

Little Girls Lost

They're young girls facing hardships that most women will never encounter in their lives. *Sara Mohazzebi* travels to Axum, Ethiopia, and discovers the children who never had a childhood

She walked for three days. After losing her father four years earlier and her mother to AIDS four days ago, Bizraf has left the only home she's ever known. Her dying mother urged her to walk to the northern Ethiopian city of Axum, where an uncle lives and might possibly be able to take care of her. So Bizraf, only nine years old and without any family or any money, begins to walk. With a cross around her neck and a safety pin to remove any splinters from her feet, she has nothing but the clothes on her body and the memories of a family that no longer exists. She spends her nights sleeping in tree trunks and cleans a woman's toilet along the way in order to have enough money to eat. When she finally makes it to Axum, she has the impossible task of finding an uncle she has never seen. She enters a local hairdressers' shop and asks if anyone knows of her uncle. Rather than





helping her, the ladies at the salon jump at her. Street kids and orphans are common, a part of everyday life in Axum. Bizraf bursts into tears. Luckily for her, Claire*, a U.N. case worker, is getting her hair done at the salon and immediately thinks to herself that street kids don't cry that easily. Claire doesn't speak Bizraf's language of Tigrinya but she decides to take Bizraf to lunch and help her find her uncle or some form of shelter at the very least.

Across town, the school bells at Abraha Wa Asbaha Elementary School are ringing. Genet, 13 years old and one of the school's best students, is rushing to class. Genet, like many girls in Axum, has an exhausting schedule. She works during the day, taking care of her young sisters and preparing meals for her family while her mother works in the local market. In the afternoons, she attends school. The class rooms are packed with close to 2,500 children; they lack tables and

chairs, the girls' uniforms are ripped and thin and they cannot afford to replace them. Students often share supplies because they are so limited, there is no water or toilets at the school, and meals are not provided. But Genet is thankful for the opportunity to even attend. A good education is her only hope for a better life and to break the cycle of poverty that runs rampant through her city and her country. "I dream of going to university and becoming a doctor so that I can find the cure for HIV/AIDS, the worst thing that has ever happened to our world. And if I don't become a doctor, I must at least become a scientist. I must do something", says Genet. She proudly shows off her report cards from the



past six years and the hope and determination in her eyes is resilient. She confesses that she used to be the best student in her class but it's difficult to juggle both her duties at home and her schoolwork and is now the third best in her grade.

Nevertheless, Genet is a rarity among most girls in

Axum. She has her family, food, shelter, and a sense of hope. Due to a ravaging 30-year war against Eritrea, several devastating water shortages, and the relentless spread of HIV/AIDS, the children of Axum live a bleak existence.

It is ironic that for a city that was once the capital of the Axumite Kingdom and is famed as the birthplace of the Queen of Sheba, it is now a city suffering from catastrophic poverty. In many ways, it's as if time has stood still in Axum and it is permanently stuck

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in the past. With its historical background, Axum is also a very religious city. Almost three quarters of its 47,000 population are Christian and members of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. The widespread Christian faith contributes to a lack of birth control being practised within the community. Every child born is seen as a "child of God" and thus, the population continues to grow, HIV/AIDS continues to spread, and more children are left to face a difficult life on their own.

It has reached a point where families, struggling to take care of their children and out of sheer desperation, would rather place them in orphanages than see them go without food at home. In Axum, a child is regarded as fortunate should they occupy one of the 350 spots at St. Yared's Childcare Centre, the only



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orphanage in the city. When they are there, parents can at least rest assured that their child will be fed, have clothing, and a slightly more optimistic future.

Tibba is 12 years old and has been at St. Yared's since she was three, when she lost both of her parents. Smart, direct and proactive, Tibba has the presence of a middle-aged woman. She has just spent the afternoon hand-washing the clothes of many of the girls at the orphanage. For Tibba, her fellow orphans are family, the only source of comfort and entertainment that she has. "This is my home, my only home," she states. She admits that she is often bored but her life at the orphanage is far better than the life of a street kid.

