

Time for Art

Art workshops at Onesimus, Ethiopia, March 2019

Onesimus is a small centre in Addis Ababa that cares for Ethiopian street children. It offers them refuge from the streets during the day, food, clean clothes and advice and guidance. Nega Meaza is the director and set the centre up in 2006.



The priority for the centre is to offer care and rehabilitation to the street children, which Nega sees as his Christian mission. Religious instruction is not, however, their central priority in a country where children come from many backgrounds. Instead the focus is

on attempting to return the children to their families, offering financial and practical support to enable them to care for their children.

Street Children

There are many reasons why children end up on the street in Ethiopia. Sheer poverty and lack of food are the main reasons as families simply cannot feed all their children. Some families even send their children out to live on the street maintaining that they can't bear to see them starve at home. Other children are orphans of HIV, others come from homes in which a divorce and remarriage has rendered them homeless as new spouses do not always want to support children from a previous marriage. Some children are lured onto the street by their peers with promises of free food especially during some of the religious festivals when food is given out free.

Onesimus

The centre is well organised and staffed with key workers who travel into Addis identifying street children. They search the common places where street children congregate, such as the bus terminal in the centre of town. Once a child or children have been identified, they are approached and a lengthy process of forming a trusting relationship begins. The child or children are invited to come to the centre. It is here that they can come during the day and be fed and offered counselling and education. The centre caters for up to 20 children each day. During their time at the centre, the staff hopes to persuade the children of the benefits of an education and offer suggestions as to ways in which the children can support themselves. They might help a child to set up a shoe shine business in the city centre, a popular activity for Ethiopians. Nega told me the children might come just once or twice, but some will come every day for up to a couple of months. This is usually long enough for the immediate problems to be addressed in some fashion. Whilst at the centre, the children engage in activities; outside they play football, table football and basketball. Inside they do basic maths, some science and some drawing.

How did I come into contact with Onesimus?

I met Nega when I was in Kenya visiting my brother. Nega was on a short break with his family celebrating his wedding anniversary. On striking up a conversation I discovered his role as director at a home for street children. I told him of the art workshops I'd done before at Empire des Enfants, a home for street children in Senegal and when I offered to come over to Onesimus to do the same, he readily agreed.

I descended on Addis Ababa on Friday 22nd March armed with a suitcase of art materials and a head full of ideas. The chance for the children to have a week to indulge in creative activity was completely novel and all other activities at the centre had been suspended for the week.

Our projects

I had devised several projects to undertake throughout the week most of them being tweaked as I went, as I am never sure of ages or competency until I get there. I know from my previous experience that children like to use as many materials and "tools" as possible and so I had brought with me materials so that we could undertake acrylic painting, watercolours, cutting out, sticking, collage, pastels, drawing and colouring. The children were remarkably quick to understand the tasks despite speaking very little or no English, but I was helped all week by Alex who translated my instructions. I had 12 boys each day who ran in every morning really excited and eager to get started. They worked efficiently and were completely absorbed in their activities. There was very little disagreement or arguing amongst them and, much to my surprise and unlike my experiences in Senegal, no fights broke out!



I worked each day until around 3.00pm and I divided activities up so that the more challenging ones took place in the mornings and the less demanding ones in the afternoons.

We started the week by doing some oil pastel work, having looked at bold and bright paintings by Van Gogh, working on black paper as it makes the oil pastels more vibrant.



We undertook a large and collaborative collage piece. I had discussed this with Nega before doing it and he was keen to do a collaborative piece that included all the flags of the different tribes in Ethiopia, 9 in all. We decided on a large tree, the flags to be placed at the end of the branches. The motif of the tree, with its many branches all coming from the same root worked really well. The boys located the main colours in pages of the glossy magazines I had taken with me and we cut them into small squares, later sticking them on to create a mosaic effect. The flags were painted on a separate occasion, something the boys loved doing as they have a fierce pride in their country and its different tribes.

We also undertook some abstract watercolour pieces, where I showed the boys how to blow paint around the page using a straw and finally a mosaic piece made using pieces of paper they had previously painted with an array of colours and had cut into triangles and shapes. Afternoons were spent on drawing skills, the portrait session being notably hilarious!



Outcomes

The staff reported to me that they believed the boys had loved the sessions and this was evident in their enthusiasm and dedication to the projects. Before I left, I had a lengthy handover with both project worker Kanu and centre worker Alex on how to inject more creativity into any art sessions they may be able to do in the future. I left plenty of materials with the centre and I feel sure they will be put to good use.

I spoke at some length to Kanu about the value and contribution of the art projects to the centre and with Ysackh, a 13 year old boy at the centre. He described to me his thoughts and feelings about the week of art. Please see below.



Time for Art's role

From the Time for Art funds I used some to purchase materials and some to pay for my accommodation for 7 days in Addis, at 30 dollars a night. I also took with me many of the art materials that so many people have kindly donated and left the centre really well equipped. I paid for my flight myself and I did the teaching for free.

The visit also gave me the opportunity to further my thoughts and plans for a manual of art projects which centres such as Onesimus could use.

My conversation with Kanu left me in no doubt about the value of this project. It was an incredibly memorable conversation, reinforcing my view that engagement with art is empowering and healing. His words were so heartfelt and genuine and moved me deeply, a conversation I will never forget.

