

## The Girl in the Red Dress

By Tiffany Talbott for "Hip Mama" Magazine

In the summer of 1997, Africa was only a far away place on a map to Chellie Kew, a million miles from her home in Lake Oswego, Oregon where she was busy with a thriving holistic health practice, amateur photography and two teenagers. But when her husband was offered a transfer to Johannesburg, South Africa, the family eagerly anticipated the adventure of living overseas. "We were so naive," Chellie remembers. But after a few weeks of living in Dainfern, a community North of Johannesburg, she realized the reality of living in South Africa was far different than her rosy expectations.

At the time, the BBC ranked Johannesburg as the most dangerous city in the world (outside of a formal war zone). Every six minutes someone was raped or murdered. Chellie, fearing her family would end up statistics, booked tickets back to America.

But, the day before their flights, Chellie learned an African man she had befriended had died. Nobody would say how. She wondered—could she have helped him? Why didn't he come to her? Chellie mentioned her concerns to a neighbor who brusquely told her, "Isaac obviously died of AIDS. Do you have any idea how many millions of children in Africa have been orphaned by AIDS?"

She couldn't sleep that night. "Even the thought of ten children watching their parents die was incomprehensible. But millions?" Thoughts of African children and her children swirled in her mind. In the early morning, she canceled the tickets.

Chellie spent the next two years learning as much as she could about Africa, its people and AIDS. "I wanted to know what they hoped for when they got up in the morning, what their spiritual beliefs were and what kept them going through all the chaos." She also wanted to help AIDS orphans, but how she would do that was elusive. "Sure I gave money to orphanages, some toys, some clothes. But it was almost insulting. What was that going to do?" Then her husband's company, worried about escalating violence that had resulted in 4,000 carjackings in six months, sent them back to the States. By then, Chellie had fallen in love with Africa.

Chellie's hands shot up and danced in the air as she described the Africa she left. "The drama, the war, the persecution, the repressed rage but also the beauty of the people, the landscape, and the birds! My God, the birds! Some were as tall as a seven-year-old child, so black they're iridescent. And tiny beekeeper birds—green, red and yellow—when they'd take flight you'd see a rainbow of colors and think, *this is the most beautiful place on the planet*. Then you'd see someone dead on the side of the road. Beauty, death, drama—that's Africa."

When Chellie returned to Oregon, she felt she'd left something unfinished in Africa. But she also needed a little time to regroup from, "Twenty-four hours a day of black and white, beauty and sorrow, life and death." She expected her Oregon home to be her sanctuary. It wasn't.

"Our house had been trashed by renters and our moving container, which held all our material possessions, had been dropped. Everything we owned was broken." And Chellie was alone. Her children were at university and her husband traveled for weeks at a time for his job. "I set about putting our house back together, which became a metaphor for my life," she said.

Chellie restarted her holistic health practice, but even that had changed. "I was so dissatisfied doing that work when I came back. I would put my hands on someone who had everything, everything! Yet they were *miserable*. Before Africa, I thought 'Oh wow, look what I can do, I can make people feel better,' and there was a lot of ego associated with that. But after seeing children taking care of each other after every adult they knew had died...." Her voice trailed off.

Chellie knew she wanted to do something to help the children. But what? She couldn't imagine what a 45-year-old woman without nonprofit experience could do. She remembers looking up at the stars one evening and saying, "Okay, if you want me to do something here, you better tell me what it is—because I don't know." Later that night, Chellie had a vision of a small black girl wearing a red dress. "She asked me with her eyes to return to Africa and use the lens of my camera to focus on their grace and not on the disease—to separate these innocent children from the stigma associated with the virus, to capture on film the spirit I saw when I lived there." Her mission became suddenly clear—a book of photos of Sub-Saharan African AIDS orphans, showing their joy.

Within weeks, Chellie returned to Africa. Traveling to squatter camps, refugee villages and homeless shelters, she took pictures and listened to the children's stories. And she noticed an amazing synchronicity—every person she met on a plane, waiting for a taxi or in a restaurant seemed to lead to something that helped her endeavor. Once it was a missionary who took her into the Kalahari, another time it was a taxi driver who introduced her to the orphanage where he'd spent his childhood.