And yet, life on the streets is never far from their innocent minds, for once they turn 18 they must leave St. Yareds. But where do these children go? What kind of life will they lead? Without families, they have nowhere to turn and must quickly figure out a way to

survive. Very few of them are good students and unless they possess marketable technical skills such as basket weaving or hairdressing, they'll become adults on the street, once again begging for food to put in their stomachs and clothes to put on their backs.

Almas, 17, is dedicated to breaking the cycle. While the other orphans head straight to St. Yared's after school, she is working in exchange for computer classes. "I want to become a journalist, to tell the stories of my people, to see the world," she says. "I will do anything to get there." Almas knows it will be an uphill struggle but she can't imagine a life where nothing changes, where her future children's fate is not better than hers.

As the sun begins to set in Axum, Harego Ingers, 38,

a native of Axum but now a resident of Dubai, says goodbye to the children of St. Yared's. Harego, along with her two friends Karen Spitteri and Casselle Sheriff, is the founder of the Axum-Africa Project. She has spent the past week rallying to get a well built at the orphanage and deciding which students to finance with scholarships to the school.

"I couldn't believe what I was seeing when I visited the school," she says. "Students were sitting on top of each other. They were sharing pencils and paper. Some classrooms had rocks for chairs. The children had nowhere to go to the bathroom so they just went outside."

Last year, the three women provided the school with 2,500 book bags and school supplies and their plans for the future include running water and toilets

for the school and housing blocks for the orphanage. Harego dreams of one day having a meal provided for each of the students at the school - a simple but extremely effective way of achieving the twin objectives of ensuring they receive adequate nutrition and equipping them with an education.

Harego didn't set out to be the local city hero. On a family vacation to show her Swedish husband and children her Ethiopian roots, she was shocked to find that nothing had changed and in many ways had gotten worse since she moved 25 years ago. Haunted by what she had seen, the Axum-Africa Project

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was born and each year makes significant contributions to the school and orphanage.

"I am reminded of how fortunate I am every time I go to Axum," she says. "These girls, these women, lead such hard lives. The girls never have time to play, to have time to themselves. They are always working and helping their families. Always".

But Harego's work is not done for the day. As she heads back to the hotel, she sets out to find out the fate of Bizraf. After running into Bizraf and Clare in the dining hall at the hotel earlier, Harego spent the morning taking care of the young girl. She took Bizraf to have her infected eye checked out at the eye clinic, to purchase some clothes to replace the rags that she had arrived in, and to have a proper lunch.

More importantly, Harego has managed to secure her a valuable spot at the orphanage. But during her afternoon visits to the school and the orphanage, a man who claims to be Bizraf's uncle has shown up. The father of three and a farmer, Bizraf's "uncle" can barely manage to provide for his own family. The young girl has no way of recognising or identifying him, as she has never met him before. The UN case workers and the hotel staff try to convince the

uncle that Bizraf will have a better life at the orphanage and that he can visit her at any point. Her uncle refuses and with the help of a police officer, Bizraf is forced to leave with him.

The hotel staff agrees that she will most likely be forced to become a worker on his farm and will never attend school. They hope that she is not physically or sexually abused while she's with him. It's disheartening and downright heartbreaking for a little girl who has survived so much, to be denied the opportunity for a better life, a chance at an education. After an unlucky childhood filled with disease and death, Bizraf simply had only one lucky morning and afternoon to enjoy.

The school day has ended and Genet is heading home to help her mother prepare dinner. Her plastic flip-flops are falling apart and her uniform has a few tears in it. She says that she is "thankful for Harego because she did not forget about her people. She cares enough to come back and to make things better". Genet sets out and begins the walk home. Unlike Bizraf, she will not have to walk for three days alone but she definitely has a long journey ahead of her.

To help or learn more about the children of Axum, please visit the website www.axum-africa.com or call (04) 3904016. The Axum-Africa Project is planning on returning to Axum in late 2007.

**Names have been changed to protect the identity of certain individuals.*

