

SCIENCE/HEALTH

Refugee camps are infested with life-threatening diseases. At one point during the years that the Asgedom family spent at the Sudanese Refugee Camp, Mawi became ill with a deadly disease called *kala-azar*. Ask students to locate information about this disease and write a brief description of the disease to be used in a brochure for Peace Corp volunteers. Include the causes, symptoms, and treatment of the disease.

Find out the greatest health threats to refugees today. What medical help are they receiving? Identify world health organizations whose primary focus is to help refugees. Make a promotional booklet with a list of these organizations. Include the address and a brief description of each organization.

ART

Mawi's family receives help from World Relief, a Christian organization that helps refugees. Read about this organization (www.wr.org) and make a poster collage that promotes their cause.

MUSIC/ART

Read the lyrics to *We Are The World*, a popular famine fundraising song (www.geocities.com/Nashville/1761/easy83/wearetheworld.htm). Illustrate each verse. How would you explain the song to Mula's classmates who used the song in a hurtful way?

Suggest that students prepare a modern dance to the music of *We Are the World* and perform it for another class. Ask them to dress in appropriate costumes.

CAREER EXPLORATION

Haileab, Mawi's father, was a healer and owned his own pharmacy and clinic in Ethiopia. When he came to the United States, his training wasn't adequate and he became a janitor. Find other jobs related to Haileab's training that he might have pursued (for example, a clerk in a health foods store or a pharmacist assistant). Write a job description for one of the jobs.

RELATED INTERNET SITES

www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/et.html
The World Factbook 2002—Ethiopia

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/824250.stm>
Ethiopian refugees' atrocity tales

www.sudan.net/main1.shtml
News and related links about Sudan



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OF BEETLES & ANGELS

A Boy's Remarkable Journey from a Refugee Camp to Harvard

By Mawi Asgedom

INTRODUCTION

Children and young adults awake each day to the horrifying news of political turmoil from around the world. Some of the news involves our own country; much of it takes place in parts of the world they have not yet studied in their social studies classes. The term "refugee" may be familiar to them, but only as it applies to the people forced to leave the war-torn countries of Europe during World War II. It is possible that they know a bit of information about the immigrants in the early part of the 20th century, and the reasons they sought refuge in the United States. But few students know anything about the people today that are left homeless in their native lands due to politics and poverty. Where is Ethiopia? Eritrea? Sudan? Why have many of the citizens of these countries been forced to leave and begin new lives? What trials have plagued their efforts to establish themselves in a new country? How have these refugees sometimes become victim of cultural bigotry? What are their aspirations and dreams? How might they define freedom?

Mawi Asgedom was only three years old when his mother packed up her three children and traveled to the Sudan in search of her husband, who had been driven out of his native Ethiopia a year earlier for political reasons. Though Mawi's father had earned a good living in Ethiopia, the Sudanese refugee camp offered nothing to the Asgedom family except a little food, and a lot of violence. His parents desired peace, and it appeared that America could provide the quiet and prosperous life they wanted for their family. OF BEETLES & ANGELS is their story. It is a story of struggle, a story of love and despair. It is a story of courage, a story of hope, and a story about working hard and winning. Mawi's words allow children and young adults to connect to the fear that accompanies displacement, and to understand that with freedom comes responsibility for determining one's personal path in life. This guide offers discussion questions that challenge students to think about the personal side of being a refugee in a new land, and to use this understanding to develop ways to better serve these people, and celebrate the cultural diversity they bring to this nation. Classroom activities offer students the opportunity to extend their knowledge of Mawi's culture by making connections to all areas of the curriculum.

PRE-READING

Ask students to use current reference works in the library or sites on the Internet to research the civil war between Eritrea and Ethiopia that took place from 1961 to 1991. Ask them to write a short news summary of this violent conflict.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

Mawi Asgedom dedicates *OF BEETLES & ANGELS* to his mother, and calls her “the true hero of this story.” Ask students to discuss the qualities of a hero. Why does Mawi consider his mother a hero? How might his entire family be considered heroes? Mawi admires his brother Tewolde. Describe Tewolde’s heroic qualities. Discuss the difference between a hero and a role model. How is Mawi Asgedom’s trying to be both a hero and a role model to young people today? What do you admire most about Mawi?

Mawi’s parents were tired of war-torn Sudan, and came to America in search of peace. The village elders in the Sudan warned, “America seems sweet on top, like fresh honey straight from the comb. But what’s sweet on the surface is often rotten underneath. So beware.” (p. 12) What part of their new life does the Asgedom family find “sweet?” What part is “rotten?” What might Mawi say to new refugees as they embark on their life in America? What could we as citizens do to make the “rotten” part of being a refugee much “sweeter?”

