

Acres of Love

by Melanie Hemry

The children in Ryan and Gerda Audagnotti's extended family aren't delivered in the normal fashion. They are delivered to their doorstep by police and social workers.

These children are found locked in corrugated iron outhouses. They are discovered living with dogs. They wander alone in parks. They are abandoned in hospitals. They are thrown at birth down long-drop toilets. They are often found beside their mothers' dead bodies. Their own families refuse to help them. They are starved and beaten. They are no more than 5 years old...

They are AIDS orphans in Africa.

With the AIDS epidemic escalating and an estimated 13 million orphans in Africa, there seems to be no solution to the overwhelming crisis. The children are victims of more than just a deadly plague; they are victims of prejudice, ignorance and cruelty—all of which stem from fear.

A Hope and a Future

This stench of death and the stigma of AIDS were far from Ryan and Gerda Audagnotti's affluent home in South Africa where they were busy raising their own four children. As Christians, however, the Audagnottis could not sit idly by and do nothing.

So they applied to become licensed as an orphanage, and turned an investment property they owned into "Acres of Love," a home for AIDS orphans. Children from ages birth to 5 years are taken in and raised as their own.

“Our mandate from God was not to just provide a bowl of food and a blanket for these children,” Gerda says, “our mandate was to provide each child with a hope and a future. We were to do for them exactly what we would do for our own children.”

That meant naming the children, applying for birth certificates, providing AIDS testing, medical treatment, an education and a stable home environment. It also meant Ryan and Gerda would anoint the children with oil and pray for them to be healed.

Founded in 1998, Acres of Love now has eight homes, with a vision to establish 1,000. Although almost every child brought to them is HIV-positive, in the first five years of operation, only six of them—already in critical condition when they arrived—have died.

“There is such a stigma associated with HIV/AIDS that even newborns are outcasts in society,” Gerda Audagnotti explains. “People are afraid they will contract the disease if an infected child lives in their home. They are afraid of the child’s saliva, their cough and their wet or dirty diapers. Many people are even afraid to hold or touch a child with AIDS. But the disease cannot be contracted by any of those means. AIDS is contagious only through contact with semen or blood.”

The Truth Makes Them Free

There is difficulty in finding homes for these children due to the misunderstanding of how the disease is transmitted, and also due to the fact that these children are sometimes misdiagnosed.

“The South African government tests for HIV by using an Enzyme-Linked Immunosorbent Assay,” Gerda says. “This test works well for adults, but children who

still have their mothers' antibodies can result in a false positive test. We provide the children with a polymerase chain reaction test in order to differentiate between the mother's antibodies and the child's true status. Out of 450 children brought to the doors of Acres of Love, more than 300 actually proved to be HIV-negative. The majority of them have been adopted by Christian families in South Africa and Europe."

What of the children who proved to be HIV-positive? A few have been adopted into Christian homes. But the majority of them are growing up in "Acres of Love Forever Homes," which are designed to provide a loving, permanent, stable home *forever*.

While many of the children with AIDS are put on Hyper Active Antiretroviral Therapy (HAART), not all of them require it. Sarah, one of the first children to be admitted to Acres of Love in 1998, was HIV-positive. Seven years later, she has never been sick nor has she needed treatment.

Recently Acres of Love admitted a 6-year-old girl who was found carrying a 1-year-old boy on her back. Beaten by her grandmother and driven away from their family, the little girl had become caregiver for the younger child.

"Our task is not just to provide for the children's physical needs," Gerda says. "We want them emotionally and spiritually whole as well. So we provide counseling and prayer to help them through the trauma they've experienced. And we help them learn to forgive."

The Audagnottis see God's loving, healing power at work in the lives of these little ones every day. They had no idea they personally would need to see that same power at work for them only six months after starting Acres of Love.

Faith for a Miracle

It was a lovely day in South Africa when Ryan and Gerda accepted an invitation to go horseback riding in the mountains. Ryan, mounted on an Arabian stallion, lost control when the horse spooked and bolted. By the time Gerda reached his broken body, he was barely alive.

In the intensive care unit, Ryan clung to life as a ventilator forced air into his punctured lungs and collapsed diaphragm. Gerda paid careful attention as doctors explained that due to the critical nature of his injuries, Ryan could not survive.

Sitting by his bed, Gerda listened to the whirl of the respirator. She had never lacked faith for AIDS orphans. Now death was stalking *her* house, and Ryan's only hope was a miracle.

Opening her *New King James Version* Bible, she read Psalm 41:1-3, "Blessed is he who considers the poor; The Lord will deliver him in time of trouble. The Lord will preserve him and keep him alive... The Lord will strengthen him on his bed of illness; You will sustain him on his sickbed."

"Lord," she prayed, "I come to You on behalf of my husband. I would remind You that Ryan has considered the poor. He has not turned away from orphans. Because he loves You, he has become a father to the fatherless. Now I ask that You deliver him in his time of need and trouble. I ask You to protect him and keep him alive. Refresh him and strengthen him on his sickbed and restore him from his bed of illness."

There in the intensive care unit, a creative miracle occurred. Ryan Audagnottti's lungs were knit back together. His diaphragm was made whole. The Lord delivered him

in his time of trouble. The Lord protected him and kept him alive. The Lord refreshed and strengthened him. The Lord restored him from his bed of illness. The Lord healed him!

The Lord is also healing and restoring the lives of orphans of AIDS. If the AIDS pandemic continues at the current rate, LoveLife, an AIDS educational organization, predicts that more than half of all South Africans under the age of 15 will contract the disease.

Those statistics only strengthen the Audagnottis' determination to establish 1,000 of these loving homes.

Acres of Love has not changed the world. But Ryan and Gerda's faith and obedience are changing the world—one child at a time. And Partners, you are part of the work they are doing! KCM South Africa has financially supported this ministry since its beginning. Not only that, KCM has supplied books, tapes and videos for the children, and VCRs so the children can watch them. The children love to sing along with the worship songs and are encouraged by watching the videos. They are being taught how to walk in faith and receive the healing power of God.

“Our longtime partnership with KCM has had a profound effect on us individually and on Acres of Love as well,” Gerda says. “Jesus said that when we give to the least of these, we have given to Him. The poorest of the orphans are literally on our doorstep, and we are so grateful to KCM and their Partners for helping us give to the least of them.”

Partners, *you* are touching the lives of orphans and you are giving to Him!

VICTORY