

Awassa Children's Project Newsletter

Summer 2002



Vol. 1 Issue 1

AIDS Education Circus Flips Into American Spotlight American Theatre Magazine Features Debut Nigat Circus



Aster Dabels and a German doctor, Herman Hunzinger, establish support groups in Freiburg and Beverungen, Germany, respectively. Aster's vision, to build a self-sufficient vocational and circus training center, begins to take shape. Plans for buildings are drawn.

2000:

The teenagers receive school fees, clothing, and lodging through the project, and begin winning gymnastics competitions throughout Ethiopia. The project incorporates as a non-profit organization (NGO) in Ethiopia. The town of Awassa donates land to support the vocational and circus training center. Theater director David Schein, a youth theater advocate in Chicago, suggests the development of an AIDS EDUCATION show.

2001:

Hunzinger and supporters in Beverungen raise \$50,000 to build five buildings on land donated by the town of Awassa. Girma Melesse becomes Manager of the Project. Schein flies to Ethiopia to rehearse with the teens, who create a show promoting sexual responsibility, condom distribution and use, testing, and compassion for those living with HIV/AIDS. Market performances commence in Awassa for thousands of people. Information and condoms are distributed. Schein applies for funding from UNICEF, USAID, and other international foundations. The Project forms its board of directors. USAID awards the project \$2,000 and the circus begins touring markets in other towns. David Schein forms a support group in Chicago. Construction on the buildings begins.

2002:

Chicago artists mobilize to raise funds toward implementation of strategic arts programming. Networking begins with the international youth circus arts community. Awassa gives the project more land for agriculture. The buildings are near completion, gardens are planted, and Schein returns to Ethiopia. The show expands and tours to more towns. The Board of Directors meets in Awassa and makes an action plan for the year. *State Department Magazine* and *American Theater Magazine* feature articles on the project. The Awassa Children's Project files incorporation papers in Illinois, publishes its first newsletter, and HERE IT IS!

To read the recent American Theater Magazine article on the AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS go to www.tcg.org

The Debut Nigat Vocational Training & Circus Center is supported by a unique constellation of non-profit organizations & individuals in the USA, Europe, France & Germany. We thank the following U.S. organizations & individuals for their contributions in the last year:

USA: Awass Childrens Project

Randy Albers, Ann Boyd, Kathy Brazda, Rona Brown, Blue Man Group, Legesse Butta, Debbie Buzil, Robert Calvin, Avantika Chandler, Melanie Cleveland, Jean Comoroff, Pam Crutchfield, Marcia de Andrade, Helen Doria, Frances Edlitz, Candace English, Henoc Erku, Ymer Erku, Fitta Geletu, Michael & Donna Gennaro, Whoopi Goldberg, Sylvia Gordon, Ronald & Audrey Grzywnski, Ivan Handler & Robyn Gabel, Eliam Hassen, Shirley Heath, Hazel Herzog, Bonnie Huffman, William Hunt, Paul Ingersoll, Warren & Ann Ingersoll, Sandra Jackson & Fassil Demisse, Tom Jansson, Eunice Joffe, Jessica Cherry & John Lefan, Monika & Alan Kimrey, Frederik & Young Klessig, Susan Klonsky, Donald & Ruth Levine, Amanda Lichtenstein, Niha Lichtenstein, David Washington, Sydney & Adrienne Lieberman, Carol & Robert Lifton, Tom & Lisa Lullo, Bryn Magnus, Joshua Mark & Pamela Margules, Aster & Kassa Maru, Michael McCaskey, Mary Ann Melvi, Haile Mezgebe & Tsehai Habtemariam, Mary Mikva, Abner Mikva, Maia Morgan, Peter & Alicia Pond, Beverly Rehfeldt, Charlie Rizzo, Deborah & William Roberts, Hallie & Brant Rosen, Judith Roth, Drs. Fassil deMisse & Sandra Jackson, Fay & Calvin Sawyer, Maxine Schein, Carroll Sherer, Melvyn & Sheila Shochet, Alison Silberberg, Joan Simpson, Hermann Sinaiko & Susan Fisher, Shumet Sishagne & Mulu Tefara, Mel & Janet Smith, Nikki & Fredric Stein, Laurie Viets, Daniel & Nina Wallenberg, Joel Wanek, Tanya White, Andrew White, Deborah Wolen, Christopher Worthman, Tina Marie Wright, David & Susan Zesmer

