



Asfaw Yemiru

When Asfaw Yemiru was nine he lived alone on the streets of Ethiopia’s capital city Addis Ababa. He started his first school at the age of 14. Now he’s 66, and has helped tens of thousands of poor children to go to school and achieve a better life.

“Asfaw is a very simple man. His only riches are all of his students,” says Behailu Eshete who attended Asfaw’s first class 52 years ago.

Asfaw’s story begins when he is nine years old, watching over his father’s goats. His father has decided that Asfaw is to start attending the village priest-school in a few days. But Asfaw has no interest in this. He had been to the capital Addis Ababa with his father, and has wanted to return ever since. He believes he can have a much better life in Addis Ababa than if he remains in the village with his eleven siblings and looks after goats. But Addis Ababa is a long way away and Asfaw knows that his mother and father would never agree to him moving.

“It usually takes more

than two days to get to the city by donkey, so it will take even longer to walk,” he thinks. Early the next morning he heads off to Addis Ababa.

Work and school

When he passes by St. George’s church in Addis

Ababa, Asfaw sees many poor orphaned children there. Since he has no money he also goes into the church. Asfaw spends the night there. He spends the next night in the church as well.

Asfaw takes a job as a bearer. Sometimes several days go by without him having anything to eat. Like many of the other poor children Asfaw begins to attend the church’s priest school when he doesn’t work. He learns quickly and the priests help him to attend a catholic school.

One day a rich woman passes the church with a large basket full of cheeses.



The children also learn about agriculture and other practical skills they need so that they can always support themselves.

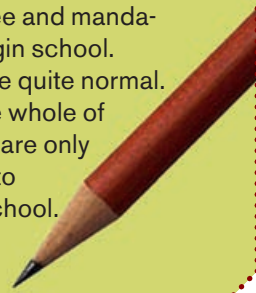


WHY IS ASFAW A NOMINEE?

Asfaw Yemiru has been nominated as WCPRC Decade Child Rights Hero 2009 because he has spent 45 years, since he was 14, devoting all of his time and energy to fighting for the rights of the most deprived children. Asfaw believes that education is the only way to help poor children to improve their lives. He started his first school for children living on the streets in 1957 at the age of 14, after he himself had been living on the streets from the age of nine, working as a child labourer. Tens of thousands of poor children have received their education in Asfaw’s schools, and he has also offered support to their families by providing money and milk. Asfaw’s schools are free, and nobody has to pay for school books or buy a school uniform. Caning has always been forbidden in Asfaw’s schools, where the children also learn about farming and other practical skills. Asfaw’s struggle to give poor children the chance of a better life has been long and often hard – he has been in prison several times.

Good grades in Asfaw’s schools

Ethiopia is one of the world’s poorest countries. The country’s inhabitants have suffered repeatedly from war and drought, which has caused the deaths of millions of people. More than half of the population are children under 15. Nearly two out of every three Ethiopians can’t read or write. School is free and mandatory for the first six years, but less than half of all children ever begin school. Only one in ten children continue on to class 6. Big class sizes are quite normal. Asfaw’s Moya school has had the best class 8 exam results in the whole of Ethiopia for many years. There are several reasons for this. There are only 30 children in each class; the poor children are highly motivated to learn; caning is banned, and there is a good atmosphere in the school.





Asfaw pays a house call to some of his students.



One of the cheeses falls out of the basket.

“Excuse me! You dropped some cheese,” calls Asfaw and runs up to her.

The woman looks at him and offers him a job and a place to stay at her home. Asfaw accepts and for the next three years he works for the woman and her two sons. Every day he gets up before sunrise and chops wood and fetches water before he runs off to school. Despite hurrying he often arrives late and is beaten by the teachers. When Asfaw comes home from school he is tired, but he still has work to do. He never goes to sleep before late in the evenings.

Eat less!

Asfaw makes up eight school years of study in only a few years. When he takes the final exam in the eighth class his results are so good that he wins a scholarship to the outstanding Wingate boarding school.

When Asfaw is 14 he begins at Wingate. He likes the school very much, but one thing bothers him. The school is adjacent to Paulos Petros Church where many poor, orphaned children live. One day as he sits in the dining room and eats, Asfaw gets an idea.

“Imagine if we gave the left-over food to the poor children instead of throwing it away!”

Asfaw goes immediately to the headmaster, who thinks that Asfaw is absolutely right. Every day after lunch, Asfaw and his friends hand out food to the hungry

children. Asfaw asks his classmates to eat less so that there will be more food left for the poor. Many think this is good, but they still tease him a little.

“Look, here comes the boy who wants us to go hungry!” they call and laugh.

Asfaw also collects clothing from his classmates and gives it to the children outside the church. Some of the poor children ask Asfaw if they can’t be allowed to go to school exactly as he does. Asfaw speaks to some of his classmates and they decide that they themselves will try

to teach the children.

