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Mozambique: HIV/Aids Takes On New Face in Photography Exhibit in NYC

Amy Lieberman 17 November 2009

Vibrant images of smiling children playing games and holding hands, may not be what conjures for most when they consider the approximate 400,000 children from Mozambique orphaned by HIV/AIDS.

Yet nearly 19 Mozambique children and teenagers in this situation show just that--happiness, hope, and yes, despair--in their photographs, now on display in the United Nations lobby in the exhibit "The House is Small but the Welcome is Big."

The exhibit marks the culmination of one Los Angeles-based nonprofit organization's collaboration with the children in Mozambique, as well as a group of young mothers and mothers-to-be in Cape Town, South Africa, also affected by HIV-AIDS, over the past two years.

By providing the children and women with cameras and training, the hope, according to Venice Arts' co-founder Lynn Warshafsky, was to "enable these people, and not just outside filmmakers or journalists, to tell their own stories, in their own ways."

"We talked a lot about the kind of stories that they wanted to tell in their photographs and how best to tell them," Warshafsky told MediaGlobal at the reception of the exhibit.

"The kids and women were really intent on capturing the joy in their lives and the complexity, as well."

In "Hope," taken by Funeka Nceke, a 28-year-old HIV positive mother of two, a mother presses her smiling face close to a laughing toddler, who is raised high against the blue sky. Even in "Positive," the pictured woman wearing a white t-shirt that says "HIV Positive," wears a broad grin.

American television producer and writer Neal Baer, who was key player in orchestrating the project and exhibit, walked MediaGlobal through the gallery, comprised in total of 40 images. He pointed out the photos illustrating these children and women's losses and struggles--like "Cemetery," in which 12-year-old Jermias is shown perched on his father's grave, marked by a single cross.

"We found there was a very stereotypical way of these kinds of stories being told, of people suffering and dying, and there is a lot of that, so you do see some of

those kinds of pictures, as well," Baer explained to MediaGlobal. "But they are very empowering, and have really served to give these people a lot of hope and direction for their future."

UNAIDS hosted the gallery reception, at which its Executive Director Michel Sidibé noted the exhibition's timing--just two weeks before World HIV/AIDS day on 1 December.

An estimated 30.3 to 36.1 million people presently live with HIV/AIDS, as of a 2008 report issued by UNAIDS. Approximately 700,000 of these affected people live in South Africa, while nearly 500,000 people in Mozambique are HIV positive or have contracted AIDS.

There are approximately 280,000 children living with HIV in South Africa, and nearly 100,000 children in Mozambique in a similar standing.

Artistic projects and installations like these help people look past these startling figures and consider the individuals whose faces and work are on display, according to Sidibé.

South Africa's envoy to the UN, Baso Sangqu, agreed that initiatives like this one certainly aid in creating awareness and fostering effective prevention programs.

"You look at these pictures and you don't just see the numbers, you see the individuals," Sangqu told MediaGlobal. "It helps to illustrate the strength of the people, and the progress that has been made. But there are still many challenges that remain, as well, in continuing to fight this battle against HIV/AIDS."

"The House is Small But the Welcome is Big," whose name is drawn from one image on display, is currently open to the public through 11 December. The exhibit has been featured at venues around the cities around the world, including Los Angeles, Toronto, Mexico City, Paris, and Boston.

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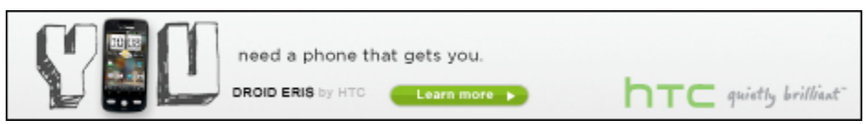
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