



November 2005

Dear Friend,

This is the time of year when, despite winter's cold, we embrace and celebrate the warm spirit of human joy and generosity. Now is when we remember the Old Year and anticipate, with hope, the New.

It's the "Holiday Season." Merry Christmas! Happy Hanukkah! Happy New Year! We'll all be making special efforts to express our love – with heartfelt gifts and cheerful hospitality – to those who share and enrich our lives, and to those in need.

Please, at this time of celebration and generosity, allow me to ask you – perhaps even gently to remind you – to share your happiness and festivities with the children of South Africa, orphaned and victimized by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

With a generous gift, you will help give warmth to their Holiday Season, and hope to their New Year.

Just knowing that you remembered will cheer them.

Licky Thusi, the Project Manager at the Greater Nelspruit Rape Intervention Programme (GRIP), and Mark Gamble, the Executive Director at James House, spoke to me recently about their organizations' work, and about the children whom you are helping.

I want to tell you about GRIP and James House because they are helping children who, in this "Holiday Season," desperately need the cheer and warmth – but particularly the real hope – that your support gives them.

For me, what I'm going to share with you is both deeply troubling and spiritually uplifting. I find much of it difficult to write about. My words evoke memories of the children – many showing the wounds of abuse and rape, and marks of HIV/AIDS – whom I met in South Africa and held in my arms, and whose courage and plight make me ask myself, "Could I do more?"

Before I tell you about the work that Licky and Mark are doing I need to pass on something that Mark implored me to explain to you. Mark said that helping children in South Africa is not the same as helping children in a country like Canada, wealthy and relatively unaffected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

In Canada, our child welfare goal is to help children who are in danger or orphaned to safely live out their childhoods, and grow up to be healthy, responsible, well educated adults.

In South Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has killed so many parents and created so many orphans – over 1,100,000 in 2003 – that the national and local governments and charities are overwhelmed. And, for some time to come, it will only get worse.

It's not possible to build and staff enough orphanages to care for all these children. Some families and communities can barely help themselves, can barely care for their dying, let alone their orphans.

Apiwe, age 13, said to a researcher from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs,

“My sister is six years old. There are no grown-ups living with us. I need a bathroom tap and clothes and shoes. And water also, inside the house. But especially, somebody to tuck me and my sister in at night-time.”

The child welfare goal in South Africa now is *not* to provide children with the means to live out their childhoods as we do in Canada, it's too late for that, but rather to give them the skills and support they need to remain in their homes, attend school, and become heads of their households.

What we now know is that wherever possible orphans should be cared for in family units, in extended family networks, by foster families, and through adoption, and that siblings should remain with each other.

The challenge for you and me is to give organizations like GRIP and James House – people like Licky and Mark – the financial support they need to help the children and orphans in their communities become adults quickly.

Our donations mean these children will be able to care for their dying parents, help raise their younger brothers and sisters, and in some cases support their grandparents.

The tragedy of the HIV/AIDS pandemic is – as unjust as it may be – that it falls to the children to keep their families together, and this must be done if they are to have any hope at all. That is the grim reality you and I now face.

GRIP and James House are like many of the organizations that your support of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund is helping. They are small, well run, community-based groups, rich in volunteers, and poor in financial resources.

Let me tell you about GRIP. There is more than one plague ravaging South Africa. You know about HIV/AIDS. The other is Poverty, which is exacerbated by the pandemic. In South Africa, the two plagues cannot be separated. They feed on each other, take strength from each other. Poverty, like HIV/AIDS, is a preventable disease. To help South Africa's children, you and I must help defeat both.

The horrors of Poverty – the soul and family destroying kind that plagues the people of South Africa – are malnutrition, disease, despair, drug abuse, family violence and break-up, violent crime, suicide, and rape. Poverty is so destructive of some men's and boys' fundamental dignity, goodness, and hope that, according to Licky Thusi, children as young as one year old have been brutally raped.

GRIP helps the victims of rape in and around Nelspruit, a small city of about 105,000. That's comparable to Barrie, Ontario or Kelowna, British Columbia. It is 340 kilometres northeast of Pretoria, near Kruger National Park.

Most of the victims whom GRIP helps – over 1,000 every year – are under 18 years of age. We usually think of rape as an assault on girls and women, but 41% of the rape victims are boys. And, this may understate their suffering, because boys are less likely to report a rape, and when they do the police sometimes laugh at them.

