

Editor's Note

Posted on [February 14, 2010](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [3 comments](#)

Paper or Plastic? No. Electronic!

The HERALD announces its move to the Internet. Paper copies discontinued. Big, better, brighter—and surely more frequent—issues are promised

By Barry Hillenbrand (Debre Marcos 63-65)

After printing 36 issues spanning a period more than 20 years, THE HERALD, our informative but quirky newsletter, is now electronic. Gone is the paper version of THE HERALD printed on its distinctive beige paper. In its place is this new electronic version of THE HERALD that will be available here on the Internet at [EandEHerald.com](#).



PAPER NO MORE: the last printed issue

I can hear some of you say: Why Change? Paper was so satisfying

A number of very compelling reasons convinced the Board of Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs

to unanimously approve this move. At the time of the last issue of the HERALD we offered readers the opportunity to download the issue as a pdf file, and forego receiving the paper version. The response was overwhelmingly in favor of the pdf version. The paper edition was abandoned by most readers in a mouse-click. Less than one per cent of our readers wrote us (using, ironically, email) to say they wanted to continue with the paper edition. Emailed Margaret Bertucco, "I so enjoy the last remnants of the 20th Century and look forward to holding a paper copy of the newsletter."

In my heart I cannot disagree with Margaret. I love reading paper publications. I read three newspapers a day. I love the feel of them. I love non-Kindle books. I spent a 34-year career writing for a magazine, and in the years I have been editing the HERALD I found great satisfaction fiddling with the type fonts and page layouts and seeing the finished produce all neatly bound.

But it is also true that most of us these days get increasingly more of our information delivered to us over the Internet directly onto our computers. It may not be as comfortable reading long articles on the screen as it is on paper, but we are all gradually adjusting. Some of us devise work-around strategies. One HERALD reader told us that if a HERALD article in the pdf version was too long to comfortably read on screen, he printed it out and read it sitting in his chair.

Another reason we are switching to electronic delivery is that producing a 56-page edition of THE HERALD was enormously time-consuming and costly. Under the stewardship of Marian Beil, who started THE HERALD as a simple newsletter before an E&E RPCVs reunion, THE HERALD has grown into a fairly big production running up to 56 pages. It takes me two or three weeks of steady work to write and edit an issue. Marian then spends another week or two laying the issue out and preparing it for the printer. It costs more \$1,000 to print the issue and send it out by first class mail.

And frankly I was finding it harder and harder to fit the blocks of time necessary to do the issue into my retirement life. The old journalistic vigor is depleted. Regrettably the time between the appearance of each issue has grown longer and longer. I am sure you found that the news in the printed issue was often stale by the time it arrived in your mailbox.

So going electronic has lots of attractions: saving money, saving trees, saving time.

What will the new electronic Herald be like?

In a word: better. With this new format, articles will be posted online much more frequently and will contain fresher news. The publication of new articles will be announced via email to those who support the efforts of E&E RPCVs by paying the modest annual fee (we will get to the dreaded money issue further down!).

Marian says the HERALD is the glue that holds our group together. It's the way we learn about group activities: about reunions, special projects, the Legacy fund. And it keeps us up to date with developments in Peace Corps and news from Ethiopia and Eritrea. The new electronic HERALD will also keep us informed on the big 50th Anniversary of Peace Corps scheduled for September 2011.

You will be getting the same old familiar sections, delivered in easily digested segments every few weeks: Sports, News of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Reunions, news of Friends, updates on the Legacy projects, Travel stories from RPCVs who make return visits to Ethiopia or Eritrea, reviews of books and films about Ethiopia and Eritrea, News of the PCVs now serving in Ethiopia. But there will be more: we can publish color pictures. We can provide links to other sites which will offer more detail for those who want to explore a topic beyond what we publish. In the print edition we had to keep articles short and Internet links were difficult to use, now articles can run a bit longer. And we can publish more articles because we are not limited to a 48-page paper format.

To do all this, we hope you can help us

First, we need people to get current with their E&E RPCVs fees. In the past we know that this was a difficult task because of the irregularity — and infrequency — of the appearance of the HERALD. Nobody could remember the last time they paid up. But now that we are online, THE HERALD will be more frequent and more regular. Online publishing is cheaper than the paper method, but it is not free. So the annual fee to defray costs for THE HERALD and the other services we provide to the RPCVs has been lower to \$10 a year or \$25 for three years. Your fee will also help finance the work of organizing E&E RPCVs' plans for the 50th Anniversary celebration of Peace Corps. So please send that to Marian at

E&E RPCVs
c/o Beil
492 Staten Ave #1003
Oakland CA 94610

Secondly, we need you to submit writing, pictures, ideas to THE HERALD. It gets a little lonely out here producing THE HERALD. We need to hear from you. I thank the few faithful writers who have regularly sent stories and reviews to the old print HERALD. I hope they continue to help us. But we need new writers and new contributors. We need stories about your Ethiopia-, Eritrea-related activities. About visits back to Africa, about work with groups in your area, news of old friends and reunions. The writing need not be formal. Think of it as sending an email to a bunch of old Peace Corps friends, which is, of course, what we all are. Send us some favorite picture you've recently had converted to digital from those dusty old slides.

