

Reality for AIDS Orphans

"The silence that surrounds children affected by HIV/AIDS and the inaction that results is morally reprehensible and unacceptable. If this situation is not addressed, and not addressed now with increased urgency, millions of children will continue to die, and tens of millions more will be further marginalized, stigmatized, malnourished, uneducated, and psychologically damaged"

Executive Director of UNICEF, Carol Bellamy

ANGELS IN THE DUST PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

ANGELS IN THE DUST (80-90 min work in progress) tells the story of Botshabelo, a place of safety, for children who have been orphaned by AIDS, starved, raped and forgotten. Many of these child rapes have been fueled by the myth that sex with a virgin cures HIV/AIDS – virgin cure myth.

Marion Clote, her husband Con and their three daughters, gave up their wealth to build a village and school that provides shelter, food, education as well as love, hope and healing to more than 550 children in need. Two hundred of the children live with the Clotes along with hundreds of teenagers and adults, many whom have grown up in the village, who help run the place. The story of this amazing family's compassion and sacrifice is a beacon of hope for a nation that has endured the darkest moments of humanity and continues to struggle to overcome disease, poverty, the dissolution of families, an epidemic of HIV/AIDS, rape, violence and Apartheid's legacy of social and political unrest.

Marion Clote believes that restoring the concept of family, beginning with children, can start the healing process for her country. She witnessed the devastation caused by the disintegration of families first hand when she lived in Bryanston, a wealthy suburb of Johannesburg, where many mothers were employed as live-in domestic workers, separated from their children. The mothers were only allowed to keep newborn infants for nine weeks, and then the babies were sent away, despite the fact there was no one to care for them.

Marion and Con walked away from their five-bedroom house, swimming pool, servants, and many of their friends and family to create Botshabelo. Besides the orphanage and school, it encompasses three separate villages and an organic farm. In fifteen years, the compound has grown to 37 hectares - now owned and fully operated by its 600 residents.

For most of the children of Botshabelo, their needs are desperate. Most have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS. Many have been severely abused and neglected. More than 90 percent of them have been raped, and approximately 25 percent of them have HIV/AIDS. The youngest rape victims sleep in beds next to Marion because they are too afraid to be alone. But despite the seeming horrific situations of these orphans, they find peace at Botshabelo. Marion has successfully incorporated working ideals of safety, belonging, and self worth into therapies and counseling that are actively healing the children. These children are learning to break the cycle of violence that has traumatized South African children for decades, so they may create for themselves a new family.

It's my agreement with the angels – bring them, we'll never turn anyone away. I did that once and I paid bitterly for it. Because when we didn't have enough food I turned away about thirty children and some of them died, some of them were raped, and I learned a bitter lesson and that's mine to carry. --Marion Clote

ANGELS IN THE DUST DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

The most chilling factor of the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa is infant rape, which has been linked to the folk belief that having sex with a virgin can cure AIDS. The virgin cure myth is not unique to Africa - it originated over 400 years ago in Europe, when people believed that having sex with a virgin could cure syphilis.

Before deciding to make this documentary I heard many stories about rape in South Africa but the most disturbing were the stories of infant rape. One weekend I was in Cape Town, South Africa and nine infant baby rapes were reported at the Children's Hospital. The reports made me very angry but rather than getting stuck in the problems, I decided to look for possible solutions. Then I found the Botshabelo village. My film center on the founder of the orphanage, Marion, is a very compelling charismatic speaker. The Clote family has chosen a spiritual world over a material world. This choice was made over fifteen years ago since then they have experienced tough times often not knowing where the next meal was coming from but they have never regretted their decision. It is true my film is about orphans and rape but it also deals with much larger issues that we in the west can relate to especially the question what am I doing in my life to benefit humanity?

The Clote family demonstrates courage, forgiveness and a tolerance and a love of humanity I have never ever encountered, anywhere. This is the story of a family choosing the spiritual world over the material and the rich benefits accrued from a choice made out of love.

Angels in the Dust is only the first step in an ambitious campaign which will focus on stopping the rape of infants and contribute to ending the cycle of violence and despair for South Africa's poorest children. Using the film as a tool for awareness and training, I hope to present Botshabelo as a pilot program and I hope to open new orphanages in and around South Africa's poorest regions. While ambitious, I feel this goal could have unparalleled impact on the future of the country, and is well within reach. Not only that, but it can be an instrument to launch an educational campaign of information.

Upon completion we intend to use a genuine grass roots approach, working with community leaders, parents and teachers, to host fundraising dinners, local screenings and events. We believe the film will also have international appeal, capable of reaching audiences in a way that standard news media cannot. In conjunction with fundraising events, we intend to roll out a campaign, which will be similar to the "arm band" drive promoted by the Lance Armstrong Foundation. The money will be used to raise awareness and launch an advertising campaign, which will dispel the virgin rape myth and establish and support orphanages using Botshabelo as a model.

FACTS ABOUT AIDS ORPHANS

More than 14 million children worldwide have been orphaned because of AIDS. That's the equivalent of every child under five in America with no one to watch over them.

