



## African AIDS victims show stories — in pictures

African women, children share horrors of pandemic in photo exhibit

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LOS ANGELES - In one photograph, a group of boys in possession of a much-used soccer ball mug comically for the camera, arms and legs going every which way.

Another shot, another charmer, depicts a child turning an exuberant handspring for a circle of young admirers. But the picture titled "Children Raising Children" delivers a punch to the gut: It shows a boy of 7, maybe 8, with a baby in a makeshift sling tied firmly to his side.

The youngster's arm is casually and tenderly draped around the infant as he smiles for the photographer; the boy's faded, yellow T-shirt is ripped, but the baby wears a cap with a jaunty pouf of pink yarn on top.

The photo gallery, online and traveling in the United States and overseas, is unlike others about AIDS and Africa: The images are both joyous and wrenching, and they were shot by women and children who are caught in the pandemic that has killed and orphaned so many.

Photographers from the outside often capture only unrelieved tragedy; those inside can tell a fuller story, say the Los Angeles-based founders of "The House Is Small But the Welcome Is Big," created to focus attention on the AIDS crisis and promote action.

The pictures were taken by 18 AIDS-orphaned children from Maputo, Mozambique, and 15 HIV-positive women in Cape Town, South Africa. An exhibit opens this week at a Denver art gallery, Gallery M, and will be seen in New York, Los Angeles and internationally.

Photos and stories about the people behind them are online at <http://www.thehouseissmall.org>. The title is drawn from a needlepoint displayed in a tiny Cape Town home featured in the project.

"In the past, documentary photographers went in, photographed people and left them to tell their story," said Dr. Neal Baer, a physician, TV writer and executive producer ("Law & Order: Special Victims Unit") and co-founder of "The House Is Small."

"That can be compelling and important," Baer said. But with the advent of good, cheap cameras, "we've been able to go into these countries and give people who were traditionally disenfranchised the opportunity to tell their own stories and show their own lives."

Baer, whose credits include the TV series "ER," has long been interested in using storytelling to illuminate social and health issues. (Last weekend, he attended a United Nations meeting of entertainment leaders and U.N. officials, including Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, that coincided with the Jackson Hole film festival in Wyoming.)

It was Baer's discovery of the pioneering work of Pulitzer Prize-nominated photojournalist Jim Hubbard that eventually gave birth to "The House Is Small" project.

In the 1980s, Hubbard was a news photographer in Washington, D.C., with a passion on the side: He gave cameras to homeless kids so they could capture their world; their photos and others were collected in a book, "Shooting Back." Hubbard also formed an organization of the same name that has inspired a growing number of such projects worldwide.

A child can live in the most dire situation, Hubbard said, lacking running water or shelter or enough food, and "yet, you come along with a camera and they almost unanimously fall in love with it."

Last year, Hubbard's quest to give children in hardship "a voice for their despair" was recognized by the National Child Labor Committee, which bestowed its Distinguished Service Award for his "lifelong pursuit of the truth with his camera."

Hubbard, now a director of Los Angeles-based Venice Arts, a nonprofit arts organization that teaches photography and moviemaking to low-income children, was contacted by Baer about bringing his approach to AIDS-stricken Africa. Baer drew on his entertainment industry contacts to help with funding, including some close to home: "Special Victims Unit" stars Mariska Hargitay and Christopher Meloni and series creator Dick Wolf were among the contributors.

"Every nonprofit in the United States wants an angel to appear," Hubbard said. That's the role Baer is playing, he said, turning worthy ideas into reality with his dedication and Hollywood connections.

The first trip, to Cape Town in 2006, was in collaboration with the HIV-AIDS education and support group Mothers2Mothers. Participants included new moms, some of whom were fighting the stigma of HIV by acknowledging their infection and counseling expectant women on how to prevent transmission to their baby.

The next year was to Mozambique, home to an estimated 500,000 AIDS orphans. By 2010, the number of children orphaned by AIDS will almost double worldwide to 25 million, if trends continue, according to a 2002 report from agencies including UNICEF. An estimated 20 million of them will be in hardest-hit Africa.

The children of Maputo were eager to make sure their story was told right.

Lynn Warshafsky, co-founder of Venice Arts and founder with Baer and Hubbard of "The House Is Small," recalls editing photos on her laptop midway through the visit. Assisting her was 16-year-old Innocencia, who had lost her parents to AIDS. She and her older brother were struggling together after relatives abandoned them.

Warshafsky recalls the teenager's critique of the photos: "We're 70 percent there, but I don't see enough joy."

"She had this extraordinary spirit," Warshafsky said of the teenager.

One photo shows two boys gleefully displaying a toy mobile phone they recovered from the trash dump that looms behind them. Behind the camera was Jeremias, 12, who was taken in by a family after losing both parents to AIDS and who dreams of becoming a pilot.

"This photo shows children who are friends," Jeremias says in a quote posted next to the photo on the project's Web site. "It's what we should all be."

"The House is Small" is aiming for results on an individual and global basis.

For the children involved, the instruction they get in photography may open the door to unimagined job possibilities, Hubbard said.

A Mozambique group, Reencontro, is working to build on what "The House is Small" started by pairing youngsters with local photographers to improve their skills and perhaps ready them for work in the field or a related one, he said.

(One American youngster drew inspiration from the project: Baer's 17-year-old son, Caleb, accompanied him to Africa with camera in hand, and his work has been shown in Los Angeles-area museums and galleries.)

The more ambitious goal is to put the photos of "The House is Small" participants in front of those who can implement change. Photo exhibits have been held at universities, including Harvard, and at the International AIDS Conference.

"We're taking pictures to the United Nations, to policy makers, to let the people speak and be heard in a way that maybe they hadn't been before," Baer said.

"The House Is Small" has become part of a larger community of such projects, linked by the Institute for Photographic Empowerment, founded by Baer, Venice Arts and the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication and its former dean, Geoff Cowan, a USC professor.

The institute fosters and serves as a conduit for photo and video projects such as "The House is Small," Baer said.

Will the hoped-for social change follow?

"The pictures have the power to bring acute awareness," Hubbard said. "What humans do with that, who knows."

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