Please send all submissions to me at herald.editor@ethiopiaeritrearpcvs.org

I will eagerly post submissions, as long as they relate to Ethiopia, Eritrea and our Peace Corps service there. News of reunions—big and small—is especially welcome.

So thank you for your patience. I will miss the old paper edition of THE HERALD but I am eagerly looking forward to a more active electronic HERALD.

Barry Hillenbrand, editor



GOING ELECTRONIC: Editor Hillenbrand

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PCVs in Ethiopia

Posted on [February 14, 2010](#) by [bhillenbrand](#) | [9 comments](#)

Getting to know you – once again

The first group of the new batch of Ethiopia PCVs heads home after two years. The verdict: hard work and many rewards, great and simple. Peace Corps now has solid roots in Ethiopia

by *Christen Smith (Debre Marcos 2007-2009)*

The September dawn of the new Ethiopian year found me back with my host family in Weliso, nearly two years after I had stumbled awkwardly into their lives as a newly arrived Volunteer from America. Much had changed since then. My little sister, just three years old when we met, was starting to read and write, and my little brother had transformed from a clumsy boy of twelve to a stylishly dressed young man of fourteen. My momma's oldest son had perceptibly shed the immaturity of his early twenties and was increasingly stepping into a role as "man of the house."

My adoptive relatives, however, were not the only ones who had grown. As lively conversation filled the house along with the sweet, spicy aroma of the traditional doro wot, I found myself able to engage fully in the festivities, bantering in my improved Amharic and showing off my familiarity and ease with Ethiopian holiday customs.

Though I had always been treated as a member of the family and a member of the Weliso community, now I truly felt it. And now as my momma played the gracious hostess, introducing me to the stream of relatives, friends, and neighbors that filtered through the house throughout the day, I found that the majority of our guests simply replied, “Yes, I know, I already know her.”

As the first group of Volunteers entering Ethiopia since Peace Corps’ exit from the country in 1999, we have spent most of our two years letting Ethiopia get to know us. To be sure, there is an entire generation of Ethiopians who remember fondly their Peace Corps teachers and will not hesitate to ask us, with eager light in their eyes, if we know “Mr. John” or “Miss Kim.” Yet ten years of absence and the initiation of a new health program, rather than Peace Corps’ more familiar work in education, has placed the task of reteaching on our shoulders.



The coffee ceremony

Starting work with our community counterparts meant first correcting their assumptions that we would pay their salaries, provide them with computers, or purchase new Land Cruisers for their organizations. We became well acquainted with that puzzled expression that would come over the faces of community members when we tried to explain that our role was to “establish linkages,” “build capacity,” and “empower the community to help itself.”



Lalibela door

I showed up on the doorsteps of countless local organizations, offering free labor and all but begging them to find a use for my skills, to be told with a smile and a handshake, “We will certainly call you.” I will let you guess how many calls I received. The process of finding work in our communities was slow, and, discouraged — some of us left Peace Corps Ethiopia. Out of the 42 who completed training and swore in as Volunteers, 19 of us will finish our service at the end of the year. Many of those who left did so in order to pursue jobs or graduate study, while two Volunteers transferred to an English-teaching Peace Corps program in China. (Seven were forced to leave the program due to medical, safety, or administrative circumstances.)

Nevertheless, despite the uphill path we have traveled, Peace Corps has accomplished encouraging results in its first two years in-country. In two years, Peace Corps Volunteers have reached 6,477 people with HIV prevention messages, linked 2,987 HIV-positive people to care and support services, and met the needs of 2,631 orphans and vulnerable children. Within their communities, Volunteers have developed data-management and referral systems for hospitals, taught life and relationship skills to Ethiopian youth, and established small business ventures, including local mills and computer centers, to help people living with HIV to support themselves.

Working in Dessie, Volunteer Nichole Starr developed a home-based care manual and used it to conduct trainings for people caring for AIDS patients. Nancy Ross in Adama organized soccer tournaments for children orphaned or otherwise made vulnerable by the AIDS epidemic. Eden Yimam organized small-scale farmers in his town, Dejen, into a sustainable agricultural enterprise that makes most effective use of their shared land. Meanwhile, Karen Preskey in Agaro created a support group for HIV-positive mothers, training mentor-mothers and antenatal care providers to increasingly prevent mother-to-child transmission of the virus. These examples represent just a small slice of the varied work conducted by Peace Corps Volunteers in their first two years in Ethiopia.

