

A History of the Kingston Grandmother Connection

Stephen Lewis put it eloquently in his 2005 book, *Race against Time*:

“There has never been a sociological phenomenon of this kind ... grandmothers are assuming the overwhelming burden of care, yet there is almost nothing in the way of special support for the parenting they provide. We must collectively carve out a social security scheme which will permit them to survive themselves and secure food and provide shelter for their orphan grandchildren.”

Pre-dominantly due to the HIV/AIDS epidemic of the last four decades, Africa has become a continent of orphans, and in the midst of this devastation, grandmothers continue to emerge as the Unsung Heroes of Africa. They bury their own children and when they are 50, 60 or 70, they start raising their grandchildren with little or no support.

The Kingston Grandmother Connection, (KGC) came to be in March 2006 when it became known that the Stephen Lewis Foundation was establishing women's groups here in Canada to support the dire situation of grandmothers in Africa. Four friends: Anne Richards, Bett Birtwistle, Marion Abell, and Donna O'Connor discussed their desire to establish such a group in Kingston. A few of them attended a Stephen Lewis Foundation conference in Toronto and were spurred to take up Stephen Lewis's "Call to Action." They agreed to invite four more friends each to join them so the group of 4 became 20 and the KINGSTON GRANDMOTHER CONNECTION (KGC) was born. It was launched with Stephen Lewis as our guest of honour at a reception in September 2006.

Two years earlier, Anne's sister Dr. Peg Herbert, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of Ottawa had met a Master's student, a nun from Lesotho, Africa. Sister Alice invited Peg to go to Lesotho and see her country. When Peg went she was overwhelmed by the poverty and gender issues. She learned that Lesotho, a small, mountainous, land locked country in South Africa had the third highest incidence of HIV/AIDS. Peg decided to leave her position at the University of Ottawa and establish a charity in Ottawa called Help Lesotho.

After much discussion and contemplation, KGC made a decision to support both Help Lesotho and the Stephen Lewis Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign. This was a good "fit" as Help Lesotho was personal and specific and we could routinely hear from Peg what the needs of the grandmothers in Lesotho were. The Stephen Lewis Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign had a broader target involving grandmothers across sub-Saharan Africa. Both groups had people on the ground to identify the projects. We would give them the monies and they would distribute the funds as they saw fit and issue tax receipts for any donations.

Our first big fundraiser was "A Chair Affair" in 2007. We asked local artists to transform 20 wooden Muskoka chairs into practical works of art. These were auctioned off, and along with

several silent auction items, raised \$30,000 that night. Subsequent speaker nights were well attended and raised further funds. Peg spoke on several occasions and we were fortunate enough to attract other international, national and local speakers, such as author Alexander McCall Smith, activist Ilana Landsberg Lewis, journalist Stephanie Nolan, and head of Queen's Global Health Office, Dr. Karen Yeates, who all talked about their experiences in Africa. Many of our members have also given presentations on their experiences in Lesotho and other countries in Africa. Our education committee has spread the word with presentations to schools, retirement homes, church groups and service organizations.

We have had many interesting fundraisers... a dart night, African party weekends, and sales of T-shirts, bags, Pearls for Girls, and cookbooks. We organized a Stephen Lewis Walk and Help Lesotho Walks around Kingston, did a Flash Mob in the market square, sold Help Lesotho calendars, had many music nights at local churches, held a theatre night, and sold vouchers to provide shoes, blankets, solar lights, and food for our African partners. Our Markets for Africa, held every November since 2008 and every May since 2016 have become our biggest annual fundraisers and attract crowds of loyal shoppers to the various booths that our members stock with whatever they can make, locate, or donate for the cause. These one-day markets raise between 12K and 25K.

The KGC is an amazing group of women with skills, creative ideas, energy, and a willingness to invite anyone to join us who wants to make a difference in the lives of others. With an annual voluntary membership fee of \$20 and effective fundraising projects, along with social gatherings (potluck dinners, picnics, a 'Pub' Night) we continue to attract many new talented women and we are always open to new ideas.

Through Help Lesotho, the Kingston Grandmother Connection has supported well over 1,400 Grandmothers and 4,200 children in Lesotho with food parcels, cooking oil, blankets, soaps, seeds, help with repairing roofs, organizing Grandmother workshops on grief, depression, medical issues, and providing celebratory "Grandmother Days" each month for Grannies all over Lesotho.

Our financial support of Stephen Lewis's Grandmother to Grandmother Campaign assists their goal to restore resilience to those hardest hit by the epidemic by supporting African grandmothers to raise an empowered and HIV/AIDS-free next generation. The Stephen Lewis Foundation works with 325 community-based partners in 15 sub-Saharan countries offering over 1800 holistic programs that combine medical and material assistance with emotional and psychological

support. The effectiveness of these programs was evident when grandmothers from Africa spoke at our 2017 event to promote the book *Powered by Love: A Grandmothers Movement to End AIDS in Africa*.

Both groups that KGC supports have shown ongoing positive results, using a community-based approach, and now the UN has also realized that “Communities Make the Difference!”

Partner organizations are saving lives with home-based care workers who help people adhere to antiretroviral treatments. Women and girls have been empowered to show grassroots leadership and stand for office in democratic elections, demanding action, not charity as a matter of social justice. Young boys receive information and compassionate life skills training on the topics of anger management, drugs and alcohol abuse, gender-based violence, and are given an opportunity to test for HIV. Young girls are at particular risk to contract AIDS, often due to forced marriage or gender-based violence and can access educational as well as medical and psychological support. Support and hope is also offered to marginalized and targeted LGBTQ communities in countries where they face violence and incarceration.

So far, KGC has raised well over \$800,000 towards meeting these tremendous needs half a world away, but close to our hearts. Our members now number over 200 and approximately 25 of us are regularly attracted to monthly meetings. There is much need in the world and we cannot be overwhelmed or paralyzed and do nothing. Through KGC we can all step forward and do something to make this a better place for those less fortunate. As Gandhi said “...we must BE the CHANGE we want to see in the world.”

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