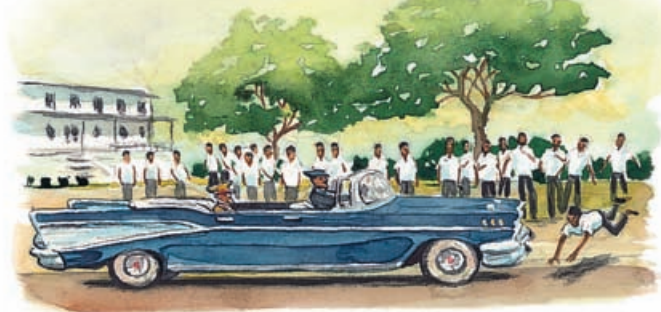
At 4.30 the next day Asfaw holds his first lesson under a big oak tree in the yard. The rumour about Asfaw’s school under the tree spreads quickly, and every day more and more poor children come.

Stop Emperor!

When Asfaw turns 17 and begins his last year at Wingate, some 200 children gather every afternoon at his school under the oak tree. Asfaw had planned to continue his studies at the university, but he feels that he can’t abandon all of the

STOP EMPEROR!

Give me land for a school!



A barefoot Asfaw (on the left) shows the emperor his new school.



The long march

Asfaw taking the lead during the 1,000-kilometre march to raise money for his schools.



Many of Asfaw's students live in simple shacks.



Asfaw pays a house call

When money is available the poorest families receive help from Asfaw, so they can let their children go to school instead of to work.

orphans under the tree. He decides to try to build a school where the children can both live and continue their education. But he has no money, and no land.

One day Wingate receives a visit from Ethiopia's Emperor, Haile Selassie. He has come to see how things are going for pupils at the country's best school. When the emperor is about to leave, Asfaw sees his chance. He throws himself on the ground before the emperor's car and cries out:

"Give us land!"

Everyone wonders in terror what will happen. The Emperor gets out of his car and approaches Asfaw.

"Why do you need land?" He asks.

"I want to build a school for poor children," answers Asfaw.

Some time later, Asfaw receives a large plot of land behind the Wingate School from the Emperor. Asfaw is able to borrow money from the headmaster at Wingate

and together with the children he begins to build the school and moves into it along with 280 orphaned children.

The long march

Ten years after the opening of the school Asfaw has 2,500 pupils and is "father" to 380 orphans. But Asfaw has two problems. Firstly, the school is getting very crowded and secondly, he realises that many of his students can't find a job after they graduate. Asfaw decides to build another school. At the new school, aside from learning maths, English and other subjects, the children will also learn about agriculture. If children learn, for example, how to grow vegetables and raise chickens, Asfaw hopes that they will be able to make a living, even if they don't find work.

As usual, Asfaw is short of money, but he has an idea...

"We will walk to Harar and back!" he tells some of

his oldest students one day.

They think he is joking because everyone knows that Harar is 500 kilometres away across the desert, half way to Somalia. But Asfaw explains to his students that they will send out information about their walk to international organisations, companies and rich people to get them to sponsor the walk.

They walk through the mountains and extremely hot steppes. They sleep under the stars. Every day some of the students give up, and finally there is only Asfaw left. He is the only one who walks the entire 1,000 kilometres.

Asfaw uses the phone book to write to the 5,000 richest people and companies in Ethiopia. He gets one answer! But finally money starts coming in, mostly from friends abroad. Asfaw buys a piece of land where, together with his students, he builds another school.

Asfaw's life has been a

long and often exhausting journey to help poor children. Under previous governments he was even imprisoned for his work.

Tens of thousands of children have received their education at Asfaw's schools since he began teaching orphaned children under that tree 52 years ago. But often Asfaw has felt unhappy that he couldn't help more children. 🌍

Asfaw's school Asere Hawariat for classes one to five.



Yewbneh

shines shoes and goes to the poor children's school

It takes Yewbneh, 12, an hour during the dry season to walk to Asfaw's school Asere Hawariat. He loves going to school, and it's his dream to one day be a doctor.

Yewbneh has been shining shoes for three hours and before that he has been in school the entire day. His back aches when he straightens up and counts his money. There's enough for a little bread and perhaps something else. Yewbneh's best friend Wondimageni has also finished work so they begin to walk home together.

When he comes home Yewbneh hangs up his worn work coat. Smoke from the cooking fires is heavy in the air, but in Yewbneh's home there won't be any warm dinner this evening either. It will be bread.

"We are poor. Life is hard and that is why I let you work every evening. I don't like to, but what can I do?"

sighs Grandmother Fikirte.

