

GranAurora won't rest until grandmothers in Africa can do the same



"We will not rest until they can rest," has been the motto for a group of local grandmothers for decades as they work tirelessly to lend financial aid and a helping hand to grandmothers in Africa caring for their grandchildren orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

That has been the mission of GranAurora since its inception as the local chapter of Grandmothers to Grandmothers, an initiative of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, and it's a mission that will be renewed post-COVID through song next month.

On May 28, GranAurora will host the Toronto Welsh Male Voice Choir at Newmarket's Bethel Community Church.

The event will be not just a concert, but an opportunity to continue their outreach within the community to help support women abroad support their grandkids through donations and also create lasting social capital through start-up funds for women-owned businesses.

"HIV-AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa is really under the radar now when it was quite a top story," says Grandmother Cathy Gross. "About 7,000 young girls between the ages of 15 and 24 [are] infected with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa every week. It is still a really, really difficult problem. 11 million children since the AIDS pandemic began have lost at least one parent. Our motto since the beginning is we will not rest until they can rest ? and we can't rest. That's the over-arching theme we want people to understand."

She describes the Grandmothers to Grandmothers movement as "senior women holding hands".

Grandmother Catherine Whittingham says the money they raise goes to the Stephen Lewis Foundation which has specific targets to meet to support grandmothers and bolster education for the kids. This can include funding to build a new school, money directly to the people to purchase HIV medications and treatments, and grants directly to the grandmothers so they can lay the foundation for sustainable businesses of their own.

"They can become self-sufficient and down the road they may not require our funding," says Grandmother Lenore Pressley.

But funding is still very much needed and the May 28 concert will help them towards their annual goal.

In fact, the concert itself was initially planned for early 2020 but the global pandemic forced those plans onto the backburner.

Over the intervening three years, the group has kept momentum going over Zoom and has continued to flourish when some other groups with similar missions lost steam.

‘Throughout COVID, our members who are craftswomen continued to make amazing things and we had sales, we continued to raise money which, to my mind, was incredible,’ says Catherine.

Adds Grandmother Moira O’Bryan: ‘It was quite interesting during the pandemic because we did have some craft sales out in my backyard, weather permitting, and then we brought it in when it was safe to do so, and we even had to have people arrive to a schedule because we couldn’t have more than a couple of people in the house at one time. It was quite an undertaking, actually, but did we make it work? We did it.’

It’s a testament to the Grandmothers’ determination but they know they can’t keep doing it on their own. As the concert date approaches, they’re working hard to underscore the work they do and to bring new members into the fold. One doesn’t have to be a grandmother to be a member; it can be any woman of any age. Men looking to be a part of the cause have their own titles ‘Gran-’ others? ‘ and are very much rowing in the same direction.

‘We’re an aging population in GranAurora and we’re looking to have new members, so if anyone in the audience is thinking of joining a group like ours, we would welcome them to come forward and contact us,’ says O’Bryan. ‘We’re really looking for new members and some fresh ideas for fundraising and all members are welcome to join and support us grandmothers supporting grandmothers in Africa.

‘One of the things we would like people to take with them [after the concert] is we’re all struggling right now with inflation, the cost of everything, and we have families who are struggling to feed their children and things like that; that is happening even more so in places like Africa. If we could only imagine what those mothers are going through, not only to nurture these children ‘ and some of them from babies, and some of them are born HIV-positive ‘ they have to make sure they have a way to get these children to clinics, wherever they might be. They have to make sure they have the money to get these children the medications, as well as feeding and clothing them. For all that we’re struggling with here, it’s tenfold in places like sub-Saharan Africa. It’s the idea that we’re coming together and enjoying this wonderful music, taking away the thought that maybe we can help a little bit ‘ today by getting a ticket, attending a concert, we have helped a grandmother raise her grandchild.’

For more information on GranAurora, visit granaurora.ca. For tickets, email info@granaurora.ca.

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