

# TELLURIDE ACADEMY

## Hands across Ethiopia



It's true. You never have enough hands in Ethiopia. Here, on April 10, Kira Hamblin walks to the hot springs outside Wondo Genet, Ethiopia, with local kids on each hand. [Photo by Abby Erdman]

**By Wendy Brooks**

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In Ethiopia, you never have enough hands. A dozen kids will fight to hold onto one of your 10 fingers as you walk down the rutted dirt roads that connect the staff motel to the school and the tea garden and the disco shop and the rows of mud huts with thatched roofs that house an average of 10 family members each. Even with 16 American students and seven staff, there were still never enough hands to hold the hundreds of kids who had never seen, much less touched, an

American. They wanted some contact with us and we were delighted and overwhelmed with the friendship offered us on our first trip to Africa.

The Mudd Butt Mystery Theater Troupe, a program of the Telluride Academy, is the 23-year-old brainchild of Sally Davis and Kim Epifano. Seven years after Mudd Butts began, we added a spring break trip to a third world country for the older Mudd Butts and alums; this was organized by me. This year the staff included not only the three originals, but prop master Mike Stasiuk from New Hampshire, musician and script writer Clay Frohman from Los Angeles and Academy staffers Luke Brown and Jeremy Baron.

Mudd Butts is about expanding one's personal boundaries, playing new roles, exploring new emotions and relationships. Mudd Butts International is about pushing the personal boundaries ever wider, moving out of the physical and social comfort zone and becoming a part of a third world village for two weeks. MBI, as it is called, has been to villages in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Oceania, Central and South America, and now Africa. Two-hundred twenty-three students, age 11-18, have been on one or more of these life-changing excursions which involve living with a host family, totally immersing oneself in the culture and spending four hours a day creating a performance piece for the host school community. MBI has been creating teen ambassadors for 16 years; some are already beginning to change the world we live in. They have a priceless experience as young teens, learning how everyone in the world lives, loves and laughs and comes together when the time and place are right.

Our 16th international trip went to Wondo Genet, Ethiopia, a landmark community five hours due west of Addis Ababa. Maybe 20,000 people live there; nobody really knows. Emperor Haile Selassie chose this spot as his "Camp David." He loved the hot springs north of town that flowed out of the dense jungle. He built a weekend getaway that is now a government-run retreat center consisting of a hotel, hot springs pools, a Coptic Christian church and our favorite restaurant, the Shebelle.

Eight local families in Wondo were chosen to host our group of 16 students; all lived in the village just down the hill from the hot springs in modest two, three or four room concrete houses. Ben Kirton of Houston said living with a host family made him feel "fortunate and lucky. The house I stayed in with my host family was made of mud. There were no glass windows, only wooden shutters. Twelve of us lived in four rooms." The kitchens, latrine, showers and animal stables were outside. Since the food was very modest and there was no hot water in the homes, we loved the days when we'd take morning excursion to bathe in the hot springs and then have lunch at the Shebelle.

Whenever and wherever we walked in the village, we gathered a huge audience. We were the first group of white people to spend time living and working with kids in Wondo. Mudd Butt students come on the trip anxious to do whatever it takes to become part of a family and a community halfway around the world. Through daily meetings with staff and problem-solving among themselves, the students break through barriers and create relationships with their new families that, always, produce copious tears on the last day.

Emily Erdman of Madison Wisconsin had been to Nicaragua, Turkey and India with MBI. She said that this year on the first evening "our host brothers and sisters treated us like a dangerous

exhibit at a museum. They simply stared. The easiest thing by far would have been to retreat from the family entirely, but we figured it was only two weeks and we plowed on. As it always happens, things got better. Night stopped becoming something I dreaded and instead I began to plan what I would do with the kids hours before I started on the path home. We were no longer an exhibit and our host family was no longer bystanders on our trip.”

Olivia Johnson from Phoenix said that “My new environment was overwhelming at times, with all of the kids yelling “you you you you” from the street. Who taught them the word “you” and to always say it four times? I really learned how vast and diverse our world is.”

Besides living with host families, the Mudd Butts had four hours each afternoon of theater practice building toward a series of performances for the community. The local school in Wondo had chosen 16 of their students to participate in the classes with our 16 students. Although all the Wondo students were in the eighth grade, their ages ranged from 13 to 20! The play chosen was a local folk tale “Fire on the Mountain,” adapted to include a sub-plot about deforestation: the jungle growth that Selassie loved so much is being systematically cut down, daily, by villagers with no other means of supporting themselves.

Kira Hamblin of Telluride said that leaving her host family home and “walking to Mudd Butts practice at the school each day, the kids would follow us as if we were movie stars walking down the red carpet.” Once practice began, Lucy Weil of Washington DC said. “we got to spend time with our Ethiopian Mudd Butt counterparts. All of them were amazing, outgoing and funny. It was extraordinary getting to know them. They all had such talent in singing and dancing. I got to know each and every one of them. “ Practices became more focused; parts were given out with each character in the play assumed by one Ethiopian who said the lines in Amharic and one American who said the lines in, of course, English. Through this complex means of scripting, the local and Telluride students assigned to be any particular character must work together diligently, being costumed the same, speaking and gesturing as one and moving in unison. This unique form of theater makes the MBI productions an extraordinary message about a “oneness in the world.” Whether we are working with speakers of Tibetan, Balinese, Vietnamese, Turkish or Amharic, the bi-lingual world speaks to the audience in a compelling way. It is a small part of Kim and Sally’s genius.

Almost 1,000 people saw our shows; we hosted a cast party for the local thespians and the host families — at the Shebelle of course — and 130 people came! All too soon, it was time to board the bus back to Addis, to Rome, to DC and home to Telluride. We landed on April 20.

Emma Gerona, a 12 year old from Telluride, summarized the group’s feelings on the way home: “This trip affected me hugely. When you experience something so amazing, so life changing, you become a whole new person. That is who I am, a whole new person.”

TO SEE a slideshow of student/staff photos and portions of the show performed in Wondo Genet, please attend our gathering on May 28 at 7 p.m. in the Program Room at the Library. For more information, call the Academy at 728-5311.