

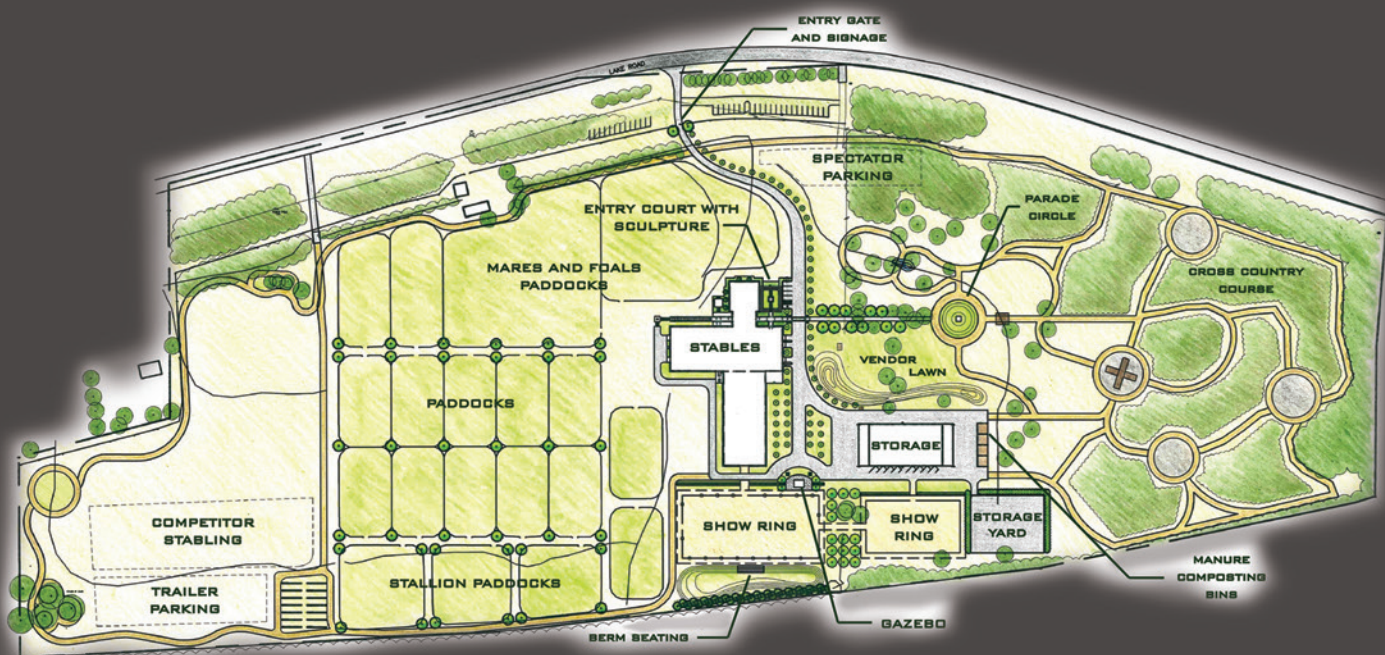


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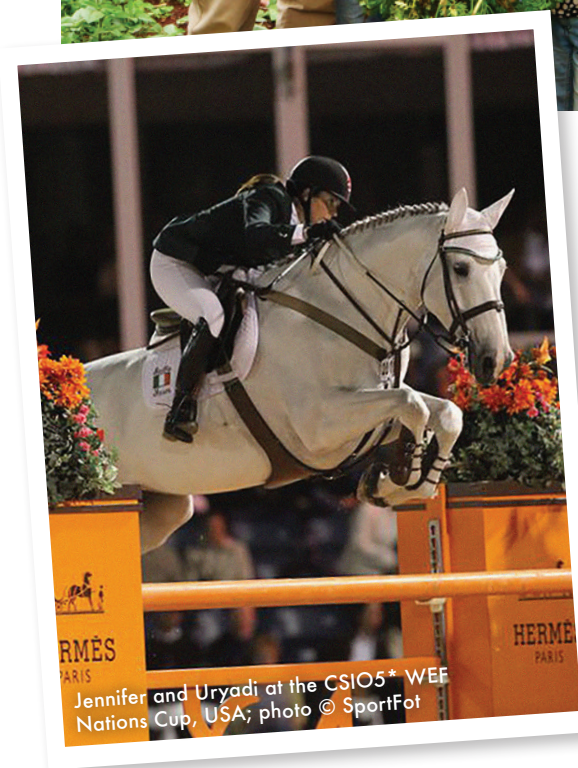
## GIVING back

