

I'm Going to Africa

by Betty Anne Cody

It had been an ordinary day. Relaxing, reading Time magazine before going to sleep, Anna Hovde read the cover article. The headline said "Read the words, look at the pictures, and try not to care." The story was about the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Africa, and the pictures told the story. Reading the words and looking with her heart at the pictures, Anna was deeply moved. She heard the words coming out of her own lips. "I'm going to Africa." Not an ordinary day, after all.

For years, she had been interested in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially in Africa. Hoping to work in some way to help with this world health problem, she earned a Master's Degree in Social Work. As a counselor, she helped clients with all kinds of traumas, and yet knew there was more. Now it felt like the doors were opening.



On her computer, she typed in AIDS/orphans/Africa. Finding People to People, she emailed the organization. "Interested. Need Info. Please contact me." "That afternoon" she says, "the president of People to People called me. He told me that they were taking sixteen people to Ethiopia in March, with the Former American Ambassador to Ethiopia, Dr. Shinn, as the leader of the group. We can't pay your way, but you can go and be there with us. We'll be at the Hilton in Addis Ababa."

On line she purchased flight tickets and made a hotel reservation. She arrived three or four days ahead of the group. Checking with People to People, she was given some local contacts. "Just call and see what you can find out," they said. Anna followed up on her own, using taxis to get to meetings with local people. She learned quickly that there are no street addresses, only landmarks and a few street names, to tell where things are. Soon she learned to ride the minibuses, very inexpensively. By the time People to People arrived, she was the one who knew how to get around in the city. Although she had planned to stay two and a half weeks, she stayed five. "I felt at home there," she says. "I was comfortable."

At home. Yes. In Africa. When she was a child, age nine to twelve, fourth to sixth grades, she lived in Liberia with her missionary parents. Now Africa was heavy with the Aids epidemic. Different yet the same. This contrast of American plenty and African poverty broke her heart. She couldn't stop crying. Children in rags, begging. Mothers with babies, stomachs bloated. Not just a picture in a magazine, but living, breathing persons. She stayed long enough to participate in the group's project, then returned home.

In a few weeks she was back in Addis, working independently from People to People, staying at a small twenty-eight room hotel. She had made contacts in the Medical School, assessing the specific needs there. It was clear that helping each individual was not what she wanted to do. She wanted to affect policy at the top, thereby having a greater effect. Anna meets people easily, connects quickly and positively with all. Now this gift helped her get to know the doctors and administrators in the Medical community. She conceived a project that would help the health needs of a great many, both doctors and patients.

Without computers, the hospital was without research information and without the ability to keep records on the patients as they healed after surgery or hospital care. "I got this crazy idea I wanted to put some computers in at the Medical school." Though she is savy with computers, she could not install and program them. However, in the hotel she had met some English men working for an American company.

They had visited off and on for a few days before she approached one she describes as the epitome of a materialistic man, about thirty. "Hey, Bryan! You want to install some computers at the Medical school?" "Not a chance!" he replied. "I don't want to get involved here." But later in the day, he changed his mind. With the understanding that he would not see any suffering or sick people, he agreed to work on this project with her, all without any pay. Three months later, there were fifty computers at the Medical school, all networked and ready for use. Bryan had spent all his time at the hospital right in the middle of the suffering he wanted to avoid. In addition to the successes with computers, Anna facilitated the bringing of experts from the USA to teach at the Medical School.

At the end of 2001, Anna moved to Addis to stay for a year. In residence, she felt she could do so much more. She says the reason she was able to accomplish things was that she didn't ask permission, she just acted. Her contacts grew in number and importance. At a meeting of fifty ministers of the government, she spoke about her commitment and many were crying when she finished "I can't thank you enough", one said, in tears. Many stayed to talk with her afterward. Now she had access to the Prime Minister and other government officers.