HIV/AIDS makes *not* reporting a rape a potential death warrant. For this reason, GRIP – thanks to the help of people like you – maintains a broad public awareness campaign in the schools, community centres, and churches. GRIP's message is clear: To prevent HIV/AIDS and save your life, go within 72 hours of the rape to GRIP or a local hospital for anti viral drug treatments.

Your financial support helps pay for the victims' drug treatments which typically cost about 1,500 Rand or \$270.

You also help GRIP give rape victims the on-going support they need to recover from their violent ordeal and avoid future danger. If a family member raped the child, he or she is taken to a safe place.

GRIP also counsels the children to help them through their psychological trauma. Too often the children believe the rape was their fault. Sometimes the shame so destroys their self confidence, they become incapable of coping with even the simplest of life's day-to-day demands. Many of these children become so fearful that they need escorts, provided by GRIP, to walk with them to school every day.

You also help GRIP give the children and their families the legal and emotional support they need to report the rape to the police so that perpetrators can be prosecuted. The minimum penalty for raping a child is 15 years in prison.

Rape can be one of the most devastating experiences a person can endure. With anti-viral drugs administered early, the risk of HIV/AIDS can be dramatically reduced. With medical treatment, the physical trauma – bruises, lacerations, internal injuries, and broken bones – will heal. What is most difficult to heal (and sometimes never does) is the mind. The psychological effects of rape can be crippling, and can last a lifetime.

Understanding that, I want to leave you with what Licky told me is one of the most important things that helps the victims recover – particularly the children. She said, "It's trusting that someone really does care for you, that someone will help you, that someone will cry with you."

Let me tell you about Gavin and Mark. Gavin's 10 and lives at James House, a children's home in Hout Bay, a beautiful little town about 15 kilometres southwest of Cape Town. Mark Gamble is the Director of James House. Mark is 36.

James House was founded in 1986 by a group of local churches that ran a soup kitchen. They built a children's home to provide shelter and love for the homeless and abused children because so many of the children who came to them for food had no place to live. They named their home after the first child who asked for help.

Today, James House, like most of the child care organizations in South Africa, does all it can to keep families together. So, only a few children now live full time at James House. One of them is Gavin. As Mark said, "He's quick to smile and does an amazing somersault."

Last Christmas, Gavin – unlike all the other kids at James House – had nowhere to go for the holidays. Mark asked him what he wanted for Christmas.

Christmas Eve morning found Mark rummaging through his shed looking for the hiking stove, backpack, and matches. Then Mark and Sebastian, Mark's aging dog, with a backpack full of lunch – bacon, bread, nuts, and fruit juice – set out for James House where they met Gavin, ready for adventure.

Table Mountain was their quest. Along the way, they talked about the truly important things in life: "Who's stronger Batman or Spiderman?" Spiderman, according to Gavin. They did the important things in life: kicked pine cones, investigated spider webs, slid down leafy hills, ran with Sebastian.

And, they ate bacon sandwiches next to a waterfall on Table Mountain overlooking Hout Bay. Sitting on a rock outcrop, Mark listened to Gavin talk about his Mum, a restaurant worker. He didn't talk about losing her to HIV/AIDS. "I know how to cook," said Gavin. "Well sir," said Mark, "I would like to order two bacon sandwiches for myself and my friend. Oh, and please cook a few extra bits for the fine dog, Sebastian."

Mark Gamble said to me, "That moment of life is now held in my heart, in my memory. Gavin squatting next to a small hiking stove stirring the frying bacon around the pan with a rotting stick, smile on his face, aliveness in his eyes. Sebastian laying close by, savouring the smell.

"I needed the walk on the mountain as much as Gavin. Needed to remind myself of children, of their potential, of the ever available quality of Spirit in a child. All Gavin wanted for Christmas was a walk with me."

Please do all you can this Holiday Season for the child victims of rape whom GRIP is helping, and for boys like Gavin who one day will be called upon to be the head of his family. Too soon, he'll have to forget the superheroes and become one.

From all of us here at the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund, please accept our best wishes for this Holiday Season.

Sincerely,



Mark Beckles
Chief Executive Officer

P.S. Yes, the children of South Africa need your financial support, there's no question about that, but as important is their need to know that you, and others like you, care about them.