



## A Simple PUSH

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A skateboard is a modest toy: a piece of wood that sits on two trucks and four wheels. I have been playing with this toy since I was ten, and it remains the only toy I can never seem to throw away. My bike, pogo stick, action figures, and Yu-Gi-Oh! cards were all tossed into a large dumpster with an eye roll and a shoulder shrug when I was fourteen (when I thought I was a grown-up). But my skateboard has remained perched on the wall next to my bed where the wheels leave black marks from the miles of pavement they have crossed. I enjoy

few things, but that toy that sits next to my bed remains one of them.

Abenezer Temesgen's board has a different story. His board has traveled halfway around the world. Abenezer is a sixteen-year-old boy who was born and raised in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. He shares his skateboard with other kids who are more than eager to try the tricks they see Abenezer perform. His city only has seven skateboards, and Abenezer uses them to teach twenty-five kids how to skate. And that number is growing. Every skateboard, every set of wheels, bearings,

Layout by T.J. Tree. Opposite page: "Back in the day..." by Instagram user ethiopiaskate: <http://instagram.com/p/tiPCk-wiZM/?modal=true>. This page: "We just want to skate" by Instagram user ethiopiaskate: <http://instagram.com/p/tSx7DsQic1/?modal=true>.

and trucks that arrives in Addis Ababa, comes from donations made from around the world—donations that are just enough to allow Abenezer and a small group of kids to have the opportunity to skate each day.

Every day of every summer since I was eleven, I would take my skateboard apart and put it back together, caring for it like a finely tuned musical instrument. Each tiny piece was plucked out, cleaned carefully, and lubricated to ensure it was as fast as possible. I did this while I sat on my couch and watched, over and over again, a professional skate video that my parents had bought me. I began to love the scent of the griptape on the board, and the smell when I washed my WD-40-soaked hands with the coconut-scented soap in our bathroom.

But I spent most of my time in my front yard, where there was a slab of concrete that gave me just enough room to practice flat ground tricks, like kickflips and pop shove-its. There was also enough room to set up the small plastic ramp I got for Christmas that year. When the school year started, I would practice tricks before the school bus came and after dinner until the sun went down.

Most kids in Addis Ababa do not go to school. They get jobs that pay a couple of dollars a day. Their daily goal is to survive; other than that, there isn't time for much else. These skaters see the constant struggle around them, and they lack a creative outlet. The toys that are sent from all over the world to Addis Ababa, especially the skateboards, become that outlet. As Abenezer says, "Skating empowers kids to be individuals." A skateboard is essentially an urban paintbrush on a canvas

of pavement, ledges, rails, and ramps. Every push of the board, every trick performed, translates into a picture, a picture that can be limitless based on a kid's creativity with that piece of wood on those trucks and wheels.



Inspired by this, Abenezer created a skateboarding campaign called Ethiopia Skate that is primarily aimed at raising money to build Ethiopia's first skate park. The goal is based around the fact that law enforcement in Ethiopia does not welcome skateboarding. However, Abenezer isn't just giving kids a place to skate: He's providing a place where they can interact with other kids and find a sense of individuality and empowerment. The campaign is also aimed at gathering donated skateboards and other skating supplies so as many kids as possible have the opportunity to skate.

Skateboarding frees the mind. It is a form of meditation, allowing a person to forget everything around them and to focus solely on the task at hand. Skateboarding also teaches one to be resilient.

Every skateboarder quickly learns how important it is to fall in order to learn. Most people don't fall as much as skateboarders do. Falling and picking yourself back up becomes normal. A skater will sometimes fall a hundred times trying to land a single trick. Even professionals fall many times before landing a difficult trick. Skaters must learn to laugh at their mistakes, get up, and try again.

There is a very unique sensation in landing a trick. The first kickflip I ever landed was enough to make me run around my yard screaming like a five-year-old who had just been told he was going to Disney World. I remember thinking, *Wow, what other tricks could I learn now?* Just that one trick opened up an entire world of possibilities and improved my confidence. I still get the same feeling when I land this trick today. Even though I land it every time, the trick has not lost its value. While I have learned to restrain myself from running around and screaming after every landing, I often can't help but let out a smile and an, "AW YEAH!"

