

By any means necessary

Canadian grandmothers band together to battle AIDS epidemic in Africa

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THE WAKEFIELD GRANNIES AND AIDS IN AFRICA

Marlo Campbell

Over the last 20 years, the AIDS pandemic has devastated Africa.

No area has been hit harder than the sub-Saharan (southern) region of the continent, a place where over 24 million people currently live with HIV — that's two-thirds of all cases in the world — and where AIDS is now the leading cause of death among people aged 15-49.

Stuck in the middle of a real-life nightmare are thousands of grandmothers who, after enduring the trauma of watching their own children die, have been left to raise their grandchildren with virtually no resources or emotional support.

Now, their stories — and the grassroots response from Canadian grandmothers who have stepped up to help — are the subject of a new feature-length documentary called *The Great Granny Revolution*, which will premiere in Winnipeg May 28 at 7 p.m. at the Park Theatre.

Filmmaker Brenda Rooney took the time to speak with *Uptown* from her home in Quebec about her latest production, which she created with her husband, Robert.

"We thought we were making a film about AIDS," she says, laughing. "Well, it's not about AIDS at all — it's about women."

The Great Granny Revolution chronicles the story of the Wakefield Grannies (of which 56-year-old Rooney is a founding member), a group of 12 Canadian grandmothers who formed a support group to help grandmothers living in the Alexandra Township of South Africa.

This is the second documentary about AIDS in Africa that Rooney has made with



Filmmaker and Wakefield Granny Brenda Rooney with a Gogo from Alexandra, South Africa

her husband. In 2002, the two spent three weeks in Africa filming *Condoms, Fish & Circus Tricks*, a documentary Brenda Rooney describes as "a wide-angle view of AIDS."

"Really, out of the first film and the community itself this movement started," Rooney says.

The movement she's referring to is the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign, which was officially launched by the Stephen Lewis Foundation in March 2006. In just over a year, the campaign has grown to include 150 grandmother groups across Canada and has already managed to raise a million dollars for various grassroots projects in Africa.

The Wakefield Grannies, while not specifically affiliated with the Stephen Lewis Foundation campaign, have also been successful at fundraising. Since the group formed in 2004, Rooney estimates it's raised

over \$20,000.

Filming for *The Great Granny Revolution* began at the group's very first meeting in Wakefield and wrapped up three years later, at the Grandmothers Gathering in Toronto last August. At that event, about 200 Canadian grandmothers, including Rooney, met with 100 "gogos" (the Zulu nickname for grandmother), who were flown in by the Lewis Foundation.

The story also took the Rooneys back to Africa, where they spent several weeks documenting the day-to-day struggles of the grandmothers in Alexandra.

The Winnipeg premiere is the first stop on the documentary's tour of Western Canada, and Rooney will be on hand for a post-screening Q&A session. Tickets for the May 28 show are \$10. The Park Theatre will also screen *Condoms, Fish & Circus Tricks* on June 6.

Dolls make a difference

Local group battles epidemic by selling dolls made by African grandmothers



...and another thing!

Marlo Campbell

I couldn't write about the Stephen Lewis Foundation and the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign without mentioning Ilan Schwartz, a U of M student I met back in December 2006.

Obviously he's not a grandmother, but as the founder of local group Simunye, Schwartz has proven that one person can make a huge difference in the global fight against AIDS.

Simunye (which means "we are united" in Zulu) has raised tens of thousands of dollars for the Hillcrest AIDS Centre in South Africa through the sale of "little travellers" — tiny beaded dolls that are handmade by women living in the Hillcrest area and then shipped to Simunye for sale in Canada.

Many of these women are "gogos" (an affectionate Zulu nickname for grandmothers) and, through the Little Travellers income-generating project, they're now able to care for their families, including their grandchildren, who have been orphaned by AIDS.

Gogos, of course, are also the main beneficiaries of the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign, a movement that has been embraced and championed by the Stephen Lewis Foundation, a non-profit organization working with community groups in Africa.

Speaking of individuals making a difference, Lewis, the former United Nations Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, is himself a passionate advocate of the grandmothers' cause and was the inspiration behind the formation of at least two local Winnipeg Granny groups.

