

# Our Journey to Ethiopia.

By Sharon Sommers



For each one of us, our life is a journey. Often a part of our journey is to strive to reach the goals we have set before us, and therefore the journey for each of us is different. The roads will have twists and turns, mixed with emotions, filled with struggles and joys. Over 25 years ago, my husband Barry and I started on a new journey. We felt a strong pull to become involved with missions. We searched and investigated our options but many of them involved a full time training period, and/or a large financial obligation. With having small children and still trying to make a living, these options were out of reach for us and we couldn't find the right organization that fit our situation. Over the years we continued to hold the passion in our hearts always looking for the right opportunity. In February 2009, 18 months ago, we were introduced to Blessing the Children International through our friends. After praying and searching, we both felt strongly that this was what we had been looking for. Canada was in the middle of a recession and as a result my husband's work had nearly come to a stop, so my mind would at times panic thinking that "Surely this was not the time". I remember praying that if God wanted us to get involved now - at this time, then I needed Him to show me by creating in my heart a passion for Ethiopia. Within days, I was sobbing for the children and those struggling to exist in poverty stricken Ethiopia. I could not contain my grief. It was overwhelming. It was not something I could have even remotely mustered up. From that point on I knew where I needed to give my energies. Barry also was getting the same message and so together with our hearts in unity, we got behind the Canadian founders, Rick and Sheila Lamb, and worked hard to form a Registered Charitable Organization, "Blessing the Children Canada". It has been an 18 month journey for us, from knowing where we needed to go to physically getting to Ethiopia. God graciously laid it on people's hearts and we have wonderful supporters who gave of their funds and their prayers to make it possible for us to get here.

Travelling abroad even for a vacation is an adventure in itself, but travelling abroad and going to a remote poverty stricken country is a heart stirring eye opener. We were warned of a possible culture shock. We felt we had been as prepared as we possibly could have been, but no one could have possibly prepared us to describe the feeling we had when we got off that aircraft. After the months of ups and downs in getting us here, we were finally seeing a dream coming to reality. "Hmm.." "so this is what Africa smells like". It wasn't repulsive, it was just different. What was it? Was it the berbere, (spice), or the different grasses and foliage? Whatever it was it was unique and welcoming to us. We were here! Instantly from leaving the airport we were introduced to the culture. Although Addis is the capital city, it did not even come close to resembling a city as we know it. Large buildings by their standards, under construction held make shift scaffolding made out of eucalyptuses tree poles holding up the not yet completed structures. We watched as buckets of concrete were being pulled up by a pulley system as they worked to get the concrete to the 3<sup>rd</sup> level. Down the road we watched small plots

of land being plowed by a hand-plow and a team of oxen. We saw a lone man walking up and down the field with a sack of seed and scattering it in his path as he seeded his tiff (grain) crop. It was like walking back in time by 60 years.



The streets were flooded with many people, oxen, donkeys, goats, horse carts, taxi vans, Bajaj, (a motorized bike with a small cab which holds 5 people), and the occasional bus. Reality revealed a small part of what we had expected but the feeling and the emotion which accompanied the visual left an ache in our hearts. In visiting the 4 churches that we work with, we found that we could not have been prepared for the level community spirit and the hospitality of the people. They welcomed us with open arms and it did not take long for us to feel like we belonged.

Our first home visit with one of the families really opened our eyes to the common yet extreme level of poverty. Again we had been told what to expect but no one can prepare you for the emotional upheaval that comes with sitting in a one room, dirt floor, authentic mud hut, approx 6 x 8 which many families, as many times of 4 or more, call home. How can I ask them, “How can I help”? How can I ask them, “is there anything that you need”? They have nothing! Where do they begin to tell you what they need? One little 8” diameter charcoal stove with a single banged up pot, sits off to the side of a single bed in the tiny room. A small rough wooden box holds all of their belongings. What can I say that will make a difference? The needs are so obvious. How can I discern which need is the most pressing right now when everywhere I look the lack is so overwhelming? My mind drifts back to our home. Over the years, how could I have possibly been so self absorbed and have been so particular about just the right color match, or brand name? I am suddenly more than willing to change and make a personal commitment to adjust my thinking, for when it all comes down to it, does it really matter? I look back to the mom who is distraught by her sick son. He has had vomiting and diarrhea for 10 days, I analyze, most likely due to the water. The child lays listless beside her, very obviously dehydrated. Her face is stricken with worry. We do only what we can do. Our team of 4, pray for him, and then run to a little corner store and buy bottled water and a little fruit. “Give him water but only bottled water, and lots of it”, I instruct her. I tell her how many bottles he needs to drink as I assure her that we are coming back in 2 days to check on him, and with that I find I need to force myself walk away. My heart is broken as I think of this mother and her sick child. In Canada I would have ran down to the pharmacy and picked up a bottle of electrolytes and/or other medication to ease the discomfort of little 2 year old “Emmanuel”. Here in Ethiopia, we give him bottled water and a heart filled with prayer. Only God will be able to change the life of this desperately ill child. The mother later told us later that the 6 year old sister tried to console her that night at

