

Aurora women spread the grandmotherly love around the world



By Brock Weir

Outliving one's own children is, for most people in Canada, absolutely unthinkable ? but for many in the developing world it is, sadly, a regular reality of life.

In Africa in particular, with the widespread AIDS epidemic, this is even more so, with grandmothers often left to raise their grandchildren left orphaned by the disease.

These women are often left on their own to raise the next generation, with little support from one day to the next, but what has been described by Stephen Lewis as a ?huge, brand-new social movement?, has been focusing on making these connections from afar, grandmother to grandmother.

The Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign was founded by the Stephen Lewis Foundation in 2006. Since then, they have raised nearly \$22 million working with African grandmothers not only to build a better life, but also in forging these very tight bonds separated by thousands of kilometers of land and ocean ? and Aurora grandmothers were in the mix almost at the ground floor.

Gran Aurora also had its roots in 2006.

From an initial meeting at the Newmarket Public Library that year, local grandmothers got together under this new name, first meeting regularly at Aurora United Church.

As a group, founding member Cathy Gross says they weren't quite sure where to start but forged ahead with a determination to do just that.

?It just so fit with everything I had done before,? says Ms. Gross, who came to the group after retiring as a teacher with the York Catholic District School Board and continuing her outreach efforts through a Catholic mission called the Pontifical Mission Society (an organization with a creative acronym she gives with a slight hesitancy!). ?At first we were not going to do any fundraising in the first year because we thought, ?We really don't know how to do this' and we would just write letters. It turned out we're now fundraisers.?

And how ? from those reluctant first steps armed with a pen and a cause on which they wanted to sound off, they have since raised a whopping \$85,000 for the organization through such popular fundraisers as regular teas and craft shows.

?We're all grandmothers,? Cathy explains. ?You don't have to be a grandmother to belong, you can be a ?grand-other', but it is the love of our own grandchildren that binds us. Then you think about the grandmothers in Africa raising their kids when they have been

devastated by losing all of their children to AIDS. Canadian grandmothers said, 'We will be your voice. Will you accept us?' and they said yes.

'Most of us have not had children who died. If any of my children died, my God. To raise the grandchildren, I am just in awe of these women.'

It is an awe shared by fellow Grandmother Pauline Maxwell, who is no stranger to projects in Africa, working in countries such as Malawi on behalf of the Anglican Church.

'When I was in Africa, the message comes through: yes, they are desperately in need of funds and it helps that way, but it is also the fact someone cares about them and they don't feel so alone,' says Ms. Maxwell. 'Even that becomes a major help to them.'

This sense of solidarity, however, is not something they can do alone. Gran Aurora and, in turn, Grandmothers to Grandmothers as a whole, relies on the public at large for their fundraising efforts. Aside from the teas, their crafts have become popular in shows around York Region. One of their members, for instance, created knitted dolls with smiling faces to represent each child orphaned by the disease. Each doll, often created in working bees, has its own special name and meaning, selling in the thousands.

Other crafts include hand-made jewellery produced with materials sourced from Africa, including clay beads purchased from a Fair Trade factory near Nairobi, which employs mostly women. When access to these materials became scarce, they found shellacked paper beads from Uganda, as well as 'Lucinda Pins' representing 'cheeky, blingy women.'

'Because we're the voice for the African grandmothers, we're trying to tell their story,' explains Cathy. 'They don't have the energy or wherewithal that Canadian grandmothers have. It is about their grandchildren. They are so loved. I think it is the idea that their grandchildren are loved every bit as much as our grandchildren are.'

As well as the tried and true fundraisers have done, this summer and into the fall Gran Aurora will be taking on a new initiative hoping to engage not only their own members, but the community as a whole.

'Sounds of Africa' will be their very first foray onto the concert scene. Slated to take place at Trinity Anglican Church on November 8, the Grandmothers and 'Grand-others' will be out in force after Labour Day selling their tickets in various venues, including September 13 and October 4 at the Aurora Farmers' Market.

'It is going to be a wonderful evening of good, good music all on an African theme,' they say.