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^Americans adopting HIV-positive kids from Ethiopia<

%xhl(More Americans adopting HIV-positive children from abroad,
particularly Ethiopia%)

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available for use.<

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^By ANITA POWELL=

^Associated Press Writer=

¶ ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia (AP) _ Solomon Henderson inherited
just three things from his birth parents, who left him at an
Ethiopian orphanage when he was 1 year old: a picture of Jesus,
a plastic crucifix and **HIV**.

¶ As one of some 14,000 Ethiopian children born with the virus
every year, Solomon's prospects for survival _ much less
adoption _ were grim. But Erin Henderson's heart stirred when
she saw him, and she decided, on the spot, to adopt him.

¶ "They told me that they weren't sure he would live through
the weekend," Henderson said by e-mail from her home in rural
Wyoming, where she lives with her husband and 11 children, two
of whom are **HIV**-positive adoptees from Ethiopia.

¶ Solomon, now an active 2-year-old with chubby cheeks and a
shy smile, is part of a small but growing movement: Americans
adopting **HIV**-positive children from abroad.

¶ Figures from U.S.-based Adoption Advocates International,
the agency that arranges the majority of **HIV**-positive adoptions
in Ethiopia, show a clear and steady rise, from two such
adoptions in 2005, four in 2006, 13 in 2007, and 38 either
completed or pending this year.

¶ The U.S. Embassy corroborates the trend, although its numbers are slightly different because it counts adoptions according to fiscal year. So far this year, the embassy said, Americans have adopted 25 HIV-positive children from Ethiopia, up from seven the year before.

¶ Ethiopia is at the forefront of the trend, in part because it is a well-established adoption hub. But countries including China, Ghana, Haiti and Russia also have seen increases, although the numbers remain small — fewer than five children in each country this year, according to U.S. adoption agencies that work with HIV-positive children. The figures could be higher, however, as many nations do not ask if a departing child has HIV.

¶ The motivations are wide-ranging — some parents say they were driven by religion or a desire for social change, or that the disease is more manageable than ever before. Others, like Julie Hehn, gave more personal reasons.

¶ "I was just scrolling through these pictures, and I saw the photo of Tsegenet, and I said, 'Oh my God, that's my daughter,'" said Hehn, a 53-year-old elementary school teacher from Edmonds, Wash.

¶ Hehn said she was not looking for an HIV-positive child when she decided to adopt from Ethiopia.

¶ "I fell in love with Tsegenet and it just happens she's HIV-positive," said Hehn, who has 27 children, 19 of them adopted from Ethiopia and five adopted from the U.S.

¶ At a recent goodbye party at an orphanage in Addis Ababa, a 9-year-old girl who was heading to the United States with her adoptive family gave a shy smile as her friends ate doughnuts and sang farewell songs.

¶ The children — all of whom have HIV or AIDS and are looking for new families — belted out an Ethiopian hymn called "No one is ashamed of you."

¶ Ethiopian adoptions to the United States peaked at 1,255 in 2007, and the adoption of HIV-positive children is growing in step, according to U.S. government figures. American adoptions in Ethiopia have steadily risen from 135 in 2003, to 289 in 2004 to 440 in 2005 to 731 in 2006.

¶ So far, none of the children adopted through Adoption Advocates International in Ethiopia since 2005 has died. The oldest is now 13 years old.

¶ Margaret Fleming, the founder of Chances By Choice, an international HIV-positive adoption advocacy group that connects parents with HIV-positive children and adoption agencies, said her group also has overseen adoptions of children from Haiti, Guatemala and Russia.

¶ Fleming said her group has helped bring about 52 international HIV-positive adoptions since 2002 from assorted adoption agencies and countries, including Ethiopia.

¶ Fleming, who has three HIV-positive children in her own brood of 12 children, said she wanted to make a difference in the world.

¶ "I feel like I'm on the cutting edge of making an impact on this epidemic," Fleming, 72, said by telephone from her office in Chicago. "It's given us a chance to be ambassadors, and our children to be ambassadors."

¶ Over the past decade, HIV has become a manageable, chronic disease, rather than a death sentence. Some children, like Solomon, require daily medication that can cost between \$700 and \$1,500 a month, though all parents planning to adopt children with HIV are required to carry health insurance, so costs are usually less.

¶ Others, like Tsegenet Hehn, have been told by doctors that the low levels of the virus in their blood mean they don't need any medication.

¶ "She doesn't get sick any more than my other children," said Hehn, who said another daughter, who has a condition that makes her react violently to wheat and gluten products, requires more care than Tsegenet does.

¶ U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services Michael Leavitt said HIV-positive adoptees pose no public health threat in America. Congress is set to repeal legislation that requires those with HIV to get waivers to enter the U.S. For adopted children with HIV, the waiver requirement can increase the nine- to 12-month adoption process by about two weeks.

¶ "The American people are compassionate people," Leavitt told the AP on a visit to the Ethiopian capital, Addis Ababa. "I applaud their compassion and I'm delighted to know they're doing so."

¶ But parents overwhelmingly say the reward is theirs.

¶ "I have learned so much from Tsegenet," Hehn said. "I have learned to be more patient and kind through Tsegenet."

¶ Like some parents interviewed, Hehn says she insists on being open with everyone about her daughter's condition.

¶ "I'm a teacher. I want to educate everybody I can educate," she said. "And I believe it is the only way we can erase the stigma. I am not going to tell her that there is not one part of her that is not beautiful and wonderful and pure."