



CHABHA marks AIDS Orphans Day

By BOB AUDETTE, Reformer Staff

BRATTLEBORO -- In Rwanda, one in five children is an orphan. This is due to the combined effect of the genocide of 1994 and the devastation of the AIDS pandemic.

Tuesday, May 6

In sub-Saharan Africa there are between 11 and 12 million children orphaned by AIDS. It is projected that by 2015 that number will have increased to 15 million.

Wednesday is World AIDS Orphans Day, which is meant "to provide a platform for local action to address a serious global challenge," said Albina du Boisrouvray, founder and president of FXB International, which founded the event in 2002 to draw attention to and advocate on behalf of the millions of children left parentless by AIDS.

The annual World Aids Orphans Day got its start as a march on Wall Street with protesters carrying signs that read "What is the value of an orphan on the NY Stock Exchange?"

Since 2002, nearly 800 mayors and elected officials in more than 40 countries have signed pledges advocating for the need to address the orphan crisis, according to www.worlddaidsorphans.com.

"We are asking people to get involved by holding events in their community, spreading the message to friends and family and visiting our Web site to send letters to government leaders or submitting stories and photos," said du Boisrouvray. "Each

gathering, no matter how small, counts. As Margaret Mead once said, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has.'"

In Windham County, Children Affected by HIV/AIDS, or CHABHA, supports four grassroots projects in Rwanda and one in South Africa which nurture independence for children so that they can grow and become contributing members of their communities.

Most of the children supported by CHABHA live in households headed by children left orphaned either by AIDS or genocide, where older siblings struggle to support and care for their younger brothers and sisters.

Susanna Grannis, a Townshend resident and the executive director of CHABHA, recently returned from Rwanda where she visited projects supported by donations made to CHABHA.

"CHABHA supports local community leaders who started these projects," she said. "Our staff in Rwanda works with them, but they are independent."

One of those initiatives is Project Independence, which provides vocational training to youth. Nearly three-quarters of those who have finished their training have jobs or are self employed and are working in restaurants, car repair shops, sewing enterprises, hairdressing and as taxi drivers, said Grannis.

Another initiative that CHABHA supports through donations is Project Agape, which sets children and families up with breeding stock, in this case rabbits, which can be raised to be sold as food.

The Amahora project supports over 2000 urban children by providing for basic needs, including

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school fees and uniforms. Young community leaders in the project hold weekly gatherings where they hold life skills workshops for HIV testing and education and make home visits to provide solace and food and to assess family needs.

"Children by their very nature are dependent," said Grannis. "They need someone to take care of them, but they also need to learn how to be independent."

Grannis, who started CHABHA in 2003, spent 10 days in Rwanda, working with project leaders, helping them with administrative tasks such as setting up their budgets.

CHABHA is about "giving them life skills in which to survive and be able to provide a decent living by giving them the necessary academic skills," said Lauren "Dolly" Glennon, of Chesterfield, N.H., who went to Rwanda in support of CHABHA's programs.

"They have a great amount of love and hope," said Glennon. "They are resilient."

"CHABHA funds Project Independence, which takes adolescents and teaches them vocational skills and a trade," said the Reverend Thomas Brown, of St. Michael's Episcopal Church in Brattleboro, who also just returned from Rwanda. "More importantly, CHABHA works with programs that are already on the ground, creating communities for, among and with children who are affected primarily by the fact their parents have died of AIDS."

According to its Web site, "FXB does not foster dependency on aid. Instead, by empowering children, young people and parents with skills, small business grants, education and basic services, FXB helps children and families to thrive permanently."

"Addressing the orphans crisis is not about

providing a handout," said FXB's du Boisrouvray. "We help the families and communities who take care of AIDS orphans to increase their incomes in order to better care for AIDS orphans and vulnerable children."

To learn more about CHABHA, or to make a donation, contact Grannis at 874-7193.

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