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Adopting kids, adopting a village

Ethiopia » Heber City couple take in six more kids -- and then a whole lot more.

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Heber City » Lon and DeAnna Kennard wanted somehow to make a difference in this troubled world.

After hearing a report on National Public Radio in 1991 about the hordes of orphans in Africa, they decided to adopt a child from that war-torn and disease-stricken continent.

It was a choice that would change their lives immeasurably and lead them on a humanitarian sojourn in Ethiopia, which keeps them busy to this day.

One potential adoption led to two, and two to four, and so on. By 1994, the Kennards found themselves with six Ethiopian children, ages 5 through 10.

Along with their six biological kids, it made for a wild time in their spacious house on the eastern outskirts of Heber City. "Every day was Christmas for them," DeAnna recalled of the arrival of her adopted children from the impoverished village of Kersa Illala, about 200 miles south of the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. "We thought they would be scared little kids. But they weren't shy at all."

Hailyn was 7 when she arrived in Utah and was dazzled by what she saw.

"You didn't know if you were dreaming or if it was real," she said recently. "I thought I'd wake up and be back in Ethiopia."

Kadist, who was 9 when she got to Heber, thought the place sparkled.

"I was thinking, everything is so nice and clean. How do they keep that way?"

It was a crazy time, recalled Lon, now a retired businessman.

Fortunately, the Kennards' biological children were older and dove in to help rear the new brood, including teaching them how to take a bath and sleep in a bed. In the beginning, the kids preferred sleeping on the floor.

"Everything was new to them," said their adoptive brother Verl Kennard. "Like watching the toilet flush."

Their new Ethiopian brothers and sisters came from an area where simply getting enough to eat was a constant struggle, noted Lon Kennard Jr.

When they arrived in Heber City, "They'd eat till they threw up, and then they'd eat some more," he said. "At some point, you just had to stop them."

But the youngsters soon settled into their new world and absorbed the English language. Before long, they were welcomed into the Heber Valley community, where they were seen as exotic -- and a lot of fun.

"The local kids accepted them," their father said. "They hit it off perfectly."

DeAnna noted that all the kids in town wanted to get to know them, touch their smooth, dark skin and feel their curly hair. "They were the stars of the show."

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Back to Ethiopia » After five years into the experiment, the Ethiopian kids were thoroughly Americanized, and Lon and DeAnna decided it was time to take the clan back to Kersa Illala, so they could see where they had come from.

But the children found their hometown -- raked by poverty and disease -- appalling.

"I thought, oh, wow. It was hard to believe I had come from a place like that," Kadist remembered. "How little the people have there. And how much I have here."

"It's hard to see them living like that," added Hailyn. "They barely have clothes. They barely have food."

Lon and DeAnna recognized that the villagers needed their help, too.

"I knew we had to do something for the village," Lon said. "But I didn't know what, exactly."

So they began investigating humanitarian organizations and programs. They came across Choice Humanitarian, a West Jordan-based nonprofit organization that seeks to end poverty in small communities by providing water, sanitation and skills. Choice Humanitarian's Tim Evans helped the Kennards focus on an approach.

Lon and DeAnna determined they could make such an effort in the small village and set up their own nonprofit organization to raise funds.

The people of Kersa Illala "had no hope, just a blank stare in their eyes," DeAnna explained. "I said, 'We should call it the Village of Hope.'"

From time immemorial, the women of the village had trekked back and forth several miles, twice a day, to haul water from a small, polluted river. The first item of business: a source of clean drinking water.

In 2005, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints donated \$175,000 for a well. Lon hired contractors to sink a hole 600 feet deep to a pure, artesian source. They built a system with six distribution points for washing and bathing throughout Kersa Illala.

"Now the villagers tell me, 'Water is life, dad, water is life,' " Lon explained.

Next, the Kennards established a small clinic and hired two nurses. Ethiopians, like most Africans, battle malaria and typhoid, among other things, as well as parasites and, of course, AIDS. At their new clinic, the villagers get advice on disease prevention as well as treatment.

Supplying nutrition, too, is a huge challenge in Ethiopia. Kersa Illala residents grew mostly corn during the rainy season, but their fields lay fallow during the dry season.

Utah businessman Paul Morrell, who wanted to make a contribution to the Village of Hope, believed the area might be suitable for dry-farming when rains abated each year. He sent agronomist Evan Maxfield to Kersa Illala to investigate.

What he found was that even during the dry season, there's enough moisture for certain crops.

Now there are two growing seasons. Dry-season farming produces safflower, chick peas, barley and wheat --- and enough calories to make a big difference in the diets of the villagers.

These days, DeAnna said, it's easy to identify residents of Kersa Illala from those of neighboring villages. "They look so much more healthy. You can just see it in their faces."

The Village of Hope is now building a children's center for high-risk youth. Most Ethiopian orphans are girls who have been traded or abducted but then run away, said Lon, who now spends about half his time in Kersa Illala. The center will have room for 30 children and provide a safe haven, nutrition and education for youngsters. One day, the Kennards want to be able to house 240.

The community has about 1,000 donors, but Lon and DeAnna hope to attract more contributors so they can continue their work there.

"I always thought it would be nice to help people," DeAnna said, "but I had no idea we could do this."

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Adopted children then and now

Then » Alemitu was 5 when she came to Utah. **Now** » She's 19 and a customer service rep for Verizon in Salt Lake City.

Then » Merga was 7. **Now** » He's 22 and a construction worker in Heber Valley.

Then » Hailyn was 7. **Now** » She's 22 and a stylist in Salt Lake City.

Then » Shumba was 9. **Now** » She's 24 and a front desk clerk at a Salt Lake City hotel.

Then » Kadist was 9. **Now** » She's 24 and in management training with Beneficial Life, Salt Lake City.

Then » Bedane was 10. **Now** » He's 25 and a student at Utah Valley University in Orem.

Village of Hope -- Ethiopia

To learn more about the Kennards' nonprofit humanitarian organization, visit www.villageofhope-Ethiopia.org

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