

Forgotten country 'needs our help'; Journey to AIDs-stricken Lesotho convinces city woman of the need to help the country's orphans

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Illustration: Photo: ASSOCIATED PRESS / Joanne McAuley saw the face of AIDS and the orphans it's leaving behind in Africa during a recent trip to Lesotho. She made the journey on behalf of the Rotary Club of Guelph and travelled with Guelph doctor Anne-Marie Zajdlik, who is raising money to keep an AIDS clinic in the southern African nation operating for another two years. McAuley also brought hats and red mitts to appreciative children from the Salvation Army of Guelph.; Map: Map shows location of Lesotho, Africa

Joanne McAuley expected to be bowled over with images of people starving, people dying of AIDS and children left to fend for themselves during her one-month visit to Lesotho, Africa.

And while the tiny landlocked country in southern Africa is in crisis -- with the third largest incidence of AIDS and HIV-infected people in the world, extreme poverty, and children orphaned by AIDS -- the image that sticks with her is of smiling children sporting bright red mittens.

Hats and mitts came courtesy of the Salvation Army of Guelph, and McAuley said that with the tiny country in the midst of winter right now, the children were grateful -- and amused -- by the colourful additions to their wardrobe.

The Guelph woman is having trouble keeping her own hats straight these days as two of her pet projects are dovetailing into one.

McAuley is the fundraising co-ordinator for Dr. Anne-Marie Zajdlik's Masai for Africa campaign and she set out with the Guelph doctor June 28 as Zajdlik prepared to work at the Place of Hope AIDS clinic in the Lesotho city of Leribe.

The clinic was opened and funded for two years by OHAfrica, a project of the Ontario Hospital Association.

Zajdlik hopes to raise \$1 million from Guelph residents to keep the clinic operating for another two years.

McAuley said ticket sales for the speaking engagement of Stephen Lewis, the UN special envoy for AIDS/HIV, at the River Run Centre on Sept. 15, in support of Masai for Africa, are going well, but sponsors are desperately needed.

But McAuley was also in Lesotho for a month on behalf of the Rotary Club of Guelph, gathering information and making connections with local agencies, non-governmental organizations, government officials and citizens to determine if her dream of helping the children orphaned by AIDS is plausible.

"When Stephen Lewis pinpoints Lesotho as the forgotten country, he's absolutely right," McAuley said yesterday.

"This country needs our help."

McAuley said there are "hundreds of thousands of orphans" in Lesotho, but unlike some other countries -- India for example -- children don't end up on the street.

"The way the villages are set up, the kids stay in the village and are cared for by grandmothers and older siblings. But it's a hard life. Everyone is so poor and food is hard to come by," she said.

She toured the countryside -- beautiful, mountainous terrain -- and said it was haunting to enter villages where there were no adults aged 35 to 50 because of the AIDS pandemic.

Grandmothers are left with four, five, six grandchildren to feed and clothe after their adult children die from the disease.

And in many cases, it's children who are heads of the household --eight- year-olds in charge of toddlers and infants.

McAuley met with members of the Rotary Club of Meseru, Lesotho's capital city, and she was intrigued by a project the club there is doing in partnership with a club in Ohio.

That club runs a day orphan centre, where children can get a meal, clothes, health care and schooling.

Then the light bulb came on, McAuley recalled.

"I thought, if we could get something like that connected with the AIDS clinic in Leribe, that would be awesome."

Leribe is a 30-minute drive from the South African border and McAuley said the two countries are like night and day.

"South Africa is like Guelph -- there's gardens and grass, highways and Wal-Mart. There's wealth, cleanliness, roads and stores all around. I don't understand how those people can just ignore what's happening right next door. It's just not right," she said.

"Now that I've been there, I can't ignore what I've seen."

Lesotho had the same effect on Peg Herbert, executive director of Help Lesotho, an Ottawa-based charity that's also working to get the struggling country on its feet.

Herbert is speaking about her project in Guelph Sunday at a district Kiwanis meeting.

Help Lesotho sends books for libraries, runs grandmother support programs and leadership training and camps, particularly for teens. It also sends kids to school through sponsors.

Key to the success of Help Lesotho is that the projects are generated on the ground, Herbert said, by the people who live and work there.

"It can be very intrusive to these cultures to walk in and tell them what they need," Herbert said. "Our guiding principles are gender equity, good governance and education. We bring these biases when we come. But the rest of it is theirs."

McAuley met Herbert on her travels and hopes the Rotary project can team with Help Lesotho or at least follow their example.

"There's no point reinventing the wheel," McAuley said.

Graham Knowles is chair of the Rotary Club of Guelph's Africa committee. He said the local club has a long history of supporting projects in Africa, specifically in Tanzania and Cameroon.

The beauty of Rotary, both Knowles and McAuley said, is that local dollars are matched by Rotary International for approved projects. So a \$1 donation can become \$2 or \$3 under the right conditions.

And because it's a volunteer organization, there's little overhead. Project dollars go to projects and not administration.

"We have three applications for matching grants in the works right now," Knowles said. "So this project? It depends how big it is. But it's definitely on the table."

"There seems to be a movement in Guelph to help that part of the world. It would be good if we can assist in some way."

McAuley and Zajdlík will make a presentation to the Rotary club on Sept. 1.

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