

MidWeek

Agency Links Ethiopia To Island Homes

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By Carol Chang



Kristine Altwies and daughter Ava celebrate 1999 (in the Coptic Christian calendar) in 2006 in Ethiopia with her brother Justin, a former East Oahu resident, who has donned local clothes for the new year. Photo from Kristine Altwies.

An East Oahu woman is forging a humanitarian partnership between Hawaii and Ethiopia that could lead to the adoption of African orphans by Island couples next year.

Kristine Altwies Nicholson, a Waiialae Nui resident, is promoting National Adoption Month on radio, TV and throughout the community this November on behalf of Hawaii International Child, a non-profit adoption agency she's headed for many years. But there are other needs in the countries HIC serves. They staff orphanages in China and Vietnam, for example. And Ethiopia's needs? Everything.

"Africa and her children have always pulled at my heart for obvious reasons," explained Altwies, the single mother of 1-year-old girl. "The mission of HIC is to find homes for needy children, and Ethiopia has more than 1 million children orphaned by HIV/AIDS alone. One in six Ethiopian children dies before age 5, one in two is malnourished, and 7 percent don't have safe drinking water."

She, her daughter Ava and her brother spent a "wonderful, positive" two weeks there in September to set up an orphanage, medical care and education programs. She met with government officials and traveled to regions outside of Addis Ababa to visit needy keiki, bringing school supplies to more than 150 youngsters.

"Our plan is to establish a humanitarian program first, and see about placing children for adoption second." They are assessing the needs now, with full-time volunteer Jim Delano assigned to manage the project.

A former business executive with international experience, he will coordinate efforts between two Ethiopia universities and an NGO working with HIV/AIDS victims there. To give a tax-deductible gift to the cause, call 589-2367.

"Ethiopia is open and helpful with clear rules and regulations, and we're nationally accredited, so they are eager to work with us," Altwies said, noting also that recent torrential flooding there did not affect HIC's fledgling operations. The nation is a smooth fit in other ways as well. "There are no cultural or communication gaps, and we have a common understanding of the world."

In general, adoption of foreign children is easier for U.S. couples, she said, and the publicity surrounding adoptive celebrity mothers Angelina Jolie and Madonna actually helps bring attention to international adoptions.

"It's a way to build families, so they haven't done any harm. It would be a kinder, gentler world if we all had this experience."

With help from Altwies' dedicated, committed staff of 13 women, HIC has placed more than 3,000 children into loving homes from Asia and Europe since 1975, and it runs Hawaii's only direct child adoption programs in China and Kazakhstan.

An orientation for potential adoptive parents will be held at 5:30 p.m. Dec. 5 in the HIC office.