by Pam Maley



Photo ©Sarah Klintworth

# The Village that Uryadi Built



Jennifer and Uryadi at the CSIO5\* WEE Nations Cup, USA; photo © SportFot

*Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.  
Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.*

(CHINESE PROVERB)

The word 'hero' is constantly overused these days, to the point where it begins to lose its meaning. But show jumper Jennifer Crooks redefines it in the fullest sense. She is, in every way, a hero.

A lifelong horsewoman, she is the daughter of an Irish mother and an English father, and she has competed in Nations Cup events as a member of the Irish Equestrian Team. She and her husband Mike met on a blind date while at university in Seattle, Washington, and now run Stella Farm, a successful training facility in Sandpoint, in northern Idaho. Mike is a veteran trainer of 30 years.



## URYADI

When we caught up with her, Jennifer, some of her children, and her talented and much beloved show jumper Uryadi, were on their way to compete at Thunderbird Show Park in British Columbia, near Vancouver, Canada. Uryadi, now 17, will retire soon, and Jennifer plans to retire with her. Having competed in 10 Nations Cups, their last was in 2016. All of us who have loved a horse will understand what she means when she says, "She'll tell me when she's ready to retire."

Uryadi's story is inextricably intertwined with a remarkable tale of a non-profit that Jennifer started in 2014. The story began in 2003, when she and Mike and their five children traveled into rural China to adopt a child. "Sophie was our first international adoption," she explained. "When we got to the orphanage, we were overwhelmed by the deep poverty. Babies were dying. I had to figure out how to help."

When she got home, she was telling the story to a friend who gave her some valuable advice. She pointed out that Jennifer was competing at the national level. But if she and Uryadi could get to the international level, she would have a real platform and a group of people that would be able and willing to support her. So the pair stepped up their game to reach that goal. "Uryadi got me to that level, and I knew it was time. I had no idea how to run a non-profit, but I would learn."

## THE FAMILY THAT KEPT GROWING

By this time, Jennifer and Mike had adopted four more children from China, and four from Ethiopia. Of their five oldest, four are biological children, and one – Catherine – is Jennifer's niece that she and Mike raised as their own. The younger nine are adopted. The oldest two, Lauren and Sean, now young adults and successful show jumpers, run their own stable in Snohomish, Washington. Of the next three, Catherine, Ciara and Hunter, Hunter competes along with Jennifer, as do Sophie and Ruby, adopted from the People's Republic of China.

Also from China are Jade, Kai and Holly; Millie, Jonah and Mahlia were adopted from Ethiopia. And just last June (2017), came their newest addition, Tegan, adopted from Ethiopia on an emergency medical visa that saved his life. "He was our surprise baby. He came to the orphanage on the last day of my visit last June. He had neurological issues from cerebral palsy and was dying. With us, he started to come alive, and I just knew he was the littlest Crooks," she said. Now with 14 children, "I realized that I couldn't adopt them all."

## URYADI'S VILLAGE

She named her project Uryadi's Village, after the horse that made it possible, and decided that Ethiopia would be the focus. "I had grown up in Hong Kong and made many visits to China. But I found through

my research that Ethiopia has more orphans than any other country – five percent of the population. In a country of 100 million people, five million are orphans. And the Ethiopians are a warm, welcoming people, comfortable to be around."

At the outset, Uryadi's Village would reach out to help communities with orphanages that lacked the resources to provide their children with even the basic necessities. In the longer term, the vision would be to ensure that each target orphanage has access to clean water and sanitation, sustainable agriculture, basic medical care, educational opportunities, and economic stability. Ultimately, they would build strong, self-sustaining orphanages within communities.