Internet access was under the control of the Minister of Infrastructure. The Medical School had no budget to pay for internet use. Wondering whether they would even be heard, they made the small request for twenty hours of internet free over one year. The reply was a call from the Minister. "We will give you eight hours of access a day, seven days a week, for a year. We believe in this project." Now the hospital had research information, capacity for following patients after hospital care, and access to medical information all over the planet.

In 2002 and 2003, Dorothy Fadiman was shooting a documentary on the effects of HIV/AIDS on Ethiopia. Ms. Fadiman is winner of an Emmy Award and has been nominated for an Academy Award for her documentary films. Anna's responsibilities working with the film maker included coordinating all in-country preparations prior to her arrival, developing a network in Addis Ababa of potential collaborators for Ms. Fadiman, and making introductions to government officials, non-governmental organizations and personnel working on HIV/AIDS in Ethiopia. The vision grows.

Now the president of Ethiopian North American Health Professionals Association telephoned her, asking that she work with them on their next project. This was a medical mission in 2003, and Anna was to coordinate it, working with Americans and Ethiopians. It was a joint effort of about one hundred people on both sides of the world. She planned, implemented and coordinated this mission of forty healthcare professionals who performed one hundred thirty surgeries in two weeks, including ten open heart surgeries, the first ever performed in Ethiopia. A forty foot container of medical supplies was shipped to Addis for this project. Her resume reads: "Duties included coordinating duty free status and shipping for all equipment from USA to Ethiopia, all travel arrangements for the delegation, scheduling of activities, overseeing all personnel while in Ethiopia, coordinating and facilitating developmental meetings between the Ministry of Capacity Building, the Mayor of Addis Ababa, and the President of Addis Ababa University."

On the day when the doctors and nurses were to perform the first open heart surgery in Ethiopia, she walked into the classroom and saw all the students watching the surgery on computer screens she had provided, and knew why she was there. "I was in tears, realizing whatever I had spent and experienced was worth it as I see this happening right here."

Soon Anna noticed that after surgery there were many cases of depression as patients recovered. As a Social Worker, she realized that no one had explained to the patient or to the family the surgery, the pain involved, the recovery process, or the further implications of surgery. During the operation, no one came out to tell the family what was happening, how much longer it would be, or how their loved one was doing. Many patients were there alone. This hospital was working at a survival level. There was no time or personnel to give compassionate care. The huge caseloads did not leave time for that. "This was when I felt a need to start my own non-governmental organization. I knew I wanted to identify more needs and help supply social services Americans have come to think of as ordinary. Ethiopians have never experienced those services at all."

Cooperating with colleagues at the University of Illinois Jane Addams School of Social Work, she made that happen. The new School of Social Work in Addis Ababa now has forty students at the Master's level.

Both heart surgery and maxillofacial surgery patients are served in this hospital. "The last patient I saw" says Anna, "was a six year old girl, alone, brought in from a nearby orphanage. There was no one to comfort her, tell her anything about what was happening to her, or help her with the fears she faced. One nurse had forty to fifty patients, clearly

without time for this." Now, through the School of Social Work, there will be some personal care for children and others alone, scared and in pain.

In 2004, Dr. Kebede came to the United States to speak and to attend some medical conferences. He is a tender and kind man, a splendid surgeon, a man of vision. He and Anna work well together, have a deep respect for each other. The contacts she has made in these years of following her vision are the basis for more work ahead. With the forming of Linking Lives, her own Non-Governmental Organization with an active Board of Directors, Anna will be able to carry out more missions to this country of beautiful people, so in need of attention and help of every kind.

The main project that seems to be next will be the provision of a place where families can live while their loved ones are in the hospital. Now they have only the streets and little life sustenance. This will call for major help from those who respond to the requests of this new NO. It is not yet on the Internet, but the process has begun.

"It's a God thing," says Anna. "When I'm living in God's will, I am a healthier, happier person."

"Read the words. Look at the pictures. Try not to care." Impossible. Not an ordinary day, after all.

Betty Anne Cody lives in San Antonio TX.

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