



October 3, 2011

Dear Family, Friends and Supporters!

The last three months were taken up with preparing for the new school year, which started in September. Our main problem was that we didn't have a room for grade 3 within the house. So we decided to renovate the 'old house', a wooden house in our compound that had been built over 40 years ago by a Jamaican couple who repatriated to Ethiopia, the parents of the current owner. After initial problems, we found a carpenter who fixed up the building very nicely from the inside; the outside will have to be painted in the dry season, after the wood has properly dried out. Both I and the children are very happy with the result; the wooden floor and plywood wall covering give the room a homely feeling. The furniture is, as per usual, a bit late; we are supposed to be able to pick it up in a few days' time, and then our grade 3 children will be comfortable.

Miss Aynalem has returned from maternity leave and taken over her class once again. Mr. Tullu is also teaching his own class, now grade 2, and for grade 1 we have found Mr. Tsegeye, a sociology graduate who is also a teacher at a local Ethiopian Orthodox Church. He treats the children very lovingly and I hope that he will be able to guide them in their moral development, as well as teach them the academic skills they need.

The new grade 1 class consists of 15 students, of whom 14 graduated from our own KG. The 15th girl, Bethlehem, was one of the original 10 children when we started our project in 2008, but her mother had taken her out of the project to marry a man who lived in another town after only a few months with us. Now the mother came back to us, asking us to once again accept her child in the project. I was shocked to see the condition of the child: she is severely malnourished, and although she is already 10 years old, in all those years away from us she didn't even complete grade 1. The last half year she had spent completely out of school, sitting at home. The mother has a next child now, who is not infected, and had neglected her firstborn terribly. She yet has to learn the

Amharic alphabet properly, but she is so happy to be back in school and after only a few days began to play and laugh with the other children.

Two more children who had left our project have returned: Freamboni, whose mother is most concerned that her own and the child's HIV status should remain a secret, has been sick more or less constantly since he left the project. The mother even took him out of hospital when he was supposed to receive treatment there. Our social worker Misa, using all her persuasive powers, has finally managed to convince the mother to let the child go to school. And Rediet, who had joined another school, was never happy there and was asking her father so many times to return to our school that he finally relented. She has joined grade 2 and is happy to be reunited with her best friend Helen and the other children.

It really seems that one of the major challenges of this project will be to keep the children in school for a prolonged period of time. Only a few weeks ago we had to go searching for Ammanuel, who had been missing from school for no apparent reason for two weeks. His grandmother finally came; she said that the boy has recently lost his mother, who lived in Dubai. She used to call him and send him clothes, and now he is asking the grandmother why he is not getting any anymore. Then he says, unless he gets new shoes, he doesn't want to go to school, and the grandmother, who is uneducated and grieving over the loss of her third child to AIDS, says I don't have money, leave me alone. So Ammanuel starts to cry and cry until he gets sick. She concluded that it might be better if he didn't come to school. Misa and I spent hours convincing her that if the boy sits at home thinking about his dead mother, he will only get more depressed. At school he is happy and doing good in grade 1. We also tried to explain to her that although the child is HIV positive, he can live for a long time and will need a proper education in order to get on in his life. We offered the grandmother counseling sessions with her and the child, in order to help them overcome the problems at home, but she doesn't seem willing to come. But at least Ammanuel is still in school.

On the academic side, one of my main ambitions this year is to improve the sports and aesthetics lessons. I've developed lesson plans and am trying to help the teachers implement them. The previous approach was to let the children do very easy things repetitively; the new schedule provides new challenges at regular intervals, and the children are so far responding well to it. In sports the children have started with simple gymnastics (forward rolls, cartwheels, handstands, headstands and so on) and will continue to track and field activities, rope jumping, and finally exercises on apparatus such as balance beam and bar,

which we are planning to prepare for them this year. In music lessons, we want to teach them some drumming and a bit of xylophone; in art they will have a set program of activities including colouring, drawing, painting, paper cutting and papier-maché; and in handicraft class they will learn simple embroidery techniques on a plastic grid, weaving on a handloom, sewing bags or stuffed animals, and crocheting. The aesthetics class will also contain weekly story-reading and story-telling periods, during which we plan to invite some local story tellers to share their wealth of oral tradition, and we'd like the children to perform two plays, one in each semester. Finally, the children will be given little patches in the garden on which they can practice planting and weeding, watering and harvesting their own vegetables.

This being an ambitious program, it has become all the more important that we find a good manager who can relieve me from my administrative duties and enable me to work together with the teachers more intensively. Having tried one person, who proved herself either incapable or unwilling to do the work expected of her, we have just hired another manager, Mr. Rameto, hoping that he will provide the support needed. We also had to hire another cleaner, the kitchen personnel having complained of chronic overloading. And we have managed to convince the parents, or at least most of them, to help a bit with the garden work. So with all this staff and help, we should be ready for the new school year.

I would like to once again thank our faithful donors for their continuous support of our project. Without them, this project would never have become a reality. Only a few weeks ago, we finally got a contribution from a funding agency as well. I had the chance to meet the husband of the Austrian ambassador in Ethiopia at a Rastafari symposium in Addis Ababa last March. When I told him about Yawenta Children's Center, he kindly invited our organization to apply for funding from the Ambassadors and Heads of Mission Spouses and Diplomatic Spouses Group, of which he is a member. I finally managed to hand in a proposal, and after an on-site visit by five members of the group, who had come specifically from Addis Ababa to see our work, we were granted over 34,000 birr (about 1,400 Euros or 2,000 US dollars) for the furniture for grade three, a second stove for the kitchen, a computer and printer for the office, additional playground equipment and a next large water tank to help us go through the dry season. Now all these things have to be bought...

With heartfelt greetings,

Isheba Tafari