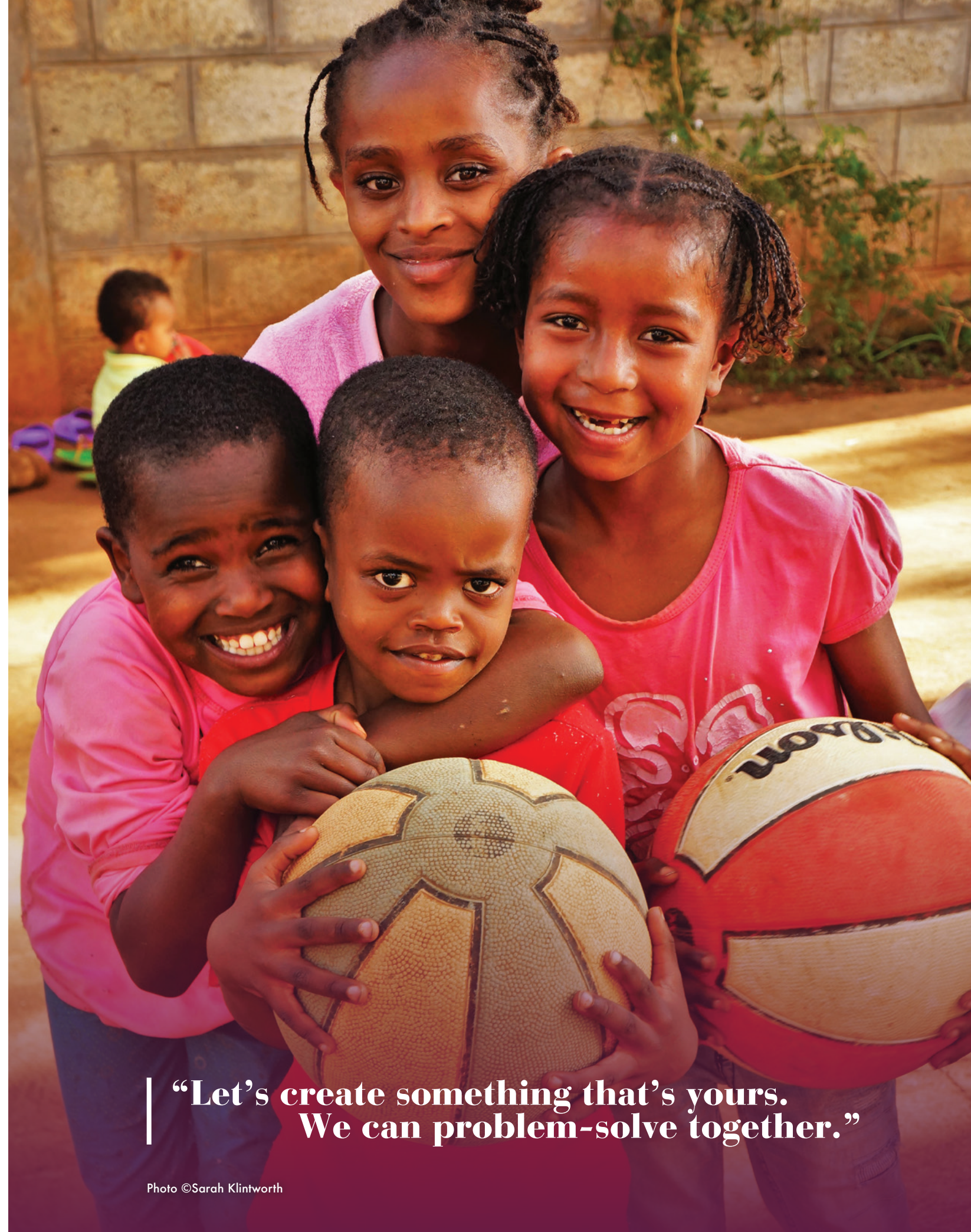
Jennifer quickly took responsibility for the care of over 20 orphans two years old or younger in the rural village of Soddo, babies who needed immediate intervention to survive. Uryadi's Village rented a facility where they could live with their nannies.

