

UNSUNG HEROES

LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

Grandmothers Beyond Borders By: Lorraine V. Alomar • Photography: Sarah Walls

For years, many Ugandan women have had to struggle through poverty and heartache. With the HIV/AIDS epidemic being an everyday reality, many have had their worlds turned upside down as they have watched their loved ones pass away and leave behind their own children. Now, many of these women are getting help. It was the story of one grandmother who touched the heart of one Milwaukee woman that put her town into action.

Amy Peterson witnessed firsthand the struggle and heartache facing many grandmothers in Uganda. Peterson was compelled to travel to Uganda after hearing a story

happiness to a small town of women who once felt abandoned and alone. The one common thread amongst all who contribute to the organization is compassion. Mary is the symbolic grandmother. Arseneau explains that while many of the volunteers have had children themselves, they mostly feel that "Mary could be their grandmother. "It could've been any one of us. It is any one of us," Arseneau says. Everyone has experienced suffering at one point or another, and it is this understanding that will compel people to reach out and help those in need. Although they were unable to locate Mary, they found many who likewise were raising grandchildren that were left behind.



In 2007 in support of Grandmothers Beyond Borders, the people of Naggalama gather for a parade..

on NPR of Mary, an 80-year-old grandmother who not only buried all 14 of her children, many or all due to AIDS, but also had the added task of raising her 10 orphaned grandchildren. Peterson was moved by Mary's plight and felt a moral obligation to help those that were faced with similar circumstances. After sharing Mary's story of sadness and isolation with friends like Janine Arseneau and local newspapers, Peterson set out to find Mary and women like her to let them know that they are not alone.

That was three years ago. Since then, the two have gone on to recruit numerous volunteers in the area. What started out as two determined women has evolved into a group of dedicated individuals eager to bring hope and

"Things changed markedly for these grandmothers. They realized that they are not alone," - Jamie Arseneau.

Since the program was launched in 2006, they have raised over \$60,000 to serve more than 500 grandmothers. With the help of Caritas, a Catholic charity, the group of volunteers sees to it that these women have basic necessities, such as food baskets, blankets, poultry and mattresses. There are places now that are uncontaminated, which makes it easier to grow fruit and vegetables. Every year the group takes a trip to Uganda to make sure the women are doing well. They help distribute supplies. But most importantly, they want to get things directly to the people so that the community can make decisions and thus feel a sense of empowerment.

The women of Uganda now feel joy because they know there are people who care. The sharing and caring transcend the miles that separate them. Of the change in these women, Arseneau observed that "together, these women have power. They've formed a collective. They found their music again." Grandmothers Beyond Borders strives to ensure that these women no longer are left to feel isolated or alone. ©

For more information on how to help, please visit: www.grandmothersbeyond.org.