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Seeds planted to stem AIDS

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As she stepped up to the lectern at Silver Spire Saturday evening, Illana Landsberg-Lewis brought a message of hope and thanks to people at the Seeds of New Hope: World AIDS Day Benefit Concert in St. Catharines.

She said she is often asked, "How do you do this every day? There is so much sadness, so much death. It is apocalyptic on so many levels."

Her reply is that the hope comes from the work done by community-based organizations such as Ubuntu Niagara.

She commended the Niagara organization for its 10th year of support.

"There are people in this community that have been extraordinarily dedicated to the cause of turning the tide of AIDS in Africa for a decade," she said.

"These people have raised funds



Landsberg-Lewis

Members of WomenChant perform at Seeds of Hope, a World AIDS Day benefit concert, Saturday at Silver Spire Church in St. Catharines. Keynote speaker was Illana Landsberg-Lewis, who heads the Stephen Lewis Foundation.

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every year, without someone coming from the foundation just out of their own sense of compassion and solidarity with the Africans and communities who are doing

the work and engaged in the struggle for survival."

Landsberg-Lewis, who is executive director of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, said the community-

to-community connection across Canada has raised almost \$70 million for African communities in the past 12 years.

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Landsberg-Lewis optimistic of an end to AIDS

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"Where the difference is being made and felt is at the community level. Small grass roots and community-based organizations which are now mid-sized having grown over the last decade or two."

Sub-Saharan Africa, where AIDS has hit the hardest, is where the community response has been so powerful for the foundation.

"It's a particularly potent and important message and reality," she said.

"It's communities here of grandmothers and women, of people who are concerned and care about both the suffering and extraordinary hardship that the Africans have overcome but also appreciate their dignity and tenacity to overcome the AIDS pandemic and resurrect the quality of life.

"As the grandmothers say, we didn't raise our children for the grave."

Recent reports estimate that 37 million people, roughly the population of Canada, live with AIDS around the world.

Landsberg-Lewis said there are 14 million orphaned children in Africa and the grandmothers, having buried their adult children, are now raising them.

She said there are mobile health clinics now when there didn't use to be any.

And in a very remote area of Uganda 400 kids who were orphaned by AIDS are now back in school, being nurtured, and 7,000 grandmothers who have come together around them to support them.

"In a world that is swinging in the direction of less compassion, I think this is a moment where we



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Illana Landsberg-Lewis, who heads the Stephen Lewis Foundation, speaks at Seeds of Hope, a World AIDS Day benefit concert staged Saturday in St. Catharines.

have to dig quite deep. As Canadians, we have an extraordinarily good foundation to make sure that we're not infected by this isolationism, insular way of thinking, and understand that people are suffering a terrible calamity. But they are the ones working so hard to overcome it, and we should be able to stand with them as one can."

Landsberg-Lewis said there is a shift now in the international com-

munity, with a recent United Nations Assembly report focused on getting treatment for women and girls at the epicentre of the pandemic.

"I think there is a real light at the end of the tunnel even without a cure, which is not on the immediate horizon.

"When people get on the antiretroviral (therapy), it reduced the viral load of HIV where they are 96 to

99 percent unlikely to pass it on to a partner. That brings AIDS to its knees," she said.

"What it doesn't do is address 30 years of decimation and unravelling of a community. We've got a long way to go."

Still, Landsberg-Lewis is clearly optimistic: "We're looking at a reality where we will see an end to this."

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