

Local Grandmothers continue work of Stephen Lewis, foundation

Aurora grandmothers have supported their African counterparts as they're left to raise children orphaned by the AIDS epidemic for more than two decades through GranAurora, the local chapter of Stephen Lewis' Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign.

The Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign connects Canadian grandmothers with grandmothers in Africa left to raise their grandchildren orphaned by the AIDS epidemic.

Since the foundation of GranAurora 20 years ago, the team of local women, most of whom are retirees, have raised more than \$250,000 for the Stephen Lewis Foundation and have no intention of slowing down as the Foundation moves forward without its founder.

Lewis, who served as Member of Provincial Parliament, leader of the Ontario New Democratic Party, Canada's Ambassador to the United Nations and the United Nations' Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, lost his battle with abdominal cancer on March 31 at the age of 88.

"Stephen was a respected humanitarian who spent his life championing social justice and human rights," said the Foundation in a statement. "Throughout his political and international careers, he was committed to creating a more equitable world."

It was a commitment embraced by people across the country, and here in Aurora, his Grandmothers to Grandmothers initiative struck a special chord.

The Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign has raised millions of dollars for women struggling to raise millions of children orphaned by AIDS. Its aim is to amplify the voices and expertise of grandmothers in Africa and show the world that leadership by older women is critical in reclaiming hope and resilience across communities.

The initiative is active in nearly 15 countries globally where local chapters diligently raise much-needed funds and awareness for the grandmothers not only helping them with donations, but business grants designed to empower and inspire.

Cathy Gross, one of GranAurora's co-founders, was spurred to get involved after visiting Malawi with fellow Auroran and GranAurora co-founder Sharon Willan in 2000. There, they met with grandmothers who were living the reality of the AIDS epidemic every day.

"It was a life-changing visit," says Gross, noting that when the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign was founded in 2006, they were eager to get involved.

It all started with a potluck dinner at Aurora United Church and has evolved into a full program focused on two major fundraisers annually.

"I still remember the passion in Stephen Lewis' voice talking about these indomitable women who had lost all their children and were left to raise their grandchildren," Gross recalls. "He was overwhelmed with their needs, their resilience, and their love of their grandchildren. These African grandmothers love their grandchildren just as much as we do, and that's the hook."

Fellow GranAurora member Lenore Pressley was also inspired by Lewis' words and what she viewed as the feeling that "nothing was being done to help."

"I think Stephen Lewis was a particularly good role model for the kind of work we do," says Pressley. "His whole life was dedicated to giving and I think he was an excellent role model for us."

'Justice is my passion and that was his passion as well,' she continues. 'I see no reason to slow down at this point in time. In fact, we keep hoping to get even more members who are a bit younger than us!'

Moira O'Bryan, another member of the group, has a similar view on keeping momentum going.

'When Stephen Lewis was there in Africa witnessing all this, I got the impression that the rest of the world was saying 'Not my problem.' It's wonderful that he picked that up and now we're continuing that work of stamping the AIDS epidemic right out and supporting these grandmothers because, yes, we all know how they would feel as grandparents and as mothers, and to have that feeling of abandonment, like the world just doesn't care, is just so horrible. What we're trying to say is, yes, we do care.'

Adds member Gwyn Gallant: 'The Stephen Lewis Foundation certainly made me far more aware of what was going on in Africa. We're all grandmothers, and we're all connected to our grandchildren, and it just brings things home a lot closer with what's going on there. How can we help? GranAurora certainly does help. GranAurora has been a real boost for the Stephen Lewis Foundation, but it would be nowhere without Stephen Lewis.'

All money raised by GranAurora and the wider Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign goes directly to the Foundation, which has team members on the ground to vet all proposed projects.

'All of the initiatives come from the grandmothers and we support what they need instead of telling them what they need,' says Gross. 'I think that's a fairly unique model that perhaps some other organizations have adopted that a little more, but certainly that's the Stephen Lewis Foundation's way of fundraising. It totally empowers them. They've gone from needing uniforms for their grandchildren to petitioning their governments for pensions and land rights. They've done major strides in 20 years.'

And GranAurora and its members will be there for them as long as they can.

'Now, [Stephen Lewis' daughter] will continue to be a driving force through the Foundation to put an end to the AIDS epidemic in Africa and we, in turn, will continue our work through the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign to support the grandmothers in Africa left to raise their grandchildren. All the Grandmothers groups across Canada have become and will continue to be the family that surrounds African grandmothers with love and support.'

For more information on GranAurora, visit granaurora.ca. For more on the varied work of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, visit stephenlewisfoundation.org.

By Brock Weir
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