

Open Arms and Huge Smiles!



I first visited Kidane Mehret Children's Home in February 2003 when my brother and sister were adopted from there at just 3 months old. As they became a part of our family, they left their native country of Ethiopia and began a new life in the west of Ireland. Although they spent a small portion of their lives in Ethiopia, we were determined that one day we would return to Kidane Mehret with them. Last August, we made the journey together, although the two tiny babies that had left 12 years before were now teenagers, anxious to see where their lives had begun. We also wanted to bring something back to Kidane Mehret having witnessed the care, love and affection that the children experience here.





Kidane Mehret is a home for orphaned and abandoned children in the bustling city of Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Founded in 1933, Kidane Mehret caters for 150 children from new-borns to 16 years. Sister Lutgarda, a Maltese nun has been the director of Kidane Mehret for many years and is a stalwart figure at the helm. Kidane Mehret's mission statement is to love, care, understand and educate children of different ages, tribes and religions. This is something that is evident throughout the home as the children welcome visitors and volunteers with open arms and huge smiles.

For children who are not adopted, they are assisted in commencing and continuing their education with the hope that most will enter university to further their studies. This is in an attempt to give these children a prosperous and positive future. Education is an integral part of the home and our donations of books and school equipment were greatly appreciated. Kidane Mehret has its own school that the children attend. At present, Sister

Lutgarda is overseeing the conversion of a shed into a study/computer room for the older children where they can concentrate away from the distraction of the younger children. I was delighted that a large portion of my donation through the Solidarity Fund would go directly towards this project.

There are 40 people working in Kidane Mehret, many of whom are single mothers. The home assists these single mothers so that they can continue to care for their own children. The home also relies on volunteers who come from different parts of the world to offer their support, services, love and care to the children.



Most of our time spent in Kidane Mehret was with the children. Having been to Addis Ababa before, we were aware that we would be limited with what we could purchase there. We brought clothes, games, puzzles, bubbles, stickers, colouring books, crayons, finger puppets, story books, face paints, sweets, footballs, tennis balls and many other toys from Ireland. The excited screams and

shrieks of the children when they laid their eyes on these donations was unforgettable and something that will stay with us forever. The children hugged and squeezed us expressing their gratitude, ecstatic with their new toys and games.



While the children are most fortunate in the care they receive in Kidane Mehret, their living arrangements are basic. The children sleep in dorms with up to twenty children of the same age. The home has noted a significant increase in the number of children living there with special needs, specifically autism. However, Kidane Mehret endeavours to meet the needs of these children as best they can. As funding is extremely limited, so is their food budget with oats and porridge forming a large portion of the children's diet. One

afternoon that we visited, the children were receiving a treat of one plain biscuit each while watching a video of "Shaun the Sheep". This was for all children from the ages of 6 to 16 but they were all delighted with this Tuesday ritual. The children aged 3-5 were given half a banana as an afternoon snack while 11 of them played with one large ball. Needless to say, the sweets and lollipops that we brought them were received with immense delight.

When we were not with the children of this age, we spent the remainder of our time with the babies. There were 15 babies from 3 months to 2 years and one girl aged 14 with hydrocephalus. Sister Lutgarda referred to her as the "miracle child" owing to the prognosis she received when she



came to Kidane Mehret as a baby. An American couple had hoped to adopt her a number of years before but sadly her doctor could not sanction her to fly owing to her condition. The babies in this room love to be held, cuddled and interacted with and cried only when we had to return them to their cots. 15 babies create quite a lot of noise but most slept oblivious to the din around them. Owing to the limited number of workers in Kidane Mehret, the babies remain in their cots for most of the day unless they are being fed or changed.

Kidane Mehret is highly regarded as a centre of love, care and nurture in Addis Ababa despite its limited resources. While we might view their lives as deprived or underprivileged, they are undoubtedly happy and content. The home relies on donations and contributions and I am eternally grateful to the INTO for selecting me as a recipient of the Solidarity Fund so that I could make a difference to the lives of these children. Thank you also to Jamie in O' Brien Press for the

extremely generous donation of a multitude of books for the school and the home that were so gratefully received.



While this return trip to Addis Ababa was significant and memorable for my family and I, our positive experience was heightened by the donation made by the INTO for the home which is something I will forever remember.

Ethiopia is a country with growing tourism that has become highly accessible from Ireland owing to the direct flights operated from Dublin to Addis Ababa twice weekly. The people are gracious, warm and friendly. Ethiopia is fast becoming one of Africa's most popular tourist attractions and I would highly recommend it to anyone seeking an alternate experience.

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