

Kew envisions equal education for African AIDS Orphans: A Love Story

Article by Belize Lane

“HIV and the AIDS is real. Really, really, really, don’t be silly. HIV and the AIDS is real.” This African children’s song reveals the devastating reality for millions upon millions of “throwaways,” African orphans whose families have died from AIDS. Through the lens of her camera, Palo Alto resident Chellie Kew set out to reveal the raw beauty and courage that she saw radiating from the faces of these ostracized, forgotten children. The strength and dignity that Kew hoped to capture in her poignant images of the children captured her instead, for she has gone on to found The “Q” Fund, a non-profit global enterprise founded in 2000 with “the vision of implementing sustainable solutions to eradicate poverty among children left orphaned by the AIDS virus,” according to Kew.

In honor of World AIDS Day, December 1, 2005, Kew is assembling the first of what she hopes to be an annual International ONE March for Children through The “Q” Fund, where students throughout the world will walk in unity to raise awareness about the millions of African children without access to equal education. For a dollar each, at one o’clock local time, students are asked to walk for approximately one hour, using the time to reflect on the theme of oneness that Kew has emphasized for the march, envisioning a world where all children are given the opportunity to receive an education. After marching, the students are encouraged to draw, take a photograph or write a poem that represents whatever images or feelings are aroused during reflection. “The money will go directly from the kids to the kids,” said Kew. “I am just the bridge.” The ONE March is an opportunity for students around the world to participate in an event with the knowledge that one hundred percent of the proceeds are going directly to the orphaned children of Africa.

The march is meant not only to raise money and awareness for Kew’s noble cause but to be a tool of empowerment for students worldwide. The schools are to present the idea for the march to their students and let them transform it into whatever allows the most creativity and involvement, “pioneering the effort to unimaginable success.” The march is intended to create leadership opportunities for anyone willing to get involved. “If a journalist for the school paper wants to write about the march, wonderful,” said Kew. “If children who are artists or musicians want to create artwork or music to accompany the theme; that is exactly the kind of role we hope they will take. We want students to become participants in something creative.”

Kew’s vision is one of breadth and hope, borne by a passion to help the children that so changed her. “It’s a love story and a story of my love for children,” Kew said. “What they gave me was a very different understanding of the world we live in, and what are the important things in life.” Empowered by this unconditional love, she has resolutely set herself to “go back to the origin of the dysfunction.” With an estimated 40 million AIDS orphans by the year 2010 according to the World Health Organization, where better to

begin helping than sub-Saharan Africa. According to Kew, “any other form of help is merely a band-aid.”

Thus, Kew has set to work at the very source of the problem, educating the youth of Africa. A United Nations report outlined the need for ensuring essential services such as education for children orphaned by AIDS deaths. According to the report, after losing caregivers, children have a greater need for stability, care and protection. “Imagine *equal* opportunity,” said Kew. “Imagine everyone having equal access to education. It has to happen if we are to continue being human beings.” Through The “Q” Fund, Kew has founded a school in Ndola, Zambia that provides education for over 500 orphans and widows and will eventually become purely vocational.

The “Q” Fund is also building a second school in Kenya that is meant to eventually provide education from kindergarten through college. The school is being built as an educational facility with equal standards to those of any other school worldwide built for higher learning. Kew’s goal is to create a school that “[she] would be comfortable sending [her] own children to.” As AIDS orphans, the children have lost their parents and with them the rich, timeless culture of the African people. The school in Kenya will teach the children their own heritage and the importance of the indigenous arts with the help of 21st century opportunities.

According to William W. Rankin, president of the San Francisco-based Global AIDS Interfaith Alliance, “if an orphan drops out of school, there is no social support system to catch them at all, and they are lost. Schooling is of crucial importance.” Kew has recognized education as the primary solution to eradicating the desolation and poverty instigated by the HIV virus. By bringing the African children up to equal academic standards with the rest of the world, according to Kew, the playing fields will be equalized, allowing for a collaborative effort to fight the virus that will include those directly affected. This collaboration is apparent in Kew’s unique approach to education and funding that is revolutionary to the non-profit world.

By means of sustainable support, Kew has found a way to create a truly self-sufficient, stable community while exponentially increasing her financing. “Sustainability is the key to the longevity of any and all projects,” said Kew. “‘Charity’ in the long run fails.” In July of 2005, The “Q” Fund purchased approximately seven acres of an organic banana plantation on the outskirts of Ndola, Zambia to achieve this sustainability. Kew plans to utilize organic farming, cattle raising, high-end finish carpentry and fish hatcheries as the components of an “engine that will constantly create more funding.” Through these sustainable economic endeavors, The “Q” Fund is creating an innovative means of support not only for the school but for the African people. “We wanted to find something to give the self-worth and dignity back to the community,” said Kew. By fostering a sense of autonomy in Zambia, The “Q” Fund is promoting pride in “self, family and country, hard work and a better life for their children.” This independence is vital for a people struggling to combat the devastation AIDS has wreaked on their community.

The notion of creating educational opportunities for sub-Saharan African orphans equal to those available worldwide presents an entirely innovative system for fostering equality in poverty stricken countries. With an increase in deaths by AIDS per day from 2000 to the present of 2,500 to 8,000 people, we are approaching a “tipping point.” Kew presents a constructive and dynamic means of promoting education through global awareness and the self-sufficiency of the African people. “This will be a blueprint that other countries will want to copy,” said Kew. The International ONE March for Children is an opportunity for students throughout the world to join in The “Q” Fund’s vision for a world with equal educational opportunities for all. Through the direct engagement and empowerment of students, Kew has shown the world that “tomorrow can be so much better than yesterday.”