Over these past two years, we have also seen growth and improvement in our program itself. At the outset, Peace Corps Ethiopia struggled to define goals and objectives that were appropriate for Ethiopia and realistic for Volunteers. We wrestled with questions of where we should work, with whom we should partner, and in what sorts of areas we should focus. Staff turnover in our first year was nearly constant, leading to a lack of consistency in policies and vision. We are still attempting to arrive at the best working relationship between the Peace Corps office, Volunteers, and the Ethiopians with whom we work. The goal is for Peace Corps to support Volunteers in their efforts to meet the needs of Ethiopians and their organizations, but without intruding upon PCVs' work or treating them like children. Using the input of the two training groups of Volunteer now in Ethiopia, however, we are slowly but surely arriving at that point.



In Axum

As an example, I, along with three fellow Volunteers and five of our Ethiopian language and culture trainers, have been involved with efforts to improve language training to better prepare Volunteers to live and work in their communities. We spent a number of grueling, full weeks together hashing out issues of content, fighting to help each other understand cultural differences in teaching and learning between Ethiopians and Americans, and eventually producing a new manual to serve as the basis for future language trainings. At the end of this gargantuan task, as we reflected upon what we had accomplished together, one of our Ethiopian colleagues warmly thanked us for “teaching us [the Ethiopian trainers] so many things about the Amharic language.” It was one of those very poignant Peace Corps moments that teaches you that just by taking another’s perspective, you can learn new things about subjects you thought you already knew everything about. That is undoubtedly what I will miss most about Peace Corps, the opportunity to challenge myself with new perspectives and use those perspectives to create positive change, both in myself and the world around me.

As I approached the end of my service, I realized how much of Ethiopia has entered into who I am. There are the big things, such as a greater value on time spent simply enjoying the company of friends and neighbors, sitting and sharing life together. And then there are the little things, too, like my astounding lack of hesitation in consuming buttered meat for breakfast, or my now ingrained impulse to accompany expressions of greeting, thanks, or even simple acknowledgement with a respectful bow of the head. I’ll miss strolling through beautiful countryside, walking into town with an entourage of sheep and donkeys, sitting on the balcony of my favorite juice bar, enjoying a fresh mango-guava-avocado mix and watching the colorful parade of people and goods heading to market. Of course, there are also elements of Ethiopian life that I think I’ll do fine without — the constant attention, the “YouYouYou!”s and “MoneyMoneyMoney!”s, the almost complete nonexistence of women in social arenas. But with all its ups and downs, joys and frustrations, every moment of my Peace Corps experience in Ethiopia has taught me something that I will always carry with me.

For all of us Volunteers, Ethiopia will forevermore be a part of our lives. I believe that through the friendships we have made and the work that we have done, we have had a lasting impact on Ethiopia, too. If nothing else, maybe when future groups of Volunteers explain that they are with the Peace Corps, they will be met with the response, “Yes, I know, I already know it.”

Editor’s note: Christen, along with other members of her group, left Ethiopia in mid-November. She is now living in Winston-Salem, N.C.

In December, 41 new PCVs were sworn in at the U.S. Embassy in Addis. This is the third group to serve in Ethiopia since Peace Corps returned in 2007. This brings the total of PCVs to have worked in Ethiopia to 3,012. Peace Corps/Ethiopia is currently focused on HIV/AIDS prevention, care and support, and assistance to orphans and vulnerable children. They work in partnership with the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, commonly called PEPFAR.

Posted in [PCVs in Ethiopia](#)

9 Comments

Books

Posted on February 10, 2010 by [bhillenbrand](#) | [6 comments](#)

A vivid slice of Ethiopian life and history

A famed doctor and accomplished medical writer spins out a novel about Ethiopia. This graphic page-turner runs more than 500 pages, but a Peace Corps doctor who worked the wards in Dessie's hospital says it's relentlessly authentic

[Cutting for Stone](#)

by Abraham Verghese

Knopf hardback \$26.95

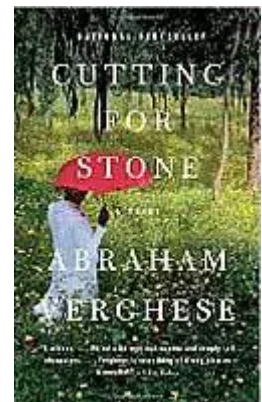
Vintage paperback \$15.95

Reviewed by Robert Mayer, Peace Corps Physician 65-67

Dr. Abraham Verghese is neither Ethiopian nor part of the Peace Corps family. Even so, this bulky first novel verbally displays wonderful images of the country, especially of Addis in the '60s and '70s. The author modifies some of the chronology of events of that period but many of the events are true and provide context for this readable and moving book. For those of you who have a weakness for medical novels, a strong stomach, and an interest in obsessively chronicled medical detail this book should interest you.

