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FEATURE

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ACRES OF LOVE

QUALITY ORPHAN CARE

BY DAVID LARSEN

Sarah's room is brightly decorated and immaculately clean. On her bunk bed is a mound of fluffy toys. Her cupboard is packed with new clothes. In the garden of her suburban home is a swimming pool and jungle gym. When Sarah comes home from school she brings a friend from down the road to play.

In many ways Sarah (6) lives a normal middle class life in suburban Johannesburg, a life that children in the shanty towns not far from her home can only observe on television. Yet Sarah's life is abnormal for the family into which she was born. The life she lives now is the outcome of a change in destiny.

Sarah's home lies on the banks of a river in the leafy suburb of Bryanston. The fence with the neighbouring property has been removed and there is a gate through to a third. In the back garden of the middle home near the river Moims leans over a bar of a jungle gym, head on the ground and one foot in the air. Closer to the river Tshepo (3) pendulum's back and forth on car-bye swings pushed gently by volunteer, Sylviane Hoare, from Houston, Texas. There is even a brightly coloured train engine, large enough for a two-year-old to sit astride, inside the third home, number 29 Royce Road, volunteer Claudia Pierotti makes a large bowl of popcorn which six energetic, three-to-five-year-olds eagerly devour.

Sarah is an orphan. She was just 18 months old when she was abandoned by her mother in Sebokeng hospital, a disadvantaged area near Johannesburg. Left to lie in her cot all day she could not walk and kept to herself. Her belly was distended and she suffered night sweats. Sarah could have become another statistic. Instead she was brought to the home of Ryan and Gerda Audagnotti.

God had been speaking to Gerda in particular about doing something about the thousands of orphans in South Africa as a result of the AIDS pandemic. Success in their financial planning business in 1997 meant that the Audagnotti's owned two houses in Johannesburg, one of which they decided to use



Care giver Phumzile Ntombela feeds a child a solid meal. For HART treatment to be effective good nutrition is vital. PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID LARSEN / THE MEDIA BANK

as a home for abandoned babies. "The Lord led us to open the doors of our own home for abandoned and AIDS babies in August 1998," says Gerda Audagnotti.

Sarah was one of the first to arrive. In the five years since Acres of Love was launched the organisation has cared for over 200 children and has grown to include the homes on either side of number 31 and another across the valley in the suburb of Olivetdale. Most of the children have been adopted by families in South Africa, Europe and Canada - but Sarah has stayed. This is because Sarah is HIV+. Few will adopt a child with a terminal condition. Janis Evans is operations director at Acres of Love overseeing two house mothers and their staff. "Until this morning we had 32 children, now there are 31," she says, sadness showing in her bright eyes. Sonnyboy was only six months old when he passed away

in the early hours of that Wednesday morning - September 3, 2003. The night staff were with him at the time. An abandoned child with full blown AIDS, he had arrived less than two months before.

"The only way I'm able to cope is that I know they have gone to a better place," says Evans of the children who die in her care. "At least he was properly cared for in his last few months." Almost all the children who are brought to Acres of Love by the police, social workers or hospitals have tested positive for HIV. Yet in the five years Acres has been operating, only six have died. All six were already in a critical condition when they arrived at the haven. This is testimony to the high standard of care abandoned children receive at Acres. "There is nothing more rewarding in life than giving of oneself," says Evans. "I could never do this alone. Every day I ask God for strength and wisdom. It has to

be the Lord every moment."

From the beginning, the Audagnotti's decided to care for the children that God brought to them as if they were their own, says Tony Palmer, development director of Acres of Love. One of the first things they do is a PCR HIV test. The South African government tests for HIV status using an ELISA test which tests for antibodies to the virus. This works well in adults, but children still have antibodies in their blood transmitted from their mother. The PCR test reveals whether the actual virus is present or not. In this way the vast majority of children who came through the doors at Acres of Love, often referred to them by health authorities because of their supposed HIV+ status, are found to be HIV- and, therefore, more readily adopted.

"To me the most amazing thing is seeing the destiny change in these children," says Palmer. "One



Aurelia Mhlongo serves food to an orphan. An ordinary woman whom God has got a hold of, Mