

FOREWORD BY
JONI EARECKSON TADA



THE GIRL WITH SPECIAL SHOES

HILDA BIH MULUH

*Miracles don't
always look like
you'd expect*

There are few people in this world that leave me speechless. The life Hilda has led as an individual living with muscular dystrophy in the midst of few accommodations is incredible. Her resilience to move beyond hurdles is a testimony to her remarkable strength in the Lord, a testimony I hope many will read. I am so proud to recommend this book.

—**Kathryn Bryant Knudson, CEO of The Speak Foundation**

Hilda's story is a gut-wrenching raw account of life with a disability in Africa. But more than that, it is a moving account of God's ability to transform lives. This is not a "tragedy to triumph" story, claiming that God will change your circumstances if you ask enough. It is a story of how God transforms a surrendered heart. Life with a disability is hard on so many levels, but Hilda's story also demonstrates the power of love and the aching beauty of trust. We need more vulnerable stories like these, to show us as a society how far we still have to go in affirming and valuing the *Imago Dei* in every human being. Allow the Spirit of God to speak to you and move you to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly.

—**Kim Kargbo, Founder & CEO of
Accessible Hope International**

Hilda's incredible prose brings us up close and personal to the struggles, mistreatment, and redemption that children living with disabilities face every day. Her experience embodies the plight of millions globally who are left behind by the world. I hope you pick up the book and recommit your life to being a blessing to children and young adults just like Hilda.

—**Justin Narducci, CEO of CURE International
Children's Hospitals**

This is not an ordinary inspirational story. This book will change you from the inside. Hilda's is an empowering journey from relative poverty and self-pity to achieving goals against all odds. It's not about

the fact that her body is impaired, it's not about pity or sympathy. This book shows disability is not inability.

—**Anne Wafula Strike, Ambassador for ADD International
(Action on Disability and Development),
Patron for Able Child Africa**

I laughed, I cried, I smiled, I felt like hugging Hilda for her bravery. I have never read a book that paints a picture of childhood in Cameroon so well, not to mention a child with an impairment struggling to cope, fall, and rise over and over again. Her inspiring journey has motivated my faith in God; it has stimulated a passion to do more for children with impairment in Cameroon who just want to live like other children. I want everybody to read it!

—**Agho T. Glory, Empowerment and Disability Inclusive
Development (EDID) Program of Cameroon Baptist
Convention Health Services**

Hilda's story transports us to the streets and into the homes and families of Cameroon. Trapped in a body of pain and disabling weakness from a young age, Hilda is driven to prove wrong those who dismiss her as worthless. Her confessions, unimaginable struggles, and bouts with hopelessness will echo in the hearts of many. But what if the faith that finds her could find you?

If anyone has ever dismissed you as worthless, if life's struggles seem overwhelming, if the future is dark and unknown, you will find someone who shares your tears and inspires your hope.

—**Rev. Christina L. Young, ELCA Pastor of
“Fresh Bread” faith gathering, USA**

The Girl with Special Shoes tells the story of her struggle with muscular dystrophy such that you don't have to be suffering from any physical ailment to relate to it. Her resilience as she wrestles with existential issues provides guideposts for all travellers on the road of life. If you ever wonder anything about life's purpose,

meaning, hope, and where God is in the midst of it all, this book is for you.

—**Delphine M. Fanfon, Vision Bearer of
Me4real International, Cameroon**

In a society where the disabled were considered cursed and a bad omen, Hilda was shunned, denied her rights, and constantly faced stumbling blocks. But no matter what, Hilda's tricycle went on, clinking and clanking forward toward her destiny. She shook the village, the city, and the nation, to become a symbol of pride and a trailblazer for many in Africa.

The more you read the book, the more you grasp that disability was not the enemy, but society's bias and ignorance. We can't afford to lose the potential of people who are disabled in body. The book is a testament of the power of a disabled body with a determined soul.

—**Dr Segid Teklehaimanot, Psychiatrist trained
at Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia**

You will suffer vicariously as Hilda retells moments of being neglected, cheated, abused, and forgotten. You will cling to hope with her as the unconditional love of her father consistently lifts her. It is fitting that God uses a lame child as a reminder to endure even the longest of journeys. My heart has been filled with gratitude and pointed to the day when there is no need for special shoes.

—**Brandon Smith, Student Pastor at
The Well Community Church, USA**

In breathtaking, authentic, and poignant moments, Hilda paints the battle between moving on and giving up, hope and hopelessness. God does not waste our pain. Hilda's special shoes are too big for me to wear, but they leave indelible prints and speak volumes throughout this side of eternity.

—**Rev. Joel Ngoh, Former Lead Pastor at Hope Baptist Church,
Bamenda, and Mildred Tsangue, Therapist**

Hilda's book is such an honest lament of what it is like to be disabled in a country where there is little help for the disabled. Worse, many people think disabilities are of the devil and avoid people with any kind of impairment. Her strong faith and true grit kept her going when most of us would have given up early on. I admire her. Even sitting in a wheelchair, she had complete control of a room full of children by her mere speaking than I ever had with full capabilities.

—**Sara Tanner, Founder of Supporting Native African Pastors**

I felt as though I accompanied Hilda through the highs and lows, through the support of family to deception, from special shoes to scary treatments by the witch doctor. Her book moved me to tears and left me wanting to hear more as God writes the rest of this amazing woman's story.

—**Jane Schmitz, veteran missionary in Africa,
Association of Baptists for World Evangelism**

Despite the many difficulties Hilda experienced, she overcame them with the strength of will, the support of her family, and the help of her friends. We in Egypt are so proud of her as a writer and artist who represents her country all over the world, especially in Africa.

—**Dr Nadia Elarabi, Executive Director of Alfan Alkhas
Association in Egypt and Art Therapist**

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OASIS
INTERNATIONAL
PUBLISHING

The Girl with Special Shoes

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To all who have felt broken,
unheard, unseen.

You are special in God's eyes.

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Before You Begin

It was nearly 50 years ago that I shared my story in a book called *Joni*. It was a vivid and honest account of my struggle to embrace paralysis after the 1967 diving accident which completely altered my life. The book detailed not only the physical hardships of quadriplegia, but the spiritual ones – I found it nearly impossible to embrace God and his strange, hard will for my life.

For a long time, I could not understand why a good God would allow one of his children to suffer so much. But after years of digging through God’s Word and earnestly praying, my heart began to soften. I did not so much find answers . . . I found *the* answer. I discovered that the God of the Bible was ecstasy beyond compare and that it was worth anything to be his friend. Even the harsh realities of complete and permanent paralysis. The *Joni* book detailed all this and much more.

When it was published in 1976, I prayed that God would use the *Joni* book to inspire and encourage other hurting people. But never did I dream that one day a high school girl in faraway Cameroon would pick up a copy. Hilda Bih Muluh read my story and immediately resonated with me, her “sister” on the other side of the world.

Even though our circumstances – and our disabilities – are very different, even though Hilda was raised in Africa and I was born in America, our stories feel so much alike. Both of us have suffered rejection, disappointment, and pain. I am convinced, however, that Hilda’s experience with these problems goes far deeper. She grew up in a part of the world where disability is looked upon as a curse. Or a reason to stay hidden away in a dark back bedroom all your life. When Hilda was only a little girl, most people assumed she’d forever be a burden on her family and would never amount to anything.

You can see why I was thrilled when I learned how my story reached deep into Hilda’s heart. But I cannot take credit for her life transformation. If our wheelchairs were parked next to each other right now, Hilda and I would agree, it’s all about Jesus Christ and his amazing power to bring blessings out of brokenness. To bring about a far deeper healing than a physical one.

Hilda came to see a Christian’s call to suffer is actually an outflow of God’s love toward us. Like the apostle Paul, she viewed her disability as something that pushed her to lean more on God for his gifts of peace, strength, and contentment (2 Corinthians 1:9). She also found an extraordinary hope in the assurance that one day sorrow and sighing, pain and affliction will be forever gone (Isaiah 35:10).

Over time, my friend – yes, I consider Hilda a good friend – sensed that God was telling her to share her own story in a book. And I’m so glad that she responded to the Lord’s prompting! There can never be too many stories about God’s ability to bring triumph out of tragedy. Given the unique culture in West Africa, Hilda’s journey from despair to delight in Christ is especially compelling. She overcame unfathomable obstacles that I know

nothing about. And now? Her book *The Girl with Special Shoes* is ready to pick up where the *Joni* book left off, refreshing the hearts of a whole new generation of readers who long to understand God's purposes in suffering.

The humble volume you hold in your hands will unfold the most remarkable story of Hilda Bih Muluh. But it will also help you grasp how the tender love of God tempers the many trials that come to each of us, allowing only those things that accomplish his good plan. God takes no joy in human agony, whether suffering people live in California or Cameroon. In God's wisdom and love, every trial in a Christian's life is ordained from eternity past, custom-made for that believer's eternal good, even when it doesn't seem like it. Nothing happens by accident . . . not even the birth anomaly of a little girl born in Africa.

And so, I heartily commend to you *The Girl with Special Shoes*. Get to know my friend, Hilda. Listen and learn from this kind and gentle woman who has suffered through great distress . . . and you, too, will be "convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39).

Joni Eareckson Tada

Joni and Friends International Disability Center

Agoura, California

The Walk to School

Half a kilometre would have been a minimal commute to school for most people. With my progressive muscle weakness, it was a vast gulf to conquer each day. Until I was 12, my delight in riding to school in Papa's taxi had been matched only by his delight in the grades I brought home. But then Papa's accident happened, and everything changed.

One day, the teacher left the class at 2:30 p.m. Students emptied the classroom in a matter of minutes. I could not carry myself and the books at the same time, so I put my books away slowly, stowing them in the open rectangular lockers of my backless wooden bench for my brother to pick up later.

It would be a while before the road was safe enough for me to attempt to walk home. After my father's accident, my family rented a little room half a kilometre from school so I could continue my education. My brother and cousins stayed there with me on weekdays.

The narrow stretch of tarmac could barely contain the volume of cars and thousands of students during peak traffic hours. With my very fragile mobility, I imagined I would be pushed over and swept away like a log in a fast-flowing current. So, I left the house much earlier and the school much later than everyone else.

Once the buzz outside died down, I picked up my bamboo cane, my faithful companion, tucked safely out of sight between the bench and the flaking wall. Using the wall for support, I moved outside to the veranda and leaned on a pillar.

A few students were left in the yard, either playing or sweeping the class for the following school day. I judged it safe to launch my long walk home. The little dusty stretch between my class and the tarmac was the trickiest part of my journey. As I took my first step, a gust blew dust into my face. I closed my eyes and turned my face, struggling to maintain balance.

A dangerous slope lay at the entrance to the school. To avoid it, I cut through the dining shed. It had a slope too, so I got down on all fours. The cane slipped out of my hand. As I reached to catch it, my foot slipped. I tumbled down the slant.

I sat back up. My knees and elbows were scraped and bruised. I blew on my scrapes to help the blood dry. I tried to dust myself off, but my feeble hands couldn't do much to restore my uniform to its sky blue and navy hue. At least the road was empty and I had the cover of twilight. I would be horrified to be seen looking like I had joined the birds in a dust bath.

I continued. *Other students go by without a care in the world. Lord, how can you deny me a very basic birthright like walking? Why do I have to be so different and so dependent?*

I imagined Jesus, walking on similar dusty roads, healing the sick and the lost. *Why don't you see my suffering and have mercy? Will you heal me too?*

I took a few more steps and stopped to rest. *How could you allow so much misfortune in one life? Why have you picked me out alone to bear such a heavy burden?*

I knew no one in my close circles who suffered as much as I did. I couldn't even think of anyone in other hospitals who

were called to suffer more than I was. *What have I done wrong? Am I the worst sinner you know? Why else would you punish me like this? Not even Job in the Bible suffered as I do!*

I reached home after dark, five hours after school had closed.



The next morning, the 5 a.m. call to prayer from the mosque downtown was my alarm clock. I was exhausted. I wished I didn't have to go to school today. I wished I never had to go. I wished I didn't have to keep living to endure such torture. The imam's call to prayer was insistent. Finally, I got out of bed.

I took more time to bathe than usual. The icy cold water felt cruel as it trickled down my back. I wasted even more time getting dressed, somehow hoping that my reluctance would earn the pity of my siblings to give me a back ride to school.

My mother seemed to think my progressive disability was partially just being self-conscious about walking. She had insisted I walk part of the distance to ensure I did not lose all of my walking ability. It took me 10 times the amount of time others took to cover a very small portion of the distance. Then I would wait for a back ride from my brothers to take me the rest of the way.

Usually, my brothers got me to school before the flood of students. On other days, my assistants felt I could do a better job walking than usual. To punish my insolence, they would leave me on the road to teach me a lesson.

I dreaded the days when they came late or abandoned me. It meant I had to bear the piercing glares of every passing student, wondering why someone was crouching over a tiny Indian bamboo cane as if her very life depended on it.

My attempts to earn my brothers' pity backfired and I was instead sent off with scolding and warnings. I grabbed my cane and hit the road. My school bag would be brought by someone later. My tears blinded me as I took off into the dim light of the dawn, moving small baby steps and stopping to wipe my face with my free left hand.

Fine, I thought. I'll prove them wrong and make it to school on my own. I pushed myself to walk faster and almost fell on my face. I slowed down to my usual pace. Exhausted, I could only go a few metres. I could already see a few students trickling to school, an indication that I had left a bit later than usual. I managed to reach the trunk of a eucalyptus tree by the roadside and lean for support.

Thousands of students and others walked past me that early morning. Although my cane helped, I was unable to sustain this standing position for a long time, particularly in a bustling crowd. I was afraid of being trampled or falling. If I sprained my ankle, I would have to be taken home, and I hated the humiliation of this experience even more than the pain I would feel from falling.

As the only student with a disability among thousands on our vast campus, I envied others' ability to move around easily, their independence, their pride, their life. I felt like a helpless victim in an arena full of curious spectators who were not sure how to help. To them I was an enigma: beautiful, smart, looking like everyone else but unable to move like everyone else. At a time when disability was frowned upon as a curse in my society, I was trying to break the mould and live like a "normal" being. People's awkward reactions reflected a culture that believed in keeping its weak and vulnerable out of sight and out of the way. My parents were taking a bold step to send

me to a regular school, and here I was paying the price of this experiment.

For the next hour or so, I hid my face near the tree and just sobbed.

I slouched in the clumsy position afoot the eucalyptus tree, clinging to my little bamboo friend for support. My legs must have been painfully cramping after the hour or two of standing on them, but I was too upset to notice. Eventually, I figured it was better to spend the rest of that day walking back home, since it was certain I could not make it on time to attend any class for the day.

A tap on my shoulder caused me to take my eyes off the ground. It was Bridget Moto. We had known each other from our primary school days. Bridget was one of my best friends. Her parents knew my parents, and we had exchanged home visits regularly.

She still bore the scars of burns that she had incurred as a result of a fire accident in their home three years back. During the months she spent in the hospital, I made sure that she was kept abreast with the schoolwork by copying down the notes twice and sending a copy to her parents to take to her in the hospital. We were fortunate to have made it to the same secondary school and to be in the same class, sitting on the same bench.

I had often comforted my friend when she went through a difficult time. Bridget had much to deal with in her own life – her parents’ breakup, the challenge of covering the long distance to school daily, and taking care of siblings. I had encouraged my friend many times not to give up.

“What are you doing on the road?” my friend asked, half-chastening, half-surprised.

“I . . . My . . . ” The tears started rolling again.

She looked at me intently, then she moved closer and held me up with both hands. I let go of my cane and collapsed onto her shoulder. She let me bawl.

She took up my head and asked, “Hilda, what is the matter? Did someone push you down?”

I shook my head, unable to mutter a word.

“Did your brother hurt you?”

Again, I shook my head and moaned.

“So, what happened? You’ve never cried like this before.” She was right, I had never cried like this before her, not before anybody but God.

I pulled myself together. “Why does God hate me so much?” I said.

“How can you say that? God doesn’t hate you. God loves us.”

“Then why do I struggle so hard to do what is so easy for everyone else? I have been on this road for the past four hours, trying to cover a distance that everyone does in a few minutes. It’s not fair.” I shook my head in disapproval as I went on, “I’m trying the very best I can, but it’s not enough to stop the suffering; nothing seems to work for me.”

“It’s OK. Let’s go on to school,” Bridget continued, gently stroking the cheek that was receiving fresh tears.

“By the time I reach school, I will only have to turn around and come straight home. So, I might as well save myself the trouble. I’ll just go back home.”

“You think I would leave you here by yourself? I’m not going to school without you.” Bridget was adamant. A few moments of silence went by. I realized she meant what she said.

“Fine,” I reluctantly agreed, “let’s go to school.”

I conceded to let her lift me on her back a few metres at a time. We made it to class halfway into the school day.

CHAPTER 1

The Gift of Family

My mother had married young and bore her first son before she was 18. For over four years, she faced prying in-laws who began to question her ability to produce more children. When I was born, there was great celebration in a dusty neighbourhood of Bamenda, the small town that served as the headquarters of the Northwest Region of Cameroon. My mother felt vindicated.

Our two-bedroom apartment was often thronged by family members both from Mami's and Papa's side of the family, some visiting and others staying for a long while. I felt significant and loved, even when Mami and Papa left us behind, the former for the Bamenda Main Market where she was a seamstress and the latter for I-knew-not-where with his yellow taxi. I always knew they would both come back – with treats for me and Achu Walters.

Achu Walters quickly filled the shoes of a big brother, helping and protecting me whenever he was not away playing with his friends. Our age difference meant we had few playing ideas to share, but he always kept a close eye on me and gave me the pet name “Jealous”.

Mami returned from the market each day before dusk with food for the family for the day to find us bathed and waiting

for a treat. Usually, it was *puff puff* (a fried dough snack) or fruit in season such as succulent mangoes, pears, or guavas.

I awaited Papa's treats even more. By the time he came back, everyone had gone to bed, except me. I hunkered in the foam Dunlop cushion of one of the few wooden chairs that constituted the main furniture in our tiny living room, struggling to stay awake, protesting vehemently at anyone or anything that threatened to take me to bed before my father's return. Papa ensured my wait was worth it. I received a real treat – chocolate (my favourite), biscuits, or candies, which I preserved jealously to show off the following day. Better than anything in the world, I went to bed on the warm shoulders of my hero.

Aunty Alice and Aunty Jane took care of us while our parents were gone. They were from our village, Pinyin, located some 20 kilometres from the urban centre. They lived with us so they could attend secondary school in Bamenda. I could tell they attended different schools from their distinct uniforms: an azure pleated skirt with a white sleeveless blouse and sandals for the one and a different tone of blue for the other. They left for school earlier than Mami left for the market and returned late in the afternoon to bathe us before Mami came back.

Like all the members of our jammed household, one was from Mami's side, the other from Papa's. I felt more akin to Aunty Jane, who was my Mami's little sister. She took me along when she went on visits around the neighbourhood and coaxed me to get my hair plaited. Aunty Alice and others might taunt or beat me for being naughty and snatching snacks, but Aunty Jane defended me.

Because the aunties went to school for most of the day, we needed reinforcement for the babysitting team. My great-grandmother, Manyu Deborah Zoh Neh completed the crèche. We called her Manyu Di, Manyu being her legitimate title for being the grandmother of twins and Di being short for Deborah.

Manyu Di was a feisty, no-nonsense caregiver, who looked nothing like her mysterious age. She seemed to be ahead of her time in her love for education and desire to speak the “white man’s language”. Her conversation, though in our native Pinyin language, never lacked a tinge of Pidgin English. She coined idiomatic sayings that have stayed alive right down to my generation.