I am most grateful for the interest and enthusiasm showed by so many of you, I can assure you that the enthusiasm of the children and their concentrated dedication to the projects showed that they loved every moment and I hope they will always remember their opportunity to do the workshops.



Sarah Moncrieff
Time for Art
April 2019

Feedback with Kanu Toma

Kanu Toma is one of Onesimus' key workers. He goes out onto the streets of Addis Ababa and finds children that can be offered help.

I asked him to tell me what the centre offered the children and for his views on how the week of art activities had gone.

He told me:

"When the children come to the centre we do activities with them. Some basic education such as maths, science, and some drawing. In addition we offer counselling and identify their problems. We talk about the difficulties of the street and advise on how to overcome those challenges.

We ask them about their interests and future plans and we talk about how they can accomplish those plans tailoring our advice to their behaviour. Most of the children are very hyperactive with multiple emotional problems resulting from the abuse and neglect they experience on the street.

We reassure them that we love them and that we are here to help and that Onesimus is their home. We try and answer their questions and teach them about rules and ethics, the things they should and shouldn't do in life."

Kanu who has a Degree in special educational needs and a Masters in holistic child development is well qualified to help the children with their behavioural and emotional problems. He is also aware of how to nurture children and he told me that sadly many parents do not know how to nurture their children. He works with those parents to help them with that also. From time to time professionals are invited in, for example psychologists. I asked Kanu what he thought of the week of art workshops He told me.

"This has been a fantastic opportunity for Onesimus. We have all observed how the children have been really excited and happy and that has been amazing for us to see. The painting and art activities are changing their lives. They have allowed the children to give themselves some value and self-esteem.

They are doing something that they have never done before and they can see for themselves that they can do it. The children are saying to themselves "I can do this" or "I've actually done that". They have all been amazed by their own skills and ability and this has given them hope for their futures.

The art activities seem simple to you, Sarah, but for them they are not simple. The experience is totally new and a great opportunity for them, it has brought them into a new environment. Sarah, you have brought with you your welcome and your spirit and your love and the children can see that and it has made the children excited and that's great for them. This is your skill and is what you can give and you have given it to us here.

It has also been something totally new and inspiring for the staff also. We have been just as excited. Before you came we had no idea of projects you could do. We have seen the children this week being quiet, working together and absorbed in their work and able to forget about their hard life on the streets. On the street the children are neglected and abused and unable to think of themselves in a good way but you have washed that away for them."

Sarah Moncrieff and Kanu Toma, April 2019

Conversation with Ysackh

Ysackh is the second eldest of six children. He is from a rural community 50 km from the city of Hoseana which in turn is over 200km from Addis Ababa.

Approximately 3 months ago key project worker from Onesimus, Kanu Toma, found Ysackh waiting on the curb at the central bus station in Addis Ababa. This is where many of the street children hang out in the hope of making a bit of money carrying bags for people getting on and off the buses. He was sitting in filthy clothes on the road just waiting. Kanu spoke with him and invited him to the centre telling him about the activities there and the support offered. Ysackh started to come to the centre every day. According to the centre staff, Ysackh is really bright, being particularly good at maths and he is keen to continue his education. His plan for the future is to be a pilot.

The centre staff found and contacted Ysackh's parents and returned with him to his home. He said that he wanted to return home. His family were very surprised to see him as they had believed him to be dead having not seen him in three years. Once at home he started to go to school again. However the problems he had experienced prior to leaving home when he was 10 years old merely returned. His father did not want to go to school and he disapproved of him wanting to read and do homework, expecting him to go out and find work instead. After a short period of time Ysackh left home again and returned to Addis Ababa. Kanu spotted him one day and since then Ysackh has returned to the centre on a daily basis.

The centre's plans for Ysackh are to help him find work during the day by buying him the equipment he needs to set up as a shoe shiner on the streets of Addis Ababa and supporting him to continue his education in the evenings at night school. The centre will keep track of him and check on him daily at first and then weekly. The longer term plan is to rent a room for him and several fellow street children so that they have somewhere to sleep.



I spoke to Ysackh the end of the week about his experiences doing the art sessions with me and what if anything he felt he had gained. He told me as follows:

"I enjoyed the art sessions very much. I enjoyed painting the flags belonging to the different tribes and Ethiopian and the abstract watercolour designs the most. I have never had the chance to do anything like this before and I would love to be able to do it again especially if I could draw elephants, lions and tigers as there are elephants where I live."

I asked him what he thought about whilst he was involved in the sessions. He told me: "I was happy whilst doing them and thought to myself how lucky I was to get such a chance to paint and draw because there are a lot of street children who don't get the opportunity. I'd love it if they could have the same chance"

I asked him whether if he had the chance to do it again whether he would he like to. He said he would and that he would recommend the experience to his friends. He went on to tell me:

"I'm upset because the street is hard, but things in my life force me to stay on the street. I forgot everything when I came here to do the art."

I asked Ysackh if he felt he'd learnt anything from the experience and he replied:

"We all got a new skill and talent. We didn't know we had this talent before but we know that now. We can do these activities. If we have the opportunity to do more we would definitely do it."