

Sheltering street children

Before starting her nursing degree, Jenna Hoyt spent a summer volunteering at an AIDS hospice in Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. “I was completely shocked by what I saw,” she recalls.

On every corner of the ancient city was a young boy begging or a tiny girl selling sticks of gum. Children were lying on cardboard in doorways and scavenging the garbage for food. Thousands upon thousands of children were living on the street. Hoyt learned many had been orphaned by AIDS. She learned that the children stay awake all night, ready to run from people who want to beat or rape them.

It was 2003, and Hoyt had become fast friends with two young Ethiopian men wanting to help the children. In 2006, they founded Little Voice Foundation and opened a home for 30 orphaned or abandoned children, aged six to 13.

Today, Hoyt, BScN OT8, doesn't practise nursing in a traditional way. But through the home, Hoyt says she draws from what she learned at U of T every day. “At the Faculty of Nursing, I learned to look at communities and see their strengths, not their weaknesses. I learned to ask people what they need, not to tell them what I think they need. I learned to treat each individual as a member of family, a community, a society and a culture. I learned to rely on my judgment and to listen more than I speak.” Hoyt, 29, shares a day in her life.

7:30 a.m. The sun tumbles through my open window and wakes me up. In January, the weather in Addis is beautiful—it's in the 20s almost every day. I put on my jeans, T-shirt and flip-flops and walk to a café for a macchiato (coffee with steamed milk) and slice of banana bread.

9:00 a.m. The lobby of a nearby hotel has free wireless, so I go sit on a couch, turn on my laptop and email the article I've written for the Little Voice online newsletter. I want to keep our supporters in Canada and abroad informed of our work.

9:15 a.m. I buy the paper to check the houses for sale. Since opening the home for street children in 2006, we've been renting and had to move three times. Not only is constantly moving hard on the children, we need more space. In our current home, 12 girls share one bedroom! Today, there are no houses listed that we can afford.

9:30 a.m. I'm off to visit a family affected by HIV/AIDS and TB that our foundation sponsors. I knock on the door and enter the one-room house. There's a mattress on the floor, pictures of Jesus on the walls and a few kitchen materials in a corner. I sit on the mattress, and the mother tells me how she mixes animal dung and charcoal to sell as fuel. When she tells me her children did well on their school exams, she smiles ear to ear.

11:00 a.m. The foundation also funds two primary schools, giving 250 kids an opportunity they otherwise wouldn't have—to get a Grade 4 education. I meet with Little Voice Academy's director to discuss extending the school to Grade 8.



Alumna Jenna Hoyt (far right, second row) and staff members with residents of the home that Hoyt helped found for homeless children in Ethiopia.

2:00 p.m. I walk to meet the director of our Women's Business Initiative. The first 25 women have completed the Business Skills Training Program, and tomorrow there'll be a graduation ceremony. Most of the women are illiterate, but now they're eligible for a micro loan to start or expand a small business. To create a culture of savings and help orient the women to the future, they've been in savings groups. Each woman has managed to save 70 birr (about 70 cents).

3:30 p.m. I'm at the home to greet the children as they come back from school. Being with this incredible group of kids is by far the highlight of my day! When the children first came to the home, they had lost everything and were on the brink of giving up on life. You should see them now! I play basketball and Ping-Pong with the kids and share in their after-school snack of bananas and home-baked bread.

5:00 p.m. The children start their homework, getting help from the staff members. I love the simplicity and sincerity of life here.

7:30 p.m. I return to the house that I share with several other foreigners and help prepare pasta for dinner.

9:00 p.m. I'm exhausted so crawl into bed. All too often, individuals are disempowered by the belief that a single person can't make a difference. I feel my life here is to tell people otherwise.✝

To learn more about Little Voice Foundation, visit littlevoice.ca.