midnight as she wept for her baby thinking that he was so ill he was going to die. Ferehiwot, the sister told her mother, “don’t weep, God will make him well and He will send help”. Because of the BCC program and the generosity of this child’s sponsor, she has been introduced to Jesus Christ and His power to heal. I make a mental note: her sponsor needs to know what a difference they have made in this situation. They have made it possible for this child and her family to hear the Good News of Jesus Christ! God is faithful and does hear our prayers and comes through for us! Two days later as promised, we go back to check on him. He is much better! The mother shows us that the child has drank 4 liters of bottled water in 2 days. He has not yet eaten but he now has a smile on his face as he reaches for Barry and climbs up on his lap and snuggles into his shoulder. God was faithful! What message did we bring to the mother? We brought the message of Jesus Christ that in our desperate times of struggle we can lean on Him. He gives wisdom to those that ask for it and has the power to heal.

Ferehiwot, Emmanuel and Abi

2 days before this photo, Emmanuel’s Mom did not think he was going to live- today he is very alive and well!



Every day we visit similar situations. There is always a need. There are always those craving a hug, an encouraging word, and a prayer. It is not possible for me to tell you all of the stories of all the visits but 2 weeks later on another day, and another visit, Barry and I trudge up a steep muddy hill beside a Social worker, in search of the home of another child in the BCC program. We are going to visit sweet little Selam and her mother. After 15 minutes we arrive to the walled compound and find within a resemblance of row housing. Each house has a common wall with another. The house exists as the typical authentic mud hut with a metal roof and a scrap of sheet metal serving the purpose of a door, which hangs awkwardly on makeshift hinges. This hut holds a 42” bed leaving a 30” space to where a rustic little cupboard sits against the opposite wall. The length of the room is the length of the bed. A tiny cardboard box approximately, 9” x 11” x 10” high, holds their clothes. I sit on a small wooden box that holds their food staples, sugar, oil, flour, pasta and tea. This Mom pays \$100.00 birr which is at least half her hard earned income for this tiny windowless room. In the corner of the room hangs one single 10 w light bulb and beneath it in the mud wall, sits a make shift switch. Outside the goats bleat and rustle as they poke their heads in the door. A rooster crows nearby. The mother is so happy that we came. Soon after her Amharic greeting and the interpretation, she lifts a small tray and grabs a couple of birr and runs to a nearby corner shop to buy fresh buns to serve to us with tea. My heart is stirred. This small household would not be able to survive on the little that mom can make by washing others laundry by hand. I see the basin and I picture her fragile body stooped, scrubbing and wringing out laundry to earn a tiny bit of money in her struggle to survive. Then I smile as I think of the Blessing the Children program. We have been able to help her! Before tea she goes to the small cabinet and takes out the HIV medication

for herself and her daughter. With a new measure of gratefulness I am thankful for the child's sponsor that enables this family to be treated for their possible terminal illness. What would happen to this family without the Blessing the Children program? What would happen if this sweet tiny girl didn't have a sponsor? As the Amharic chatter continues between the social worker and the mother, I ponder, "Are we giving enough information to the sponsors so that they really know how valuable they are"? Do they know that they really do make a difference"? I make a mental note that I personally will make great effort in trying to give the sponsor a mental picture of the fine thread of survival they hold between them and their child and the child's family. The \$30.00 a month that they give is such a minimal amount in our culture but it literally means life or death to this family. It means that this child receives medical care, will get an above standard education. She will get food, clothing, but above all will get teaching and the message of Jesus Christ and His power. Again we have the privilege of praying with them, and soon find it time to leave. We walk out of the compound aware that we are conspicuous with our light hair and skin, and as a result draw many children around us. I hand out peppermints and take their picture. They crowd around my digital camera and laugh as they see themselves in the digital frame. It sure doesn't take much to make their day. The difference between Selam, and the other children in her neighborhood not in the program is disturbing to me. They wear very tattered clothing and long for love as they snuggle their dirty little bodies close to mine. I hug them as my heart cries, "oh God, enable us to reach more of the helpless children. Speak through us, let our voices reach the ears and the hearts of men and women across our nation and move them to awareness and compassion".



Selam and her mother

Our days are very full here. Our goal everyday is to include the message of unconditional love. God is not respecter of persons. He loves us all regardless of our color, race, country origin, status or economic situation. God has called us all to take this message to everyone. You may not be able to come to Ethiopia but in helping others to go and in giving resources to help the poorest of the poor in another world so different from our own, you too will receive a reward. God has called us to be His hands and His feet to the nations. We are to reach out to the poor, the orphans and widows and to those without hope. James 1:27

The message we give to them is: love, hope for a better future and the message of God's promise of Eternal life for all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. So because my heart compels me, tomorrow I will rise with the sun, pray, put on my shoes grab my back pack

and go again with this message whether it is through the tangible or with my voice. I will continue to give the life changing message that God does make the difference.