

Doctor devotes his life to healing in Ethiopia

'Saving one life is like saving the world'

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THE GAZETTE

Rick Hodes is a single, 56-year-old workaholic U.S. doctor so dedicated to healing the ill in Ethiopia he adopted five of his patients.

Two boys he healed are in high school in Addis Ababa; three are living in the United States attending high school and university.

An orthodox Jew from Long Island, N.Y., Hodes worked in Ethiopia for two years during the famine in the mid-1980s, but hadn't expected to spend the bulk of his adult life caring for the poor in Addis Ababa.

His mantra "saving one life is like saving the world" kept drawing him back, he told close to 100 people Monday at a gathering in Montreal.

The talk was hosted in part by the Montreal Jewish Chamber of Commerce, the Kodem real-estate development company and Kulam, a Montreal humanitarian group founded by Benjamin Sternthal and Julie Schneiderman. Kulam (Hebrew for "everyone") is sponsoring Hodes's work and also helping build a medical clinic at a Rwandan village for child survivors of the genocide.

As an example of his mantra, Hodes presented the case of Azmera, a 12-year-old orphan who lived in a medical bed for three years, severely deformed from a disease that bent her spine at a 90-degree angle. It was starting to have an impact on her spinal cord, and would likely lead to paralysis, a probable death sentence in one of the world's poorest countries.

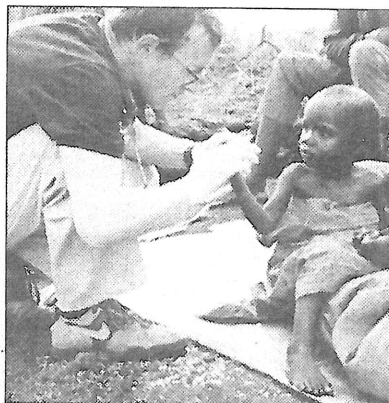
Hodes raised \$13,000 for her operation in Ghana. She now lives in his house, goes to private school and speaks English. She travelled to New York and raised \$700,000 for spinal surgeries. She wants to be a doctor.

"For \$13,000, we completely transformed a life," Hodes said.

Hodes was hired in 1990 by the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, a humanitarian aid group, as their medical director for Ethiopia, caring for the tens of thousands of Jews emigrating to Israel. He also volunteered at Mother Teresa's Mission, helping the destitute. Almost all Christians or Muslims, many would travel hours to see the only doctor who could treat their cancers, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and tumours the size of grapefruits deforming their faces, "timebombs waiting to explode."

He rises at 6:30 a.m. His days end at 1 a.m.

More than a dozen patients in their teens and 20s live in his six-bedroom Addis Ababa home, the children sleeping two to a mattress in a house where electricity and water are sporadic, and children receive chemotherapy treatments from makeshift IV units on the balcony. He funds treatment and education for many of his patients, buying



COURTESY OF RICK HODES

Angel of Addis Ababa: U.S. doctor Rick Hodes cares for a young patient in Ethiopia.

shoeshine for others so they can support themselves.

He adopted his first two children in 2001 so they could qualify for medical insurance and receive treatment in the U.S. He debated the massive responsibility for days, then decided he should take the gift God was giving him. He eventually adopted five, the most allowed by law.

They call his mother, a Republican who voted for John McCain in the last U.S. presidential elections, "bubbie," a Jewish endearment for grandmother. He helps with their homework. They also are trying to find him a spouse. He wouldn't mind, he said, "but I work all the time - I'm not the easiest to get on with."

As his star rises - he's been recognized as a CNN Hero, recently had a book published about him titled *This is a Soul*, and is the subject of an HBO documentary released this month called *Making the Crooked Straight* - Hodes has shifted some of his focus to fundraising. He spends about six weeks a year on speaking tours, raising the funds to send major cases to doctors who volunteer their services in the U.S., India, Israel and Ghana.

Not everyone wants to live in Africa, Hodes realizes. But they can still make a contribution by "perhaps giving a bit of money, or joining other people and having a goal, like sponsoring one kid's surgery, or building a well or a school."

"I really feel like I'm making a difference," said the soft-spoken man in glasses and kipa who has been dubbed the Angel of Addis Ababa. "And this group of people really needs me."

To learn more about Dr. Hodes's work or sponsor one of his patients, visit www.rickhodes.org.

To learn more about the Montreal-based Kulam humanitarian initiative, which is seeking architects, engineers, teachers and other professionals and volunteers to help with their international projects, email kulaminfo@gmail.com

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