A first-time author, Chellie didn't bother with finding an agent or publisher. Instead, she maxed out her credit cards and self-published *African Journal: A Child's Continent*. She spent the next nine months driving around the US promoting the book, lecturing and raising money for the "Q" Fund, the nonprofit she founded which is dedicated to improving the lives of sub-Saharan orphans affected by the AIDS virus by providing housing, food, health care, and education. With the book proceeds and the money she raised she's been able to support grass root projects in Durban, Botswana, Zimbabwe and South Africa. But what she is most proud of is building a school from the ground up in Ndola, Zambia which educates 500 AIDS orphans and widows. She named the school Chimoza, meaning 'we are one'.

When she initially met the first students of Chimoza, she observed, "Not one child smiled, their eyes were vacant—these kids had been taken off the street where they'd been living out of garbage cans and prostituting themselves for food and shelter." A year later, Chellie returned and

hardly recognized the children. "They were singing, practicing plays, drawing—and they were averaging better grades than the children at the government schools, the schools that had excluded them because they had no living relative to sign a piece of paper."

In addition to formal education, children also learn indigenous arts at Chimoza. "For example, a certain basket weave, is it for a wedding or a funeral? They are taught the traditions that would've been passed down within the families if the adults had lived. These children have such a thirst for education and they are so bright."

One of the most difficult things for Chellie has been leaving the children at the end of her visits. "Whenever I leave the children, I cry. And the children say to me, 'No no, don't cry Mama Chellie.' I tell them how much I will miss them." Chellie paused as she silently blinked back tears. She took a deep breath and continued, "They tell me, 'You go away just in the skin but your spirit stays with us always.'" She asked the children if that is how they think of their parents. They told her, "Yes, we know they have gone. But their spirit is always with us."

Does she ever feel like 'white lady bountiful' swooping down to save black children? She pinched the skin on her arm and answered, "What is this? Nothing but skin. We are all related on a deeper level. If you melt down every citizen in the world—we are all African. Our DNA has proven links to the Bushman. It's our family of origin and that's why what happens in Africa matters to us. They're our relatives and if they are suffering it hurts our conscience."

What's next for Chellie? "We're going bananas!" she said with a laugh. Chellie's dream is for Chimoza to become self-sustaining and a blueprint for future projects. To initiate sustainability, the "Q" Fund recently bought 5,500 baby banana trees, seven acres of fertile land and partnered with another grass roots organization based in Ndola. "The goal is to be able to walk away because the school will support itself through organic banana sales. Most Africans don't want a handout and this way the entire community grows."

When not working in Africa, Chellie continues to lecture around the US. Recently a woman approached Chellie after a lecture and said, "Chellie, I want to adopt one of those orphans—can you help me?" Chellie reminded the woman that these children aren't babies, they have roots and memories in their communities. But the woman persisted, "Who wouldn't want to live in America?"

Chellie replied, "But have you asked the kids what they want? Buy yourself a ticket, go to the school and ask them. Bring your whole family over. Please understand, the school is the only thing they have, their teachers and friends are their family and you want to pluck them out and put them in a Disneyland culture? Let them adopt you—go to Africa and be there with them."

And for those of us who can't hop on a plane to Africa, what can we do? I expected her reply to be, "Open your wallet wide Sister and dig deep!" But Chellie surprised me. "The most important job is to raise children who look through the lens of humanity." She believes we make a difference simply by mixing with different cultures within our own cities. "Go to multicultural

festivals, take children to playgrounds in neighborhoods rich with immigrants, eat at ethnic restaurants and get to know the owners. Bring Africa into your home with food, ritual, books, art, music and dance.”

Why Africa? And why doesn't Chellie focus her energy on the problems in her own country? Those are most frequently asked questions Chellie hears when she lectures. “I do this as much for my children as for African children. I want my children to live in a world where they're not bombarded with war, inequality, and racial disharmony. Everyone looks through their own cultural lens, giving them a slightly different view, but if we integrate our images together we will have a beautiful collage made out of respect. And that benefits us all.”

To find out more about the “Q” Fund, visit [www.qfund.org](http://www.qfund.org)