



BREAKING FREE

How small gestures helped one girl escape the terror of human trafficking

By James K. Capple

PHOTOGRAPH BY JAMES K. CAPPLE

In a small town in southern Ethiopia, a girl named Abebech* and her family struggled to survive the worst drought in modern memory. Water was scarce, food was scarce, and hope was scarce. In an impoverished community of about a thousand people, where social advancement is nearly impossible, a child with any imagination quickly becomes discouraged at the slim prospect of ever escaping to a better future.

For reasons known only to Abebech, South Africa represented a chance at escape. So when

the 13-year-old met a woman who, for a price, would arrange transportation to her dream destination, she saw a glimmer of hope.

BROKEN PROMISES

Several months later, Abebech and three other hope-seeking girls were loaded (aged and counterfeit documents and then placed on a bus headed south from Ethiopia. After bribes were paid, they crossed into Kenya and stopped in the border town of Moyale. Where Abebech found herself in a holding room with

about 40 other young girls, she was terrified to realize her destiny was no longer her own.

The woman who gave Abebech the false promise of South Africa was now sitting her in the driver of a cargo truck carrying goats. Abebech was placed in a bag and tucked into a tight space below the first level of goats. She spent those days in this position, unable to move. At night, she would be released from the bag and raped repeatedly by the driver and two of his friends. He gave her khat, a popular euphoric inducing drug, consumed in that

Africa. For the next three days, she had no grip on reality, even while trapped in a nightmare.

Abebech continued her journey to Nairobi, where she was unloading from the cargo truck in Scotland, a community that is home to many Somali immigrants. Packed into a tight room, she slept next to other girls from Ethiopia and Eritrea,

The girls were all trafficked after leaving their homes with the hope of finding food, jobs, and a shot at security. They paid a price for their transportation, and then they were made to pay an even steeper price in another currency: sexual sex.

STEPS TOWARD FREEDOM

For two months, Abebech searched for work. She tried twice to escape her captors but was quickly recaptured and isolated. She didn't speak English, Swahili, or any language familiar to Nairobi. She knew only the local dialect from her home in Ethiopia. Abebech had no papers, no place to go, and no way out. Finally, in an act of desperation, she ran from the house and just kept running.

Rev. Ketebe Getaneh*, a pastor working in Scotland among the Ethiopian and Somali communities, was leaving town at a local nightclub when a neighbor interrupted and beckoned the pastor to his shop. There stood a young girl covered in dirt, hair uncombed, clothing torn. Her face was swollen, but Rev. Getaneh couldn't place her in his mind.

The neighbor said the girl spoke no English but added when asked if she was Ethiopian. Rev. Getaneh began speaking his dialect from his village in southern Ethiopia, and Abebech immediately responded. Within minutes, they recognized each other—their families had been friends in the same village.

Rev. Getaneh was aware of Abebech's disappearance. Her family believed she had wandered from the village and perhaps been killed and eaten by a wild animal.

The pastor took Abebech to his home, where his family cleaned her up, fed her, and listened to her brutal, ugly tale of trafficking and torture. Politically, Abebech would break into bars, health facilities, she was able to travel her journey to Nairobi, where she was unloading from the cargo truck in Scotland, a community that is home to many Somali immigrants. Packed into a tight room, she slept next to other girls from Ethiopia and Eritrea,

and in shame, believing she could never return home because her family wouldn't accept her.

Abebech lived with the pastor and his family for about eight months. During that time, she looked for employment. There was

To support anti-trafficking efforts, you can give to MCF's Global Anti-Trafficking Fund: www.org/trafficking

discussions about reuniting with her family, but Abebech couldn't bear the thought of returning to her village. Her pain and sense of shame ran too deep.

Finally, Abebech registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and received the option of returning home or seeking refuge in the Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya. She chose the camp, where she has lived for two years. With access to a variety of social services, Abebech is slowly finding her way, and within the next several years, she has a serious chance to be reunited.

Abebech is a survivor, and by whatever way you want to describe it, she is a miracle. Nearly half of the girls trafficked in the world simply don't survive.

SOMEONE WHO CARED

In each of the survival cases, there is a story. There is someone who talked, someone who cared, someone who took action. These "someone" are what the difference between life and death. Abebech's story is one repeated in millions around the world. It isn't just in Ethiopia. Versions of her story happen in rich countries and poor countries alike, in every region of the world. Ultimately, the story plays out in a local community or neighborhood. Maybe years, maybe more.

Abebech's miracle was borne of small gestures that made a big difference. When we in west care hearts, compassion, and humanity in the people, places, and lives around us, we all have the chance to be that someone—to play a role in another person's miracle.

* Names have been changed to protect the privacy and safety of those involved.

James K. Capple is the founder and president of Servant's Forge, a nonprofit promoting the role of servant-leadership that teach and empower to men here globally. Servant's Forge partners with Nazarene Compassionate Ministries through the Gender Based Violence Partnership in Kenya.

Abebech is a survivor, and by whatever way you want to describe it, she is a miracle. ... In each of the survival cases, there is a story. There is someone who noticed, someone who cared, someone who took action.