

October 13, 2007

## For society, Africa is the cause du jour

By DEIRDRE KELLY

From Saturday's Globe and Mail

*Local philanthropists are developing a global perspective, Deirdre Kelly writes*

The red carpet showcased the usual suspects during the recent run of the Toronto International Film Festival: Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, George Clooney, Matt Damon. But new to the celebrity parade were more than a dozen African-born orphans of disease and war, as part of the African Children's Choir, who were among the beneficiaries of the OneXOne charity gala (held at the same time as the film festival) that Mr. Damon chaired.

It's all part of the trend to everything African. Celebrities such as Madonna, Bono and the couple known as Brangelina have espoused African causes for the past few years - and it seems to have especially taken root in Toronto. "Torontonians are just great," Mr. Damon said at the gala. "They want to give."

From charities and fundraisers to influences in decor that echo Torontonians' growing empathy with the troubled continent, the African "moment" is getting stronger.

Take the African Children's Choir. Founded in 1978 by Canadian human-rights worker Ray Barnett, the presence of the choir was a vivid reminder of Africa's plight. The audience at OneXOne included such Toronto luminaries as Ted and Loretta Rogers; Taylor Thomson, daughter of the late Ken Thomson; Belinda Stronach; and Paul and Gina Godfrey.

The crowd opened its heart along with its wallet and contributed \$1-million toward the Hollywood-backed charity. Not only was it the right thing to do, it was *thething* to do.

As the media turn up the heat on Africa's problems, so more personalities are embracing the continent as a cause. Canadian soprano Measha Brueggergosman is a goodwill ambassador for African Medical and Research Foundation. Seamus O'Regan, *Canada AM* co-host and emcee at OneXOne, is also a spokesman for Spread the Net, a Toronto-based charity raising money for mosquito nets to curb the spread of malaria. (This past week, he appeared in ads for the Harry Rosen men's-wear store and donated his sitting fee to the charity that is fronted by Ms. Stronach and comedian Rick Mercer.)

"You see a lot of names suddenly associated with a cause and it's easy to think, 'trend,' " Mr. O'Regan says. "In fact, it's the opposite. People go into this with their eyes wide open. This is a high commitment."

Toronto-based Ben Peterson, son of former Ontario premier David Peterson, founded Journalists for Human Rights after travelling to Ghana in 2001. "My life changed instantaneously," says the younger Mr. Peterson, 30.

"I flew into Ghana three days after 9/11, and there I was, a very privileged upper-middle-class white guy from downtown Toronto ... thrown into one of the world's poorest countries... the tragedies I witnessed changed my perspective of the world."

Journalists for Human Rights have taken more than 175 professional journalists from Canada and elsewhere into 16 African nations, where they have been training African journalists on how to report on human-rights issues for an indigenous audience.

Just this week, Mr. Peterson opened a new centre for JHR in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

These types of projects are a far cry from the usual mainstay of the society calendar, says Torontonian Jeanne Grierson, formerly of South Africa.

"Society fundraisers used to reflect as much as we were exposed to, a children's hospital, a cancer hospital, and a host of other local 'needs,' " she says. "But weigh that against media spotlights on how HIV/AIDS has left 15 million children orphans in sub-Saharan Africa ... and 'humanity' encompasses a new global geography."

Ms. Grierson, whose great-grandfather was both the first South African to become a member of the House of Lords and a colleague of Cecil Rhodes, concentrates her energies in a small, meaningful way toward the cause.

She has a posh cupcake business called Eat My Words. Her hand-decorated wares are staples at Toronto society weddings and bar mitzvahs and profits from each sale go to the Toronto-based Stephen Lewis Foundation, which helps to ease the pain of HIV/AIDS in Africa at the grassroots level.

Young people are getting in on the action too. Over the past two years Upper Canada College students under the direction of teacher Craig Parkinson raised \$30,000 for the Lewa Wildlife Conservancy, a not-for-profit organization located in the foothills of Mount Kenya that works to boost declining populations of rhinos.

That money went to "the construction and building supplies of the schools we built and to outfit the classrooms with desks, textbooks and stationery supplies," to educate the local population to help with the conservancy, says Mr. Parkinson.

Where there's a spotlight, there are always style influences.

"Africa is fashionable," says Liz Addison, a former executive with the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. "Decor and style magazines are featuring African art and design. Celebrities like Clinton, Bono and Jolie are raising our consciences with their African causes, and Africa is an increasingly popular travel destination."

The University of Toronto's Alumni Travel, in association with Toronto-based Free the Children, is for the first time next year offering a trip to Kenya where participants, spending \$4,775 plus air fare, will build a school house.

Meanwhile, Canadian Tia Cibani, a designer for Ports 1961, showcased East African-inspired safari day suits at the recent New York spring collection runway shows.

Celebrity chef Greg Couillard serves up African-inspired cuisine to customers at his latest Yorkville restaurant, Manyata, which is Swahili for "meeting place."

And society jeweller Colette Harmon is this season offering a line of necklaces inspired by Africa to a clientele that includes Catherine Bratty, Nancy Pencer and Lynn Posluns, with prices ranging from \$175 for a pendant necklace to \$895 for the more elaborate pieces.

It's not as shallow as you might think.

There is "a counter-trend away from mass-produced to unique handmade goods," says Ms. Addison, who recently returned to Toronto to start an import business specializing in hand-crafted decor items created for the most part by fair-trade-registered women's co-operatives in Africa.

"The women seem to carry the greatest burden," says Ms. Addison of the African co-ops, "often supporting large extended families, and looking after family members with AIDS."

In the past, after a famine or other misfortune, for instance in Ethiopia or Somalia, there was a flurry of activity and then nothing. But what is happening now in support of Africa is "organic," says UCC's Mr. Parkinson.

"Tens of thousands of young people [from all over the world] are volunteering to help Africa every year, which is very different from the past. It's a whole new grassroots movement."