

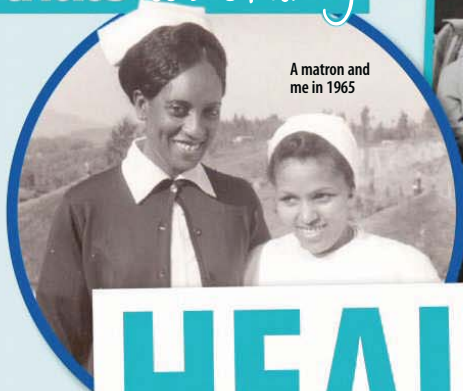


22 OCT, 2020

## HEALING LIVES spreading hope

That's Life, National

that's touching



A matron and me in 1965



The Hamlins were so caring

# HEALING LIVES spreading

Mamitu Gashe, 74, and renowned Australian Dr Catherine Hamlin shared a passion to save lives. Mamitu tells their moving story. . .

**S**ick and delirious at the hospital gates, a guard scooped me up in his arms and carried me like a baby.

In so much pain, I hardly knew what was happening.

Then two white people – a man and a woman – suddenly appeared.

I'd never seen anyone from outside my country of Ethiopia before, and I thought they must be angels.

As the woman's mouth began to move, I didn't understand what she was saying to me, but she smiled with such warmth, I felt instantly reassured.

Then the man lifted me into his arms and took me inside, where he gently placed me on a bed.

With a nurse translating for me, they explained they were husband and wife, Dr Catherine Hamlin from Australia and Dr Reginald Hamlin from New Zealand, and they had come to Ethiopia to set up a midwifery service.

Instead, they'd ended up treating a lot of women like me, who had been injured during childbirth.

'You are safe now,' Dr Reg said. 'We will take good care of you.'

It was 1962, and aged 16, I had horrific internal injuries and was close to death.

'You will be our daughter,' Dr Reg said. 'You will be part of our family.'

Then Dr Catherine reached for my hand.

'We have a son,

but you will be our daughter, and we will care for you as our daughter.'

As they both hugged me, I wept tears of happiness and relief.

I'd been living in a small, remote village where my parents had arranged a marriage for me.

When I was 13, they told me I was engaged. It was the way things were traditionally done.

I was married at 14 to a husband 11 years older than me, and I saw him for the first time on our wedding night.

Two years on, I was pregnant and when my labour started, my mother and sister came to help me in my tukul – a traditional mud and straw hut.

But things did not go well.

I was in labour for four days and nights and in so much pain.

I grew weaker and

weaker, and finally my mother called the medicine woman.

She said the baby was dead and cut me below to pull him the rest of the way out. But then I became even sicker.

Lying on the ground, urine and faeces leaked uncontrollably from my body.

I'd lost my baby and I was so sad and humiliated.

Scarily, I couldn't feel my legs either. Crying, I wished I was dead.

'I need to go to hospital,' I managed to say, but the capital, Addis Ababa, was a long way.

My family and neighbours carried me on a stretcher made from tree branches down the mountainside, walking for 12 hours throughout the night to get to the nearest road.

From there, they lifted me onto a bus for the four-hour

Aged 16, I had horrific internal injuries and was close to death

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The **BEST** real-life stories

Dr Catherine was my second mum

journey to hospital.  
 As Dr Catherine and Dr Reg examined me, they said the baby's head had torn a hole in my bladder and rectum, called a fistula.  
 That was why I couldn't control my leaking.  
 Before they could operate, they had to treat the infection and I needed to grow stronger.  
 While I stayed at the hospital, I learned from the other patients that the Hamlins had come here from Sydney in 1959, three years earlier, and they'd become so busy with fistula patients.  
 I began to understand that women didn't get fistulas in their countries as they have doctors, midwives, Caesareans and other things for difficult births. But in Ethiopia and other poor

countries, we don't have enough clinics and roads, and it's hard to get help.  
 Eventually, I had surgery, but my injuries were just too bad for it to work.  
 The Hamlins didn't give up though, and kept operating on me.  
 I was so grateful to them for how they were caring for me, I would get out of bed and start helping out at the hospital, mopping floors and making beds.  
 Then, I organised other recovering patients to help with chores, and reassured new patients that they were in good hands.  
 One young girl who came in with a fistula, had been living in a cave for years as she'd

been left by her husband and banished by her village because of her leaking and the constant smell.  
 'These doctors will take good care of you,' I promised her.



They didn't give up on me



Dr Catherine with me assisting

Turn the page to read what Mamitu did next...

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