

OPINION

AIDS

Not your granny's charity: grandmas raise millions



ANDRÉ PICARD
apicard@globeandmail.com

At first blush, Beverly Suek, a Winnipeg grandmother of 10, is the last person you would expect to see marching through the streets of Durban, South Africa, chanting slogans, singing and demanding better care for AIDS orphans.

But there she was, walking arm-in-arm with African grandmothers prior to the International AIDS Conference, aiming to draw attention to the plight of AIDS orphans and their caregivers, many of whom are gogos (the isiZulu word for grandmother).

Like them, Ms. Suek has been touched personally by the AIDS

pandemic. Her son, Brian Taylor, died of AIDS back in 1987.

At the time, there was still much stigma and few services, so she founded an organization, Kali Shiva, to ensure her son could get proper care and die at home.

"At the time, the health-care system was not very responsive," Ms. Suek says. "We didn't have drugs, education or social services."

"It's a very familiar story here in Africa three decades later," she adds.

Ms. Suek is one of hundreds of Canadians involved in the Grandmothers to Grandmothers campaign, a grassroots movement affiliated with the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

The first grandmothers' gathering was held in Toronto in 2006, with about 200 Canadian and 100 African gogos. This time around, in Durban, there were 300 African grandmothers and a couple of dozen Canadians.

The grannies have a powerful network: With 240 groups across Canada, they have raised about \$25-million in the past decade.

The grandmothers don't stage a single, high-profile event, such as the Run for the Cure for breast cancer, but rather a seemingly endless series of local fundraisers, limited only by their imaginations.

There are craft fairs, pot luck dinners, art auctions, nude granny calendars, bike rides, quilting bees, book sales, auctions, speaking engagements and Scrabble tournaments. While it all sounds bookish and, well, grandmotherly, there is always an activist edge.

Janine Reid, a grandmother of four in New Westminster, B.C., for example, helps organize an annual craft fair hosted by the Greater Van Gogos.

"But don't get the wrong idea," she says. "This isn't your granny's craft fair: There isn't a pot holder in sight."

Ms. Reid has been involved in the network for more than a decade, from its very beginnings.

At the time, she wasn't even a grandmother yet, but was moved by the plight of AIDS orphans.

(HIV-AIDS tends to hit people in young adulthood, when they have children, and those children are often left to the care of grandmothers. There are an estimated 18 million AIDS orphans around the world, the bulk of them in sub-Saharan Africa.)

"I have a tremendous belief that all children deserve care and nurturing and that's what attracted me to this cause," Ms. Reid says.

As an added bonus, the group is a way of meeting like-minded women of her age.

"We have formed tremendous friendships in this group. As women at this time in our lives — when parents are dying, husbands are falling ill, grandchildren are being born — we all need

support," she says.

The Grandmother to Grandmother campaign, because it is loosely structured, also allows for ebb and flow; women come and go depending on their availability.

The Stephen Lewis Foundation is also careful to not place any constraints on the groups.

"We don't tell them what to do," says Ilana Landsberg-Lewis, executive director of the foundation. "They are grassroots volunteers and we're tremendously grateful for their support."

Ms. Reid says raising money matters, but equally important is building bonds with women in other countries and cultures.

In fact, she says, "what we do is not charity in the traditional sense. It's a movement of solidarity with women in Africa."

Ms. Reid pauses, wondering if she is sounding too serious, and adds: "People think old people just garden and go on cruises. Ha!"