--United Nations Foundation 2004

By 2003 15 million children under 18 had been orphaned by HIV/AIDS worldwide. About 12 million of these live in sub-Saharan Africa, and it is expected that this number will have risen to more than 18 million by 2010.

AIDS is responsible for leaving vast numbers of children across Africa without one or both parents.

THE AGE OF ORPHANS

The age of orphans is consistent across countries. Surveys suggest that overall, about 15% of orphans are 0-4 years old, 35% are 5-9 years old, and 50% are 10-14 years old.

www.angelsinthedust.org

"Orphans have little food, few clothes, no bedding and no soap...and as a whole, community care because of HIV/AIDS is overwhelmed and breaking down."

AN INCREASING PROBLEM

The scale of the AIDS orphan crisis is somewhat masked by the time lag between when parents become infected and when they die. If as expected, the number of adults dying of AIDS rises over the next decade, an increasing number of orphans will grow up without parental care and love.

"The increased spiral of adult deaths in so many countries means that the number of children orphaned each day is expanding exponentially. Africa is staggering under the load." Stephen Lewis

AFFECTING FAMILY STRUCTURES

In African countries that have already had long, severe epidemics, AIDS is generating orphans so quickly that family structures can no longer cope. Traditional safety nets are unraveling as more young adults die of AIDS related illnesses. Families and communities can barely fend for themselves, let alone take care of the orphans. Typically, half of all people with HIV become infected before they are aged 25, developing AIDS and dying by the time they are aged 35, leaving behind a generation of children to be raised by their grandparents, other adult relatives or left on their own in child-headed households.

"Throughout sub-Saharan Africa, there have been traditional systems in place to take care of children who lose their parents for various reasons. But the onslaught of HIV slowly but surely erodes this good traditional practice by simply overloading its caring capacity by the sheer number of orphaned children needing support and care. HIV also undermines the caring capacity of families and communities by deepening poverty due to loss of labour and the high cost of medical treatment and funerals."

THE VULNERABILITY OF ORPHANS

The vulnerability of AIDS orphans starts well before the death of a parent. Children living with caregivers who have HIV/AIDS will often experience many negative changes in their lives and can start to suffer neglect, including emotional neglect, long before the death of the parent or caregiver.

The economic impact of HIV/AIDS illness and death has serious consequences for an orphan's access to basic necessities such as shelter, food, clothing, health and education. Orphans run greater risks of being malnourished than children who have parents to look after them.

In addition, there is the emotional suffering of the children, which usually begins with their parents' distress and progressive illness. Eventually, the children suffer the death of their parent(s) and the emotional trauma that results. They then may have to adjust to a new situation, with little or no support, and they may suffer exploitation and abuse.

Since HIV can spread sexually between father and mother, once AIDS has claimed the mother or father, children are far more likely to lose the remaining parent. Children often then find themselves taking the role of mother or father or both - doing the housework, looking after siblings and caring for ill or dying parent(s).

"It's very hard to find a family in South Africa that hasn't been personally touched. It's very hard to find a child that hasn't seen or witnessed a death related to HIV/AIDS. The extended family in the community structure, they've really broken under the weight of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and poverty, and when the burden becomes too great, families are unable to cope anymore, and so we're seeing tremendous numbers of orphans and children who are no longer able to be cared for by their extended family."

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MEETING EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Orphans will often have many physical needs such as nutrition and health care, and these can often appear to be the most urgent. But they will have significant emotional needs as well as the sickness and death of a parent is clearly a major trauma for any child. The emotional needs of the children must not be forgotten.

"My sister is six years old. There are no grown-ups living with us. I need a bathroom tap and clothes and shoes. And water also, inside the house. But especially, somebody to tuck me and my sister in at night-time." --Apiwe aged 13

THE NEED FOR URGENT AND SUSTAINED ACTION

Millions of children have already lost at least one parent as a result of the AIDS epidemic, and millions more are likely to over the next few years. There is an urgent need to help, care and protect these children, as well as preventing more children from becoming orphans in the future. In many countries a variety of initiatives are now taking place to help AIDS orphans, but the number of children is increasing rapidly, and in many instances the increase in response is not keeping up with the increase in need.

"...in South Africa, (we) were taken to a village where the orphan population was described as outof control. As a vivid example of that, we entered a home and encountered the following: to the immediate left of the door sat the 84-year-old patriarch, entirely blind. Inside the hut sat his two wives, visibly frail, one 76, the other 78. Between them they had given birth to nine children; eight were now dead and the ninth, alas, was clearly dying. On the floor of the hut, jammed together with barely room to move or breathe, were 32-orphaned grandchildren ranging in age from two to sixteen... It is now commonplace that grandmothers are the caregivers for orphans."

"The grandmothers are impoverished, their days are numbered and the decimation of families is so complete that there's often no one left in the generation coming up behind. We're all struggling to find available responses, and there are, of course, some superb projects and initiatives in all countries, but we can't seem to take them to scale."

--Stephen Lewis, September 2003, the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa.