

December 2005



### *Open House celebration at Layla House*

Greetings everyone,

I am writing from Ethiopia on a lovely December Saturday morning. Yesterday we had the open house and celebration dinner at the new Layla House. The move was completed during the first days of November and was extra challenging due to the unrest and taxi strikes in Ethiopia at that time. But the kids have made a good adjustment and they are very excited about being in the new larger quarters. Let me tell you about the celebration.

It will take us all some time to recover from the excitement of yesterday. The children worked so hard to prepare. The older children practiced being tour guides. They made up a drama to present and made sure everything was clean and tidy. Those who had them wore their traditional Ethiopian outfits or at least their best clothing and they helped decorate. Even the babies seemed to know something special was going on as they were extra smiley.

The volunteers had blown up dozens and dozens of balloons, the kids made miles of paper chains, and there were balloons and chains tied to every possible surface. One volunteer had painted a banner saying "Welcome to Layla House."

The afternoon open house was for government folks, the people we work with from other orphanages, and others with whom we have a professional relationship. People from the Children's Commission attended as did U.S. Embassy staff, doctors we work with, and orphanage people from KM, KT, SE, AHOPE, staff from the hospital that cares for our children, people from Nazret where we have a sponsorship program, and probably others, sorry if I missed folks.

The older kids did very well as tour guides and children showed off the new library, craft class, music classrooms, and sleeping rooms.

Guests were then were shown into the new dining area where refreshments were waiting and a coffee ceremony was presented by the older girls. There were treats for all of the guests and children.

There were many smiles and lots of enthusiasm. The drama went very well and then as more people came, others began to drift away.

Once that party was over, around five in the afternoon, the set up for the dinner party began. It was held in the soccer field for the children and staff. Two of our teachers play in a band and the band came to play. The children clapped and swayed to the music but they didn't actually dance until it became dark and they couldn't be seen as well.

Three fires were built in the parking area and huge metal flattened wok-shaped pans were set over them. Vegetable stuffed pastries were fried as were potatoes and onions and later meat was cooked on these griddles. Tables were set out with plastic table cloths I had brought, with bright balloons on them and people from the hospital brought a bouquet of roses which added to the decor. My job was to hand out the paper plates so I got to greet each person. The volunteers had made chili which was served in buns and huge plates of salad and cooked vegetable were also available. Youngest children were served at their tables inside but there were chairs outside for all who were about five and older. The youngest went through the line first and were served. Then group by group the older kids came. All staff was invited and it seemed that the line of staff would never end. From the number of paper plates we used I know we served over 200 people. The music continued through the meal until finally it was time for the band to eat. By then it was very dark and the soccer field is not well lit. Neighbors were trying to peek over the wall to see what was happening. The kids were batting the balloons that by some miracle were still inflated and I was afraid someone was about to get hurt.

And it was nearly bed time so we began gathering the children, youngest first and sending them back to their rooms. It was a magical night, stars were bright, fires were still burning in the parking area, the smell of cooking food was strong, and everyone was in wonderful spirits.

For me, it is a dream come true to finally be in the new Layla House. Someone described the facility itself as "simple" and it is, nothing fancy just lots of space for all the things we need to do a good job of caring for the children.

So, I want to say another thank you to those of you who gave in so many different ways to make this a reality. I wish you all could have been there.

As we approach the holiday season I can't help but think of the many Ethiopian children who this year became orphans. We plan to continue to expand our sponsorship program to reach out to as many orphan children as possible who can remain with relatives.

Very best wishes to you all for a blessed holiday season.

Merrily and Ted