



BACKGROUNDER

Over twenty-five years ago, Ray Barnett of Vancouver, B.C. was on a humanitarian trip to war-torn Uganda when he gave a small boy a ride from his decimated home to the safety of another village. During the journey, the child did what he knew how to do best—he sang. That simple song of dignity and hope became the catalyst for a program that has changed the lives of thousands of children and reshaped the future of the African continent.

“When I went back to Canada and people were not very interested in Uganda, I remembered this small boy,” Ray explained. “I knew that if only a group of these beautiful children could go to the West, people would be deeply moved and would certainly want to help.”

From there the African Children's Choir was born.

Rallying support from the west, Barnett conducted the first tour of the Choir which successfully brought the voices of 31 children of war-torn Africa to the West. The Choir inspired audiences with their stories and raised enough funds to open the first Children's Home. The Home provided a stable environment and a quality education for the Choir children and additional children who needed care.

The success and instant popularity of the first tour encouraged Barnett to continue and a second Choir was selected from the Children's Home, and the African Children's Choir began another tour.

The Choir's success meant that it was able to provide for many children beyond those in the Choir. Over the next few years, six more children's homes were established to care for vulnerable children, many of whom had been orphaned by the war. African Children's Choir established a number of special Literacy schools in Uganda where hundreds of children learned to read and write and gained confidence and skills that ensured a brighter future.

As the children got older, the program developed a sponsorship arm where all of the educational needs of these children could continue through secondary school, and in many cases, the children went on to higher education.

The AIDS pandemic changed the face of Africa, and with it came a new calling for the work of the Choir. Changing Government policies required that children remain with family as much as possible. Already over-burdened families were feeling the strain of taking in more needy children. Having one central location would allow students to keep in closer contact with families, while relieving many struggling families of the pressures of providing for additional children. So the organization opened its first boarding school: the African Outreach Academy to provide a stable environment and a quality education; a lifeline for hundreds of children whose families had been affected by AIDS.



As the organization grew, so did the needs of Africa's most vulnerable populations. Thousands of children had been helped in Uganda, but Ray knew that his job and the works of the Choir were far from done. Ray was moved to help with similarly tragic situations in the neighboring countries of Kenya, Somalia, Sudan, and Rwanda.

The Choir began selecting Kenyan children for tour in Kenya in 1990. Firmly established in the country, the organization was able to quickly respond with emergency food and supplies during the violence surrounding the 2008 Presidential Election.

The African Children's Choir responded throughout the 1990's crisis in Somalia, Rwanda, Nigeria, Ghana and Sudan, sending emergency food, medical supplies and education supplies where needed. Today, in Sudan alone, the organization supports 15 primary schools, a secondary school, a skills training center for practical skills like carpentry and brick-laying, and one of the area's few teacher's training colleges to help re-build the local education system. The choir has worked in Rwanda with children suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress.

As the new millennium arrived Ray learned of an area in South Africa decimated by AIDS. In the Nkomazi region thousands of orphaned children had to fend for themselves and raise their brothers and sisters. A Choir was formed from the area to raise awareness and secure funding for the devastated region. Based on the transformation seen in these Choir children, a powerful new program was born in South Africa. The first Music for Life Center was established in South Africa to provide benefits to children not touring with the Choir. Music and dance lessons, program camps, tutoring and nutrition were added later.

The organization has recently opened similar Centers in nine more locations in South Africa, as well as two in Kenya and two in Uganda. At these Centers, the children are nurtured into confident young men and women, equipped with the skills and determination to improve their communities and their nations.

The Choir has represented all of Africa's children to Presidents and royalty, at events like Live 8 and World AIDS Day, and to massive global audiences through TV programs and film soundtracks. In the West, the children's music has brought hope and healing to places like Ground Zero in New York and in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina. In Kenya, the children sang as brothers and sisters in a country divided by tribal tensions. While the significance of this global audience is enormous, the organization continues to help Africa's most vulnerable children today, so they can help Africa tomorrow.