I remember reading about the Ethiopia Skate campaign for the first time on a notable skateboarding site called Transworld Skateboarding. I had suspicions despite reading about it on such a prominent website, and did a quick Google search. I was in awe to find so many popular skateboarding sites with a very similar write up and video about the campaign and its goal. I remember having a strange sensation of pride. I was proud of this kid, Abenezer, halfway around the world, whom I had never met, for taking something as seemingly simple as a skateboard and using it to implement positive change for kids like him in his country.

I purchased an Ethiopia Skate campaign T-shirt to contribute to their goal of building a skate park. I wore it one morning to breakfast at a small diner in Rhode Island and noticed that as I stood up to leave, the cook was staring at the shirt from behind the counter.

He laughed, pointed at my shirt, and asked what it was about.

"Ah, it's a campaign from Ethiopia aimed at raising money for a skate park. They are also trying to get people to donate skateboards for kids who don't have access to them," I explained.

He laughed again, "That's a bit silly. What those kids over in Ethiopia need is food."

I left the diner with the type of anger that turns you into a bad-mouthing machine. I was enraged with this man's statement and made that rage very clear to my friends as we walked home. How could this man be so narrow-minded about human life as to think that the kids in Ethiopia should just settle for survival, that they shouldn't be worried about being creative or empowered or having fun simply because they were born in Ethiopia?

Over time, I slowly began to see the man's point and acknowledged my harsh overreaction. People over there do need food, resources, and more access to clean water. And while this is certainly something those kids have to worry about, they also need something that empowers and motivates them; something that teaches them to keep trying; something they can love and enjoy.

This past March, Ethiopia Skate held a workshop in Addis Ababa and sixteen kids attended. The workshop taught basic instructions and tool safety, and then

taught the skaters how to make skateboard ramps out of bamboo and other common materials. This workshop not only taught them how to build their own skate spots, it also taught them problem-solving skills, imagination, teamwork, and resourcefulness. As I thought more about what the cook had said to me, I realized that I should have explained to him the great things that the campaign was actually accomplishing. I should have told him about the small steps it was making to give children better lives. In fact, Ethiopia Skate has now received tens of thousands of dollars in donations and enough skateboards for every kid who wants one of their own.

It's not just skateboarding. It's not just playing. It is a reason to get out of bed in the morning because you can't wait to skate with your friends or try that trick you couldn't land yesterday. It's that feeling of empowerment you get from landing a trick, and knowing that every day you improve just a little bit more. Most important, this is something fun and creative that allows kids to be themselves. So yes, while kids in Ethiopia do need access to more clean water and a larger food supply, they also need that form of empowerment, because survival alone should not be all a kid in Ethiopia has to focus on each day.

This summer, I will be skateboarding 270 miles from Syracuse to New York City wearing my Ethiopia Skate shirt the whole way. This trip is to honor Ethiopia Skate, and although it won't be something that directly gives the campaign a donation, I hope it shows them a huge amount of support and respect for what they are trying to do. I will be documenting the entire trip and posting the final product to YouTube as well as e-mailing

it to the founder of Ethiopia Skate to make sure they see the support.

I look forward to making a trip to Ethiopia after I graduate to skate the park that the campaign will build. Until then, I will continue to do what I can to help kids in Ethiopia get what they need to skate by donating boards, supplies, and any funds I can spare.

"We just want to skate," says Abenezer to finish off the campaign video. Every time I watch the video, the phrase sends chills down my spine. Such a simple request from a kid who might as well be saying, "We just want to be kids." This is the reason this campaign deserves support—so these kids can be kids.

#### Work Cited

Stromsoe, Sean. "Ethiopia Skate, A Message to the World." Online video clip. Vimeo. 20 Oct. 2013: Web. 19 Sept. 2014.

