

OFFERING HOPE TO AFRICA'S GRANDMOTHERS AND THE ORPHANS IN THEIR CARE

RNAO's International Nursing Interest Group launches awareness initiative to support grandmothers caring for orphaned children.

Sylvia Scott has seen first hand the devastation the HIV/AIDS pandemic has brought to the African continent. Each year, the RN from Kitchener-Waterloo travels with her husband to their native Kenya to work at the Matangwe Community Health Centre, which the couple opened almost a decade ago.

Through her international work, Scott has seen too many adult men and women succumb to the disease, leaving behind millions of orphaned children. She has also seen how grandmothers are reaching across generational lines to care for these children. Scott says the Matangwe clinic, and the community projects that operate out of the facility, help support more than 300 grandmothers looking after 2,000 orphans.

According to the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF), there are 13 million children in Africa who have been orphaned by HIV/AIDS. That leaves tens of thousands of grandmothers with little choice but to take on their care.

At RNAO's 2007 annual general meeting, members passed a resolution to promote awareness about two SLF programs: the *Give a Day Campaign*, which encourages individuals to contribute whatever they can to the foundation on World AIDS Day in December; and the *Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign*, a project that allows Canadian grandmothers to raise funds for their African counterparts.

Cindy McNairn is president of RNAO's International Nursing Interest Group (INIG), which sponsored the resolution. She says the group brought the issue forward in part because it directly relates to health care overseas. But the resolution is also personal. McNairn was moved to act after hearing Stephen Lewis, former UN Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, speak at Toronto's George Brown College, where she teaches. She has since become so inspired that she contributes to the foundation regularly, and



Kenyan grandmothers receive certificates after completing an agricultural program at Matangwe Community Health Centre.

she is taking a year-long sabbatical to work and travel abroad. She will spend six weeks at Scott's clinic in Kenya.

Scott believes RNAO's support for the *Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign* represents a chance for RNs in Ontario to truly understand the plight of African grandmothers, some of whom are also retired nurses. She says Canadians need to raise money to help find solutions that will give this older generation hope and resources to make their lives better each day. Scott and her husband have been able to help by providing grandmothers with seeds so they can grow their own crops. Matangwe clinic staff worked with the grandmothers and a local nutritionist to develop healthy recipes using local foods. The recipes will appear in a cookbook they hope to sell to raise money.

"We have grandmas who are doing absolutely amazing things," Scott says. "If we can identify other income generating activities to support sustainability, that's what

these women need to be self-reliant."

Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, executive director of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, says grandmothers are the best experts when it comes to making life better for themselves and their grandchildren; they just need the tools to do it. She began thinking about how the foundation might help after noticing the number of proposals coming across her desk that sought money for widow and parenting projects. She also noticed that each time her father, Stephen Lewis, returned from Africa, he spoke about grandmothers he had met at orphan feeding programs, or who were holding support meetings under a tree. Landsberg-Lewis realized these women need help not only because of the tremendous poverty they face, but also to cope with the grief of burying their own children while simultaneously raising grandchildren who are struggling with their own loss.

In the year-and-a-half since the launch of the *Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign*, more than 160 groups have been set up across Canada, raising funds for more than 200 projects in Africa. McNairn hopes RNAO's group will soon be among that number. Members of INIG have already started talking about how to move the resolution ahead, and hope to set up a group by December.

Landsberg-Lewis says she looks forward to the ongoing contributions of Ontario's grandmothers, particularly those who are also nurses. She believes nurses' work experiences, whether in Canada or abroad, will help them imagine what life is like coping with the overburdened health-care systems in African nations, and the sense of duty grandmothers feel not just to their grandchildren, but also to their communities.

"It takes a leap to imagine the enormity of [the HIV/AIDS pandemic]," Landsberg-Lewis says. "But it doesn't take a leap for nurses to imagine the responsibility of caring for families and communities, and to understand the skills that are needed (to help)."

To find out more about RNAO's resolution, and the *Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign*, contact RNAO Nursing Policy Analyst Gail Beatty at gbeatty@rnao.org or 416-599-1925/1-800-268-7199, ext. 237. **RN**

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