She reminded anyone who cared to listen how beautiful she was in her youth. I asked about the lacerations on her face and her body. She said they were beauty marks gashed by her peers in her youth, a time when young men and women went about wearing only a little stringed covering to conceal vital lower parts. I could imagine children my age going around bare-bodied, but grown-ups? No way!

Manyu Di told us about life in colonial Cameroon under the Germans and later the British. Our part of the country, referred to as the Southern Cameroons, was a British Trusteeship until it voted for independence in 1961 and joined French-speaking *La République du Cameroun*. This explained our English expression and why we spoke Pidgin English everywhere except at home. Mami made sure that we stuck to our mother tongue while at home.

My great-grandmother’s gifts also drew me to her. Every time she visited one of her numerous progeny strewn around Bamenda town, she brought back sweet yam, *egusi* pudding, and other delicacies. Manyu Di was the only one I knew who

could tie up soup, runny or viscous, in banana leaves and carry it in her handbag without leaving a trace. When she returned, our watering mouths gathered to see what the banana leaf bundle would unveil while she called out names and dished out each one's portion.

For all her sweet charm, Manyu Di was a strict disciplinarian from whom my mother copied most of her own stringency.

"Pih, stop walking like that!" she chided, pointing to my feet as I tiptoed around her. I was about four years old, and I knew instantly there was trouble when Manyu Di chose to call me by my given name Pih, instead of one of the pet names she had a flair for coming up with.

She came over and tried to push my heels down. "Put your foot down like this." She stomped her foot on the dusty floor.

I would try and fail to walk properly according to her. She would give me a little slap on my arm or a nip on my cheek, thinking it was a childhood prank. I avoided her and limited my movement when around her, keeping my struggles to myself in hopes they would go away.

I loved to run and play around, and my difficulties were taking a toll on my four-year-old freedom. I had been the leader of our troupe of playmates, drawing the lines for *ntabalah* (hopscotch), making a ball from old pieces of cloth and nylon paper bags for "dodging" (our favourite), and dictating who got in or stayed out of the game. Unable to resist a tempting game with my mates, I would desperately attempt to play, run, and skip rope, but I kept falling. I was often disappointed and frustrated.

Manyu Di noticed something wrong when she had to pick me up more times than usual as I struggled to keep up with my peers in our childhood exploits. She watched as my hands

couldn't hold on tight to anything, so I even dropped my food. One day, she saw me get into a fight with my peers. One of them slapped me. I was unable to fight back because my fingers were becoming limp and I could hardly stand on my own.

Years later, she told me, "For one who was a head taller and stronger than all her age-mates, I couldn't stand seeing you being beaten by others, even children younger than you. I did not understand why you would cry out in frustration instead of fighting back as I knew you to do. I would beat you, not knowing there was a storm coming."

How serious the storm would be, none of us had any idea.

Acknowledgements

My journey in life has been enriched so much and by so many people that it would take another book to write down each name. I'm humbled and grateful to the entire village that made this life an adventure and this book possible.

Thank you to my parents, whose relentless and selfless love gives me a glimpse of what the everlasting love of my heavenly Father looks like.

To my siblings and extended family, thank you for bearing me on your strong backs and never getting weary of caring for me. You have shown me that love and sacrifice can enable one to endure the most trying times.

To my friends and siblings in the faith, your prayers and constant encouragement to grow in grace give me hope, pointing to the light that leads home.

I am grateful to my local church at The Well for the joy of being a member of the body of Christ and for their commitment to seeing me grow as a vessel that can be useful to the Lord.

To Joni and Friends, I'm grateful that you blazed a trail, holding out the light of Christ so I and others could see and follow.

Thank you to all teachers who kept me on the path of life and the pursuit of knowledge. Thanks to you, I was able to see a world of wonders beyond my walls and reach for it.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Sister Petra and the Franciscan Nuns in SAJOCAH who took in me and other children like me when nobody else wanted us.

To the Oasis team, thank you for guiding me through the daunting process of publishing and making sure the message of hope in Jesus shared in this book reaches further and wider than I could have done on my own.

If you're holding this book in your hand or reading my story, then you are the reason it was written. You are a part of my story – thank you and God bless.