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Firelight Foundation offers grassroots support to those orphaned by AIDS

By John Sammon
Posted: 04/04/2010 01:30:54 AM PDT

SANTA CRUZ -- The HIV-AIDS epidemic ravaging the African continent is a tragedy for the millions of lives it snuffed out, and also for the children it has orphaned.

"Our objective is to make the lives of these children bearable," said Rufaro Mutsau, founder of Ingalo Zomusa, a support group based in one of the poorest and most rural parts of her native Zimbabwe.

Ingalo Zomusa means "Arms of Mercy" in the Ndebele language of Southern Africa.

Mutsau spent a week in Santa Cruz explaining the effects of AIDS and poverty on children in Africa to officials and guests of the Firelight Foundation, a Santa Cruz charity. Firelight works to improve the lives of people in Sub-Saharan Africa through small grants to grassroots support organizations in Africa.

Mutsau said youngsters orphaned by the epidemic face life alone.

"After the death of the parents, it is sometimes the eldest child in a family who takes up the role of parent," she explained.

Ingalo Zomusa locates foster mothers willing to volunteer as a surrogate parent to orphaned children.

The volunteers try to make life as comfortable for the children as possible," Mutsau noted. "One woman may take care of 10 families."

Zimbabwe has among the highest rates of HIV in Africa.

Impoverished, parentless children, some ill with HIV or related diseases and malnourished, often walk miles from their village to get to school. Mutsau, a teacher and lecturer in addition to



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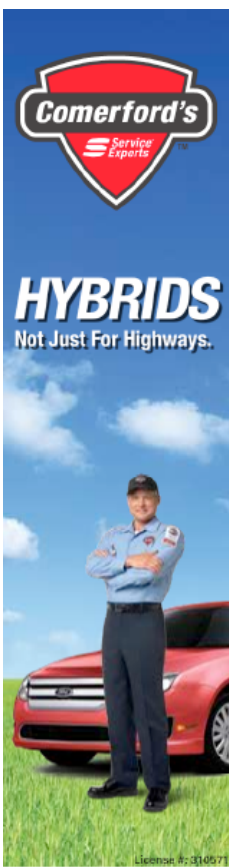


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her social work, said part of her job is to explain to people the nature of the problem.

Largely through her organization's efforts, she has gotten more services including education, food and medicine to the children. However, the program depends on contributions from outside countries including the U.S.

"People are dying every day," Mutsau said. "Some have infections like tuberculosis. The only thing keeping these people alive is that we supplement their treatments with basic needs like food. But we don't have enough and must go to other countries."

Suzana Grego, Firelight Foundation director of communications and advocacy, said her group helps communities in Africa improve the lives of thousands of children and families with a holistic program of care and support.

"A little goes a very long way," she said. "For example, \$1,000 equips 1,000 children with school supplies for a year, depending on the country."

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An average grant is \$10,000. Firelight has fewer than 15 employees, but contributes approximately \$2 million annually to African communities to support vulnerable children and families. The effort is partly funded by the Elton John AIDS Foundation, the Nike Foundation and other philanthropic organizations.

Grego said a significant hurdle, particularly with U.S. audiences, is saturation with AIDS-related issues.

"There's been a lot of focus on HIV-AIDS, but there are about 12 million orphans in Africa, which presents us with a huge challenge," she said. "While Firelight supports nearly 200 grassroots groups a year, there are thousands more in Sub-Saharan Africa doing amazing work changing children's lives. Our resources will only stretch so far, but if others would join us at the funding table, the sky's the limit."

Mutsau agreed the project is a mammoth task.

"Our work comes from the heart," she added.

HOW TO HELP
 Firelight Foundation
 Mission: Improve the well-being of children and support grassroots organizations helping families and communities in Sub-Saharan Africa
 Where: 740 Front St., Suite 380, Santa Cruz
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