As a writer, Verghese was acclaimed for his first nonfiction book, "My Own Country", which has become a must-read for medical students seeking to understand the AIDS plague of the '80s; his other career is as a specialist in infectious diseases at Stanford Medical School. In this book he takes full advantage of Ethiopia's fertile environment for such maladies, and he covers the ground from the familiar hepatitis and dysentery to the less common typhus and relapsing fever, finishing with a treatise on the ravages of untreated syphilis. I admit this medical review brought back vivid memories of trying, often without success, to identify and treat the many severe systemic infections I saw daily during a three-month stint at the Dessie Hospital in 1965.

The book takes its title from an obscure proscription in the Hippocratic oath ("I will not cut for stone..."), but also plays on the novel's penetration into the history of three generations of the Stone family. The protagonist, Marion Stone, is born to an Indian Catholic nun in a mission hospital in Addis (called "Missing" in the novel, a distortion of the Amharic tongue) and becomes an instant orphan when his mother dies in childbirth and his presumed father, super-surgeon Thomas Stone, goes missing himself. In one of Verghese's less successful flights of fancy, Marion is born



conjoined to his twin brother through a narrow bridge of skin connecting them head to head, a harmless anomaly for the twins but a major contributor to their mother's death from complications of delivery. In fact less than a quarter of conjoined twins survive, and the novelist's contrivance, with which he plays throughout the book to emphasize the interconnectedness of the siblings, would be an extreme rarity in an already very rare condition.

Although the book is not identified as autobiographical, Marion Stone follows a route similar to that traveled by the author in becoming a physician. Verghese was born in Ethiopia of Indian parents and attended Addis Ababa Medical School briefly before being forced to leave the country in 1973 due to political chaos. He worked in menial jobs in a hospital near New York City and began to settle into a routine when he found himself drawn back to his interest in becoming a doctor.

Because our medical establishment would not recognize his partial training in Ethiopia, he went to his ethnic country of origin and completed medical school in India, then took a residency position in a small hospital in Tennessee. This is where he became immersed in the AIDS epidemic, which in turn started him off on his writing career. Verghese is credentialed in both medicine (his unique professorship at Stanford permits him to write whatever he wishes on "company time" beyond his teaching and clinical responsibilities) and literature (M.F.A. from the Iowa Writers' Workshop), according to a [feature article](#) about Verghese published in the Washington Post last year.

As in most good novels, romance is sparsely but passionately portrayed in this book, often with wrenching effect on familial bonds. Shiva, the protagonist's brother, registers an Apgar score (medicine's initial rating of quality of life) of close to zero at birth but somehow survives and becomes the more successful twin professionally. He develops pioneering approaches to the surgical treatment of vaginal fistula, the tragic outcome of prolonged unsuccessful delivery in countries without adequate obstetrical care. He remains in the shadow of his brother interpersonally, with social skills suggesting Asperger's syndrome.

The brothers are raised by a peculiar but kind expatriate medical pair who work at Missing and do their best to fill the void created by the death of Sister Mary Joseph Praise and the flight of Dr. Stone. The twins share their childhood with Genet, an Eritrean girl who charms Marion as an adolescent but, as she reaches for adulthood, wreaks havoc on the boys' attachment. Genet eventually forces Marion's abrupt exile from the kingdom through her involvement in the Eritrean People's Liberation Front. In the end, and on a different continent, father and sons reunite, and, in another twist of medical fancy, the twins again share tissue through the actions of their father. This "re-union" has its unfortunate downside however.

For me at least this novel became a page-turner not only because of its often captivating if sometimes fantastic story line but also by necessity to push through the heavy doses of medical jargon and sometimes overdone literary flourishes:

He took a leak by the roadside. A hyena laughed, whether at his action or his equipment he couldn't be sure.

In the Washington Post article referred to above, Verghese calls the novel a medical epic, saying "It's all there. I left nothing out". This is indeed both the draw and the curse of the book. Nonetheless, I enjoyed the read and will keep my eyes open for Verghese's next work, hoping that either he or his editor will apply a more forceful hand to the literary scalpel before final closure.

Click on the book cover or the bold book title to order from Amazon and Ethiopia & Eritrea RPCVs, an Amazon Associate, will receive a small remittance. All earnings from Amazon will go to the RPCV Legacy Program.