the well runs dry'. This simple blessing enabled us to start planting up the yard once again; with the cooperation of the 'Urban Gardening' project funded by USAID, we had a drip irrigation system installed and got a 5,000 liter tank for storing water. The system wants much improvement still – for example, the containers that feed the drip irrigation system are so far away from the tank that we need to buy a pump to get the water there, unless we want to continue carrying buckets all across the yard – but eventually, especially with the help of the rains which came, finally, in mid March, we've got everything growing again. At the present we harvest lettuce and Swiss chards, but courgettes, string beans and all types of cabbage plants are catching quickly. We've once again had to battle the birds, which, unless prevented, would gobble up every last leaf of the young plants; we've now started to build regular frames for nets that cover the vegetable beds. I've put much sweat and work into the gardening, and am happy to see things growing at last.

In the last three months I've been absent from the project for quite some time. In late March, the workload of administering the project single-handedly finally got too much for me, and I had to go away, take some rest and take stock. At a board meeting in May, we decided that a manager needs to be hired to reduced the stress on me; we advertised for the position in early June and are now getting

ready to interview the short-listed applicants. Since the position of manager is quite important, and the project could suffer a lot if the person is not committed and capable, we will take our time and select very carefully. As for myself, I'll retain the position of school director, produce teaching materials and fundraise for the project. This way, I hope to be of service to the project for a long time without burning out again.

**With heartfelt greetings,**

Isheba Tafari