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# From Different Corners Of The World: Mothers Make A Difference

By KERRY OLSON, *Founder & President of [Firelight Foundation](#)*

## OPINION

As a little girl living in the suburbs of Detroit in the 1960's, I remember lying awake at night trying to wrap my head around the fact that many children around the world didn't have what I had. I didn't know what it meant to be truly hungry, to not be able to go to school, or to grow up without the loving care of my parents. I was moved by the words of our pastor about the importance of caring for others and felt moved to action.

As a seven-year old, the activity within my reach was a backyard fundraiser. I recruited my friends and organized a neighborhood fair, complete with ring tosses and stuffed animal prizes. It became an annual event, each year we raised small funds for humanitarian organizations working overseas. I was exhilarated by the discovery that even as a kid, I could make a difference.

Flash forward 35 years. It's 1999, I am the mother of a high-school child and I am on disability due to chronic illness. After working over 20 years with children and families and completing my doctorate in developmental psychology, I'm not sure if I'll ever work again.

But there is something else keeping me up at night. In the midst of my own health crisis, I'm learning about a crisis much more disturbing and global in scale: *Millions of children in Africa are being orphaned by HIV and AIDS because their mothers and fathers do not have access to life-saving treatment. Many millions more are orphaned or dying, often at heartbreakingly young ages, due to extreme poverty and preventable disease. Thousands of orphanages are being built, separating children from their extended family members who are unable to care for them because of*

*poverty*. The scope and scale are overwhelming, especially to an American living in California who had never set foot in Africa.

Mostly homebound, I began reaching out to individuals and organizations working in Africa and reading everything I could get my hands on to gain a better understanding of the issue. On [World AIDS Day](#), December 1<sup>st</sup> 1999, I was invited to attend the UN Conference on Children Orphaned by AIDS. I heard many powerful speakers, including Kofi Annan and Hillary Clinton.

But the speakers who moved me most of all were the African women – mothers and activists – who were leading a grassroots movement to respond to the crisis in their own communities. With compassion in their hearts, and drawing on their own experiences as mothers living with HIV, these women were mobilizing local resources to bring hope, care and support to children, mothers, and families made vulnerable by AIDS. It was truly inspiring.

I came away from hearing these stories realizing that I, like many Americans, had too often associated Africa with its struggles instead of recognizing and supporting its strengths.

In December 1999, my husband David Katz and I started the [Firelight Foundation](#) with funds generated by the Silicon Valley tech boom (Dave is a software engineer). Firelight began making small grants directly to African community organizations responding to the needs of children and families affected by poverty, HIV, and AIDS.

These grants, together with the initiative and resourcefulness of local communities, support an incredible range of programs that bring about change “from the ground up.” The grassroots groups Firelight funds help make sure moms and dads are tested and treated so that fewer children become orphaned. They help mothers not only to survive, but also to provide through micro-loans and small business training, so that their children thrive.

The last 12 years have been an incredible journey. Started as a private foundation, [Firelight Foundation](#) is now a public charity supported by a growing number of individuals and groups (funders include Johnson and Johnson, Nike Foundation, and the Elton John AIDS Foundation). Thanks to this support, Firelight to

date has awarded over 1,200 grants to 330 grassroots organizations serving children and families in 10 African countries.

This [World AIDS Day](#), December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2012, I celebrate the work of the many local and unsung heroes who are keeping hope alive in their communities. People like Elizabeth Mwenya, a mother and community leader at the Mansa Network of Zambian People Living with AIDS. Elizabeth lost her first two children within their first year due to undiagnosed AIDS. Her second and third child survived thanks to medical treatment. Elizabeth joined an AIDS support group to overcome stigma and learn to live “positively.” She now leads moms’ support groups and community outreach to prevent other moms from suffering the same loss that she did.

Elizabeth and women like her, working alongside men in their community, have taken their stories and changed the lives of others. Mansa NZP operates a program of support in 10 rural clinics. They’ve seen an increase of people who access treatment by 66 percent and a reduction in the number of children born HIV positive from 400 to 15.

Each time I hear stories like Elizabeth’s, I am inspired and reminded about the power of individuals and communities to make a difference. This is why Firelight is a proud supporter of the Million Moms Challenge. I learned as a child and as a mom at home that, even from our small corner of the world, we can take action that changes lives. You don’t have to go to Africa to make a difference for moms in Africa. As the Challenge comes to a close later in December, let’s continue the message forward!

Thank you Million Moms for raising awareness and needed funds to a cause that is so fundamental to a better and brighter future.

To learn more about Firelight Foundation: [www.firelightfoundation.org](http://www.firelightfoundation.org)

To donate to Mansa NZP thru Million Moms Global Giving: <http://www.globalgiving.org/projects/keep-zambian-mothers-and-infants-healthy-and-hiv-free/>

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