## THE HORSE WORLD STEPS UP

The progress made by Jennifer and her team over these four short years has been enormous. "It's because the horse world stepped up," she says with feeling. "We are 80% funded by the high-level horse world. When we traveled to competitions, my kids looked like the UN, so I could talk to people about it. I could tell them my story. I've held babies as they died. At shows, I don't talk



Jennifer: "Crooks children all dressed up standing in line in fancy clothes;" photo © Shoshana Rosenberg



“Let’s create something that’s yours.  
We can problem-solve together.”

Photo ©Sarah Klintworth



horses anymore; I've gotten to know people on a different level – and there are some pretty great people in the sport.”

Indeed, if you go to the website, [uryadisvillage.org](http://uryadisvillage.org) and scroll through the 'Our Kids' section, their sponsors read like a 'Who's Who' of show jumping. In addition to the riders, horse show management teams have sought ways to help. Blenheim, West Palms, HITS, and Thunderbird do a 'Jump for the Village' event as part of the Grand Prix. Uryadi's Village donates one of the jumps, and owners, trainers, riders, or spectators can choose to make a pledge of any amount, that applies each time the fence is jumped clean. Jennifer refuses on principal to spend a lot of money on fundraisers, believing passionately that every penny should go directly to the children. So this type of event is ideal, as the only expenditure is the cost of the jump, and Uryadi's Village gratefully averages \$15,000-\$20,000 each time.

#### WOLAYTA VILLAGE – SELF-SUSTAINING PERMACULTURE

The first self-sustaining village, called Wolayta, is 60%-70% complete, and already functioning. Designed by permaculture expert Warren Brush, it's completely self-sustaining, providing a model that can be replicated around the world. A group in California has already expressed an interest in studying it.

“The Uryadi's Village team,” says Jennifer, “came in with an agenda that differed from the NGOs (non-government charitable organizations) that for decades have come in with their hearts in the right place, laden with supplies and donations, determined to introduce our American ways, and unwittingly creating a dependency. Instead, we worked with the local people, and said, 'Let's create something that's yours. We can problem-solve together.' Everyone on our team watches the documentary NGOs, Inc. every year, just to keep ourselves on the right track. We can't just come in with our American ways; the community needs to be uplifted, supported.”

Permaculture moves away from the American style of mono-crop farming, actually taking the people back to their roots, with a large variety of food crops, and chickens running around amongst them doing the fertilizing, etc. One acre can grow 70% more food with this style of farming. Wolayta Village has five houses so far, each with a house mother and 12 children; produces nearly all of its food;



CSIO5\* Queen Elizabeth Cup, Spruce Meadows Canada, photo © Cansport



Photo © Sarah Klintworth



Jennifer with husband Mike Crooks; photo © Sarah Klintworth



Toddlers under the watchful eye of their nanny; photo © Sarah Klintworth

ensures clean water; and provides a locally run on-site Health Clinic. The goal is to meet the power needs of the village with renewable energy systems, and the team is currently working to get a solar grant to make that a reality. Also in the planning stages are cottage industries that will help to stimulate the local economy.

The Ethiopian people and the local government are so delighted to have Wolayta Village in their community, that they have recently donated five adjacent acres, making the Village an eight-acre property, which will allow for the building of houses to accommodate 50 more children, in addition to the 73 now in residence.

#### AN ADOPTION PROGRAM

Like the ripples in a pond, circumstances have taken Uryadi's Village in directions that they hadn't imagined. A local adoption program has become a huge part of their mission. Jennifer invited a group of local religious leaders of all faiths to meet with her and the staff. They all agreed that whatever your style of worship, one of the basic tenets of every faith is the duty to take care of our orphans. “Working together, we have already adopted out 15 children to local families,” she said proudly. “After all, a poor family is better than no

family. I visit each of them every time I'm there, and the program has produced such happy results that I really want to grow it. It's wonderful to see these bonds develop and to watch these kids blossom. Uryadi's Village continues to provide food raised at Wolayta, and medical care, for the adoptees. Permaculture makes that possible.”

