

Author Terry Fallis joins GranAurora to raise awareness of African grandmothers



By Brock Weir

When life gets tough, sometimes all you can do is laugh.

If you're in Aurora on March 29, however, you can laugh and make a difference in the lives of those considerably tougher than your average Canadian when GranAurora joins forces award-winning author Terry Fallis to raise awareness of the plight facing grandmothers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Mr. Fallis, a two-time recipient of the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour will join GranAurora, the local branch of Grandmothers to Grandmothers, an initiative of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, for an evening of laughs and a chance to introduce people in the community to the work they do.

Founded by Mr. Lewis, Grandmothers to Grandmothers, aims to partner grandmothers in sub-Saharan grandmothers with their Canadian counterparts in an exchange of support and understanding. These grandmothers are often left raising their grandchildren, orphaned by the AIDS pandemic, and struggling to make ends meet.

Grandmothers to Grandmothers aims to raise money for the women overseas in a variety of ways and this money goes towards several initiatives including education and grants to enable grandmothers to become empowered members of their local communities and economies.

'We just had International Women's Day and one of the big this is education,' says GranAurora member Sharon Willan. 'The education of women is extremely important because with every year of education a woman gets, she is able to have more skills. If she gets married, her children are healthier, there is less infant mortality, they are able to do these entrepreneurial businesses, and it helps the economy of the country. I think women in sub-Saharan Africa are really looking at those kinds of things and saying, 'We have the brains, the minds, the ideas, and the creativity to do these kinds of things,' and it gives them the impetus to do that.'

Fellow member Geri Adam agrees, noting the Stephen Lewis Foundation has created an atmosphere of empowerment.

'They come together as a group and are strong women,' she says. '[Now] they are not so isolated, they feel empowered and are doing a lot. The Foundation asked [the African grandmothers] what they wanted, what they needed and how they would use the money. They have to present a plan and they check in later to make sure things are going well. If it is going well, they get more money. It creates independence and it creates a feeling of pride in what they are doing.'

Perhaps the most important thing, notes members Lenore Pressley and Kate Whittingham, is that the money going towards these women does not go through governments. All the money, she says, goes where it is needed and the results are clear. But, there is a

role for government; with this sense of empowerment, the grandmothers in the impacted nations are lobbying their local seats of power for their rights.

?That's the real problem,? says Ms. Willan. ?It's the fact that if the husband dies, the woman loses her property and very often is out on the street with the children. They are lobbying the government so that the inheritance will come to the children so they can take care of the children.?

Over the years, Gran Aurora, which was founded in the basement of the former home of the Aurora United Church, has worked hard to gain a presence in the community, and ever-present at a number of community events, particularly craft shows and bazaars where their traditional African crafts have garnered a following, they have raised over \$80,000 for the charity.

With their upcoming author talk, which will be held at the Aurora Cultural Centre, they hope their message reaches new audiences.

?What I want people to take away is how amazing these women are, these grandmothers who are suddenly plunked with these grandchildren,? says Ms. Adam. ?They have very little support from their own governments and the way they adapt, if they are just given some support, is amazing. A lot of people have no idea what is going on over there.?

Adds Ms. Willan: ?We hope to do ourselves out of a job, they will be so empowered!?

Tickets for the March 29 event are \$20 and are available for purchase by calling Cathy Gross at 905-727-1638 or Ms. Willan at 905-773-2823. Doors open at 6.45.