Discuss the treatment that the Asgedom family received in the Sudanese Refugee Camp. What did Mawi and Tewolde do to survive life in school and the village? They face a different type of survival when they come to America. How do they have to learn new ways of survival? How do their methods of survival change, as they become young men?

The school in Wheaton informs Mr. Asgedom that Mawi and Tewolde are fighting everyday, and that such violent and volatile behavior isn’t tolerated in American schools. Why do the boys feel betrayed by their father when he tells them, “In America, Do Not Ever Fight Back?” (p.38) Discuss non-violent ways of dealing with bullies.

When the Asgedom family departs the Sudan, the elders tell them, “Remember us. Remember your people.” (p. 12) Cite evidence from the book that Mawi never forgets his people. Mawi, whose real name is Selamawi Haileab Asgedom, says that he can never abandon his real name. How is his name important to his “roots?” Discuss how “roots” and ancestry are important to all people.

Discuss the metaphorical meaning of the book’s title. How does Haileab describe an angel? Why does Mawi feel that his deceased father was an angel? Who are the angels in their lives? Who are the beetles? How does the Asgedom family deal with the beetles? How do the “beetles” in our lives make us better appreciate the “angels” in our lives?

The Asgedom’s receive much help when they settle in Wheaton, Illinois, but they also come face to face with prejudice and bigotry. Define prejudice. What is the difference between prejudice and bigotry? What causes prejudice? How is it a learned behavior? How are the teachers in Mawi’s school in Wheaton as guilty of prejudice as the students? What can schools do to promote tolerance of other cultures?

Describe the confrontations that Mawi and Tewolde face with other Africans living in Wheaton. What causes this conflict? Eventually the boys become friends with some of the people like Mbago who have made their lives miserable. How does this friendship develop?

How does Haileab lose his self-worth when he comes to America? Discuss the meaning of paranoia.

How might the loss of self-worth cause paranoia? Discuss how Haileab helps his children develop self-worth when he feels none.

Tewolde experiences a transformation when he reaches 13. He becomes less inclined to violence and develops a heart known as “*libee migbar*.” Discuss how Tewolde’s “heart” better serves him than violence. How does religion contribute to Tewolde’s change? What does Mawi learn from his brother about peace vs. violence?

After a drunk driver kills Tewolde, Mawi says that he thought more about the meaning of the word brother. How might Mawi define brother? What is your definition of brother? How was Tewolde a brother to people outside his family?

CLASSROOM CONNECTION

LANGUAGE ARTS

Haileab had a talent for composing rhyming poetry in *geetme*, Ethiopian spoken-word freestyle rap. Write a rhyming poem that Mawi might have delivered at his graduation from Harvard as a tribute to the memory of his father.

At night, Tewolde often told funny stories about five Chinese brothers who were mistreated by “ill-willed Americans.” Mawi says that these stories were “our kid way of dealing with our unfriendly world.” (p. 44) Ask each student to select a picture book that will help elementary children deal with an “unfriendly world.” Share the stories in class. The class may wish to compile an annotated bibliography of all the books selected to share with an elementary school.

Discuss the phrase “brotherly love.” Then, ask students to read the newspaper for a week and locate a story that best represents the meaning of “brotherly love.” Have them write a brief synopsis of the article.

SOCIAL STUDIES

Many of the refugees who find their way to America become citizens of the United States. Research the requirements for becoming a naturalized citizen. Conduct a mock citizenship ceremony in class.

Mawi has fond memories of when the people in the refugee camp came together during festival time. Research the various festivals celebrated in Ethiopia (www.tourismethiopia.org/pages/detail/detailfestival.asp or www.selamta.net/Festivals.htm). What other holidays are celebrated in Ethiopia? Divide the class into groups and ask each group to pick one festival and plan a celebration for the class. Include the meaning and history of the festival. How do the people dress? What do they eat? Is there a traditional dance or song?

Ethiopia is the oldest independent nation in Africa with many beautiful and interesting places to see. Use books in the library and sites on the Internet to research places to visit in Ethiopia (www.tourethio.com/brief/index.htm). Make an illustrated brochure for a travel agent to distribute to people who wish to visit the country.

MATH

Ask students to use an atlas to locate a detailed map of Ethiopia and Sudan. Calculate the distance between Mawi’s birthplace in Adi Wahla, Ethiopia, to the refugee camp in Umsagata, Sudan.