Thanks to Brian Clare and Porte Communications

for hosting

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And to Ras Dashen and Mama Destas

Restaurants



Awassa Children's Project
1728 W. Balmoral
Chicago IL 60640

About the Project:

Debut Nigat (Southern Dawn) Vocational Training and Arts Center and the Awassa AIDS Education Circus has grown at an amazing speed. What began five years ago as a backyard effort to feed a street kids' gymnastics troupe has rapidly grown into an internationally supported training and art center that feeds and educates thirty five teens, and that has created a world-famous AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS that tours throughout Southern Ethiopia.

AWASSA:

Awassa, Ethiopia, a town in the rift valley, on the shores of Lake Awassa, is the capital of Sidama Province and Ethiopia's Southern Regions. 12 million of Ethiopia's 65 million people call it home. Sidama, a tropical place of mountains, lakes, bananas, coffee, and sisal, contains many tribes and languages that are all linked by the greater Ethiopian culture and Amahric language.

LOVE AND GYMNASTICS, AN HISTORICAL TIMELINE

1996:

Civil war in Ethiopia, wars in Somalia and Sudan, and the droughts of the early nineties of the north and west, lead to mass displacement of Ethiopian people, including many abandoned and orphaned children. A young gymnast, Berreket Dana, encounters a gymnastic troupe of street children, and with the assistance of his cousin Sunnait Bekele, begins to feed and train them at Sunnait's home. Sunnait's sister, Aster Dabel, visits from Germany and pledges to help fundraise in Europe for a food budget.

1997:

In the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa, the French charity S.O.S. Français commits partial support for food budget.

THE STORY OF THE TUKOLS

OUR BUILDINGS: by Herman Hunzinger

To understand the story of our buildings you must know that the tukol, the round house with the thatched roof, is the traditional house of Ethiopia. It is a perfect expression of the Ethiopian way of organizing the home and living, an round, open communal space, in which it is possible to look in everyone's face. In Ethiopia the extended family unit is the village; everywhere there are tiny constellations of four or five tukols.



In 1999, after Awassa Town had given us land, I was in Awassa with Aster Dabels and for the first time saw a modern tukol, a hotel bar. That's when I fell victim to "tukolism": the idea that our buildings would be in the traditional style. I traveled all over the country-side with fellow Beverüngen Elmar Scharf and fellow board member Solomon Mengistab looking at tukols. Solomon and I started drawing, recreating something really Ethiopian, but modern, a little Debub Nigat village, 5 tukols, a kitchen, bathhouse, office, and clinic surrounding a large tukol which would serve as dining room/circus center/meeting hall/school: the center of the Center. Now in a fever of tukolism I went back to my German town where I have a medical practice and started infecting everyone I knew. After speaking at the Lions Club, and being featured in the local newspaper, the money started pouring in. I was surprised, and then so proud of Beverüngen. The old village tradition is: you don't let people go hungry. Within a year, my little German town had raised \$50,000.

Back in Ethiopia Solomon and Girma Melesse, who we had hired to manage the project, found a contractor. Solomon polished the plans. Girma negotiated the budgets. We came to Ethiopia last year and while David built the AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS, we met with contractor Aboneh Gessesse and in two weeks (record time for Africa) made a contract. Last year the buildings were built, all by hand, tons of concrete poured from wheelbarrows. When we came last March it was too beautiful to believe. Solomon Mengistab said "Now I can live a hundred years," meaning, "if I do nothing else in my life, I will still be proud." The buildings and the land are extraordinary. The challenge ahead is to fill them with kids and programs. As I write this the project moves to the tukols.

SOUTHERN DAWN TAKES ACTION AGAINST H.I.V.

The Awassa AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS

The Awassa Childrens Project of Chicago specifically raises money to support the AIDS EDUCATION Circus as well other arts projects that will bring resources to support the Awassa Children's Project Center. The seeds of the circus were planted in 1999 when Hermann Hunzinger approached his friend, theater director David Schein, with a question: We've got a troupe of kids in Ethiopia who can stand four on top of each other, do front and back flips, walk tight ropes and juggle. And they have no way to feed themselves. How can they use what they know to find resources?