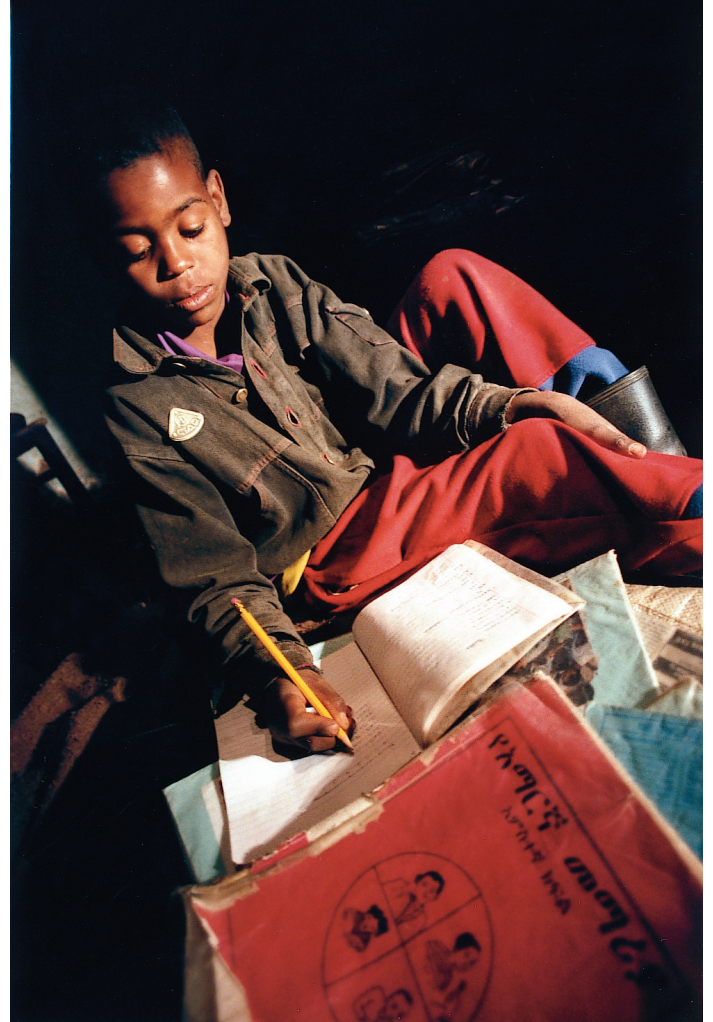
Yewbneh has always lived with his grandmother and her children because his own parents are dead.

"It is good to live with grandmother, but I am always sad when I think about my parents. I don't remember what they looked like."

No uniform

After dinner Yewbneh goes into his little brown mud house. Yewub, who is his aunt, is already waiting for him. They do lessons together every night under the only light bulb in the house.

Yewbneh thinks of Yewub as his sister. All of grandmother's children - and they are many - have become his



Yewbneh does his homework under the only light bulb in the house.

siblings. Ten adults and seven children share two small rooms..

"If I don't study I can never get a real job and then I will be poor my entire life," he says.

Grandmother agrees.

"Education is very important and we've been lucky. All of my children have been able to attend Asfaw's schools free and I have, in addition, been given money by the school every month to pay for electricity and to buy food and other things for the children. I would never have been able to afford to send the children to any other school."

Yewbneh knows that this is true.

"During my first year the school gave me 20 birr every month so that I could continue attending. Now I don't receive money as frequently because the school can no

longer afford it. But I still don't need to pay for going to school and we don't need to wear uniforms. No one

Yewbneh calls his aunt Kebebush sister. Here she pounds wheat.



Ten adults and seven children share two small rooms in Yewbneh's home.



Smack!

Just as Yewbneh walks past with his shoe-shining kit one of the boys squarely hits a ball, which is bound fast with a rope to a pole. The ball has been made of plastic bags by the boys themselves. The boys are playing Tezer-ball and when one of them misses it is time for a new player. They motion for Yewbneh to join the game, but he never has time.

“I think all children ought to be able to play after school instead of having to work,” says Yewbneh.



Yewbneh earns enough money for bread from the day's shoe shining.



would have the money to buy a uniform,” says Yewbneh.

Likes English

“I am not certain that I want to get married and have children. First I must find a job so that I can support them. If I can't do that I don't want to have children. I don't want my children to suffer as I have, to go to school and have to work at the same time. Children should be able to just go to school,” says Yewbneh.

“I would like to become a doctor. In Ethiopia there are very many poor people who have no access to a doctor. I would like to help them,” he says.

Someone rings the bell that hangs in the tree outside the classroom and recess is over. The teacher writes something on his blackboard. It says, “He shines shoes in the afternoon”, in English.

“Have I spelled it correctly?” he asks.

“Yes, it's right!” answers

the entire class in chorus.

It is the final lesson of the day and Yewbneh, who is in class five, has English. He looks for a moment at the blackboard and then writes the sentence in his notebook. “He cleans shoes in the afternoon”.

Long way to school

When the school day is over Yewbneh talks for a moment with his friends, but he can't stay for very long. It's a long way home. In the dry period it takes about one hour.

When the rains come he has to wade in mud and then it takes nearly twice as long.

“Hey there Yewbneh!” calls his ‘sister’ Kebebush, who is crushing wheat in the yard when he comes home.

He returns her greeting and puts down his brown school bag and eats a piece of bread before putting on his blue work coat. He goes to the water tap and fills his shoe-shining bucket. Just then his friend Wondimageni arrives and they go off together towards the road. 🌍

