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In need of love and respect

By Mariam Belay

Out there on the streets, it is a world where only the fittest of the fittest will survive. When Samuel Hailu fled his hometown, Gondar, and came to Addis, he joined a group of street children afraid of being lonely. But they always chased him away every time they were eating 'Bule' (leftovers of food from restaurants and garbage). For them, he was just an outsider. "I didn't know anyone; I had no friends," he recalls. He knew the only way to survive was to find a job, but, that was impossible because even menial jobs such as providing change for mini-bus conductors on the street requires an ID.

Samuel left his home, as his mother, a widow, could no longer provide for her five children with the meager income she gets from selling petty items. Samuel, her youngest son, was hot-tempered and used to quarrel with his teachers, in the place where he was receiving informal education. "I did not have patience. I used to rip off my books and walk out of the class," he said smiling. "But I'm calm now."

When he could no longer deal with the situation at home, he went to the nearest town, Bahir Dar, where he earned some money by washing bicycles. However, he did not get more than one birr a day, and eventually came to Addis to look for a better opportunity.

Unlike Samuel, what drove Dereje Berhanu, 17, to the streets was his lust for education. When he was still a child, a relative took him from his mother by promising to send him to school. His mother did not hesitate because she believed that education was the best she could give her child. However, soon afterwards, Dereje found himself performing household chores rather than going to school. His relative made sure that he did not leave the house. One day, he told her he was sick and took to bed waiting for her to leave the house. When she did, he did not waste time to hit the road; and he never looked back. He came to Addis and found children, sleeping on the streets. He started to live with them until one day he met people from Hope for Children in Ethiopia, a relief and development association.

Now both Samuel and Dereje are receiving help from the association and striving to have a better life. Samuel is in the 6th grade and Dereje is waiting to start school soon. Dereje has not seen his family since he left home and says he doesn't want to until he "becomes somebody".

Hope for Children is now working with a similar association in Germany: Dignity for Children. On Wednesday and Friday, the associations organized a charity concert "Building a Bridge with Music". The Berliner Cellharmoniker, founding members of Dignity for Children, played together with the Gospel Choir SoG and music students from the Addis Ababa University. On Wednesday, the concert was held at Hilton Addis and on Friday at the German Church in Sidist Kilo. The prices for a tickets were 150 and 50 birr, respectively. The money will go to one of the programs that Hope is running, either the prevention, which is protecting children before they come out to the street or the latter phase, assisting them with living and education.

“For the prevention program, we conduct home-to-home visit, but to help children on the street, we need to go out and see how they live, make them friends and analyze their situation,” Gizachew Ayka, chairperson of Hope for Children in Ethiopia, said. “We will have a meeting decide to which program the money would go to.”

Anna Lena Schmidt, first chairwoman of Dignity for Children, came to Ethiopia four years ago while doing a field study, as a Cultural Anthropologist. After seeing the hardship children were going through, she was determined to come back and help. Dignity for Children has already organized four charity concerts in Germany and has worked in Peru and Afghanistan as well.

“I’ve written a thesis on human rights and specialized in human rights of street children. I have been analyzing the situation of Ethiopia for a long time,” she said, adding that the issue is complex and has to do with history, society, economics and international relations. “Many actions have to be taken from different aspects. Only then can it be changed.”

Anna said that from her personal experience and that through Hope, her observation was that street children do not only lack food or clothing. “Above all, they lack care, family and love. They feel like they are treated by the society like garbage,” she said. “Street children have special rights and deserve respect.”

Gizachew believes that the problem is enormous and more people need to engage in such charity activities to make a difference. “These children are productive citizens. We only need to show them the way,” he concludes.

(The names of the two children are fictitious)

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