The answer was obvious. As AIDS swept across Africa in the nineties, grass-roots theater and story-telling initiatives had proven to be one of the best ways to get prevention information to rural populations. Uganda reversed the tide of AIDS largely through popular education. Ethiopia, one of the most underdeveloped countries in Africa and with the fourth highest rate of AIDS, was perfect for popular AIDS EDUCATION projects. The children of the Debub Nigat Circus had all the skills to make a brilliant show, and Schein, who had directed grass-roots theater initiatives in Quebec, and in urban and rural settings in the USA, felt lucky to be in the perfect place at a crucial time.

In 2001 Schein spent two weeks working with the teens in Awassa and lined up support from local anti-AIDS/HIV agencies. The first show took place in the Awassa Market for thousands of people and condoms were distributed. The May 2002 issue of American Theater Magazine featured an article the first performance. After the initial show, the troupe began to tour through the markets of Southern Ethiopia.

Schein's prediction came true: The project won support from the American AID wing of the US Embassy in Ethiopia. It was featured in the US State Department Magazine. Schein returned to Awassa in 2002 to expand the show and incorporated new songs and acrobatic stunts. Schein also researched the potential of touring to the tribal regions of Southern Ethiopia and the refugee camps along the Sudan Border projected for 2003. Now the Awassa AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS is the most visible program of the Debub Nigat Vocational and Arts Training Center, attracting international attention to the project.

ALTERNATIVE OPPORTUNITIES FOR AWASSA YOUTH

EDUCATION: Not just a means to an end

In Ethiopia, less than 50% of children attend school. However, all participants of Debub Nigat receive an excellent education and have their uniforms, notebooks, library cards and required tuitions subsidized by the project. In the words of participant Sentayo Mengistu, a brilliant student who began formal education at age 10, "If I stop my education, my life is over."

By the time Ethiopian students take their twelfth grade exams they have mastered a couple of Ethiopian languages, studied English, History, Calculus, Biology, Physics, and Chemistry. 120,000 graduating secondary students vie for 6,000 University positions. Only 3% make it.

By training and employing the youth of the project in the two years after high school, the project hopes to create income and develop vocational skills that will ensure that graduates can survive and hopefully prosper in an incredibly brutal economy. Debub Nigat aims to provide alternative opportunities for youth in Awassa. In the next year, vocational workshops and agriculture will bring resources to the center while preparing participants to go out into the world and succeed.

The year 2002 will focus on hiring teachers to implement training and production, and obtaining the necessary equipment to produce books, t-shirts, posters, and cards to market in the US and Europe. Additionally, the project is researching the establishment of an electrician's shop.

The Project announces with cautious optimism that vegetables now grow on the grounds of the Center. In the coming year a barn will be built and cattle will be purchased to graze on the new land. Vegetables, milk and meat will be used by the project and/or sold to create income.

The year 2003 will honor Aster's original vision of creating the vocational training and the agricultural component. Stay tuned to our web site www.awassa.com for teachers' updates and the latest developments on new workshop buildings, vocational training, plant growth, and livestock grazing.



AWASSA AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS BENEFIT

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5844 N. Broadway, Chicago

SUNDAY, JULY 28th, 2002

7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m.

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**CAN'T MAKE IT TO THE BENEFIT?
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SEND A TAX-DEDUCTIBLE DONATION TO:

AWASSA CHILDREN'S PROJECT
1728 W. BALMORAL
CHICAGO, IL 60640

NOTEWORTHY:

Chicago artists Monika Kimrey and Steve Walters collaborate on fine arts posters on sale beginning August 4th. Proceeds go to AWASSA CHILDREN'S PROJECT. Buy one online after August 4th!

A letter writing exchange between Awassa and Chicago, Vermont and New Mexico youth is underway! See our website for details.

Chicago Waldorf School donates percentage of proceeds to the AIDS EDUCATION CIRCUS from their circus debut this June.

Thank you!

**COMING SOON ONLINE AT
WWW.AWASSACHILDRENSPROJECT.ORG**