And now an update: since *Uptown* first reported on Schwartz and Simunye, Lewis visited Winnipeg for a speaking engagement and found out about the little travellers.

In April, Schwartz received a letter from Stephen Lewis himself. It reads, in part:

"The Little Travellers HIV/AIDS project is totally inspired. I endorse it every stitch of the way. It raises the consciousness in Canada and hope in Africa... The sales are made in Canada, and money flows to the heroic women and children and families battling the pandemic on the ground. What could be a better act of human solidarity?"

Schwartz was thrilled but far too modest to take any credit or admit that he's done anything special (that's part of his charm).

But he has. So, congrats, Ilan!

For more information, browse on over to www.littletravellers.net.

Finally, one last related item: another Winnipeg grandmother, Enid Butler, is organizing a potluck dinner on June 13 at St. Bartholomew Anglican Church, with all money raised going to the Stephen Lewis Foundation. Tickets are \$10 (plus a dish — it's a potluck, after all). You can find out more by e-mailing barbf@miic.ca.

When the mothers are gone...

Grandmothers work to make life better for African children orphaned by AIDS

news

GRANDMOTHERS VS. AIDS

Marlo Campbell

All across Canada, including here in Winnipeg, groups of grandmothers are mobilizing.

They're trying to raise awareness about the situation facing grandmothers in Africa, and together they're part of a growing national movement.

In sub-Saharan Africa, 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS, and it's the grandmothers who are left to raise their grandchildren, often in unsafe communities with no electricity, running water, medical supplies or food.

The Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign is a grassroots fundraising effort which supports African grandmothers as they struggle to raise their grandchildren in the midst of the AIDS pandemic. Local groups raise money for the Stephen Lewis Foundation, which then channels it into grassroots programs in 14 African nations.

Gogo Action Winnipeg was founded by Claire Painchaud in March 2006, shortly after the national campaign was launched. Painchaud, a 59-year-old retired school administrator, clearly remembers the day she decided to get involved: it was in the morning, and she was sitting at her table, drinking a cup of coffee and reading the paper.

The TV was on, and Painchaud began pay-



Claire Painchaud and an African Gogo at 2006's Grandmothers Gathering in Toronto

ing attention when she heard two African women talking about Stephen Lewis and the newly launched Grandmothers campaign.

"He's a man who commands respect," she says. "It piqued my interest."

One woman lamented that she was raising kids at a time in her life when she should be sitting back and sipping tea.

The comment struck a chord with Painchaud, who contacted the Lewis Foundation to see how she could get involved with the Winnipeg group. She was told that a chapter had yet to be established here yet, and she was encouraged to start her own.

She did just that.

The activities of Gogo Action Winnipeg are intentionally small-scale and unstructured. The 12 women involved prefer to raise money through grassroots events — one sold home-made perogies to her friends, while another held a bake sale. On June 9,

they're holding a garage sale (1300 Dudley Cres., from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m.) with all proceeds going to the campaign.

To date, Gogo Action Winnipeg has raised about \$10,000, and last August Painchaud was invited by Lewis Foundation to attend the Grandmothers Gathering in Toronto, an event at which Canadian grandmothers got to spend some time with African "gogos."

It was a life-changing, powerful experience, says Painchaud.

"The first words they said to us were, 'Tell the world that we exist and that we demand food for our grandchildren,'" she says.

She continues: "I came home and I wanted to sell my house... You couldn't come away and not be moved."

Granny groups exist in Brandon and Portage la Prairie, and the movement continues to grow. Painchaud says she's been talking with women from Flin Flon who are planning to start up a group of their own, while another Winnipeg group formed as recently as last month.

Mary Odger, founder of the new granny group, humbly describes WinnipeGo as "just a group of ladies who wanted to do something" and explains that it will be different from Gogo Action Winnipeg in that it plans to hold larger-scale, more structured events. Odger says she hopes to hold movie screenings at the universities in the near future, and possibly a gala event.

To contact Gogo Action Winnipeg, go to www.stephenlewisfoundation.org and click on the grandmothers link. To get in touch with WinnipeGo, e-mail maryodger@hotmail.com.