Another direction Jennifer would like to pursue is a program for special needs children. It's difficult to adopt them out locally, and the Ethiopian government, for reasons difficult to understand, has closed international adoptions. “We hope that will change soon, but in the meantime, we can bring in therapy teams, and we have an older lady in the village that is our 'go-to' for special care. Five of my own children have special needs, but little Tegen needs more support than the others. We have a therapy team that cares for him, and every year his entire team travels to Ethiopia to serve the village. We say that Tegen put together the team!”

#### SCHOOL SPONSORSHIP

Quite by accident, a school sponsorship program has grown up. Jennifer and Mike bought a house just 10 minutes from Wolayta that was built by a missionary couple whom they met in Soddo. During the 'where are

you from' part of the introductions, the two couples discovered that they have homes near each other in northern Idaho, not exactly a populous region. “We have developed a great friendship, very synchronistic. We get together every year,” Jennifer says.

There are three houses near the Crooks' house, and they have a total of eight children in them, the oldest one 14. Instead of attending the local public school, the children were laborers, working to help the family get by, a story that repeats itself over and over in Soddo households. Jennifer and her team figured out that a child's income could be replaced with \$18 per month, so they began seeking people who might want to be 'school sponsors.' A school sponsor makes a monthly donation of \$20 to the family, in exchange for the promise that the child they sponsor be allowed to attend school. In no time, the program was off and running, and now has about 90 kids who can attend school because of their sponsors.

Inside Wolayta Village, there are 25 school-age children in residence. Tuition at the best private school in Soddo is \$15 per month, so the Uryadi's Village team contacted each of their sponsors to ask if they could add an extra \$15 per month to their regular contribution. All of them said yes. “We



work hard to create a special bond between the child and the sponsor. Each child has a picture of his/her sponsor, and the sponsor has one of the child. Every penny that they contribute goes to their little sponsee.”

Moving the Wolayta Village children to the better school has reaped huge rewards. Behavior problems resolved themselves, the academics are better, and the real added bonus is the boost to their self-esteem, which can have a positive effect in so many ways. There are two deaf (and “crazy-smart,” says Jennifer) children in the village. Their sponsors agreed to increase the contribution to cover the cost of the school for the deaf—a boarding school. The children come home to Wolayta on weekends and holidays, and both are thriving.

#### WORKING WITH MOWA

Then there’s the partnership that Uryadi’s Village has formed with MOWA, a branch of government that oversees all women’s and children’s issues, among them the trafficking of children, an all-too-frequent occurrence in Ethiopia. When children are turned in to MOWA, or more often found abandoned, MOWA calls Jennifer, and she,

or someone on the staff, goes to get them. MOWA allows themselves a window of three to four months in which they try to track down the child’s family, but it can be a difficult task, as some of the children were trafficked too young to remember where they came from; they have no memory of family. If relatives can’t be located, the child remains with Uryadi’s Village.

Jennifer related the story of brothers ages four and six, who had been found by MOWA. When MOWA was able to contact the family, they discovered that the boys’ parents had died, and the extended family was unable to care for them; so they came to the village. They soon told the staff that they had an eight-year-old sister that was sold as a housemaid. “When MOWA found her, she was afraid. She didn’t want to come with them; she’d already been trafficked once. Eventually, she let them take her to the village, and when she saw her brothers, she was over the moon!”

#### A FAMILY EXPERIENCE

Last fall, Jennifer and Mike pulled their children out of school and home-schooled them so that they could stay in

Ethiopia September through December (2017). “We were moving out of the rental quarters and into the village,” she said. “I felt like it was important to be there, to work on relationships.” Her children made friends with all the children in the village and slept in the village with them. “It was a really important time; important for the government to see that we’re not leaving, we’re there to stay. We were able to forge valuable partnerships with the mayor and city officials. And it was a life-changing experience for my children; they became aware of how fortunate they really are.”

Jennifer hopes that other families will bring their children and experience the village. “Being part of it really changes them.” Anyone is welcome to “come hold some babies,” she says. Now there’s an invitation that’s hard to turn down! She gives huge kudos to her husband Mike for his unflagging support, partnership, and encouragement. “He’s a really good baby holder!” *HS*

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Jennifer, with staff and children when Wolayta Village was nearing completion; photo © Sarah Klintworth

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