

First-hand experience with Ethiopian orphans is an inspiring eye-opener.

by Leslie Steele

As a board member for Uryadi's Village, hunter/jumper trainer Leslie Steele welcomed the opportunity to experience the non-profit's work by visiting Ethiopia this past December.

Established by show jumper Jennifer Fills Crooks, Uryadi's Village has the mission of supporting "vulnerable children and their extended families around the globe by developing social, economic and environmentally renewable systems with orphans, vulnerable women and children where the need is greatest."

Home to five million orphans, Ethiopia is the organization's first area of focus and the location of its first sustainable orphanage.



My motivation for joining Uryadi's Village is that, first and foremost, it's important to give back. When I saw Jennifer Crooks' material from Uryadi's Village, and all of the beautiful babies that were discarded and/or homeless, I felt inspired to help the organization get sponsors for the children that we had at the time.

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Being in a horse community where everyone is so fortunate, and considering how inexpensive it is to feed a child in Ethiopia, I felt like the horse show people know how good we have it and are always interested in giving back: paying it forward, so to speak.

To me, any cause to help people who are impoverished in third world countries is something that, to those in a privileged country, is a call to help in any way we can. It made me, as a person, feel like I was doing something good for the world.

We spent the first few days in the capital of Ethiopia, Addis Ababa: going to open air markets, walking around, seeing the human fossil "Lucy" (over 3 million years old!) and just discovering what was going on in that city—quite the large city at that.

What struck me the most was how many little children, generally 5- to 6-year-olds, were out on the street begging for money, or trying to sell you anything that they could muster, for money. It was sad because I felt like the parents were making their living vicariously through them.

We then took a six-hour long trek to Wolayta Soddo, the village where Uryadi's orphanage is located. Along the way we saw little kids who were herding their livestock to areas they could graze them in, or women and their burros coming to and from the market with supplies or water from the local water source.

To see people who still lived in mud huts with no sanitation, no running water, no electricity, was mindboggling—that in this day and age, so many people would still have so few options but to live like that.



Once we arrived in Soddo, we had the opportunity to see the babies and play with them. It was

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hard to believe that people would forfeit these beautiful little children: just dump them somewhere, and leave them to their fate as orphans, when they were otherwise such healthy little children. It's difficult to comprehend the hardships that the birth mothers face that would convince them to forfeit these beautiful children.

Also, the children who came in that were so malnourished: essentially starving to death with their families. In addition to the young children, the orphanage is home to older children with special needs. There were approximately seven, with ailments ranging from clubbed feet, hearing impairments and epilepsy. There were even two darling albino children whose mother attempted to kill them because she thought that their skin was a sign of demonic possession!

Then we went to property that the mayor had bestowed upon us, Uryadi's Village, and had a ground-breaking ceremony with the mayor, plus local contributors Daniel Abebe, Henok and others. Seeing this beautiful piece of property where these children would be able to call home was very exciting! It's the site for Wolayta Village, an integrated, sustainable system which will provide for nearly all of its own food, water, energy, housing, and economic needs while nourishing the community and ecological systems within and around it.

The property is the focal point for the organization this year as a thriving example that can not only save children's lives and empower the local people in Soddo, but whose success and inspiration can be replicated elsewhere in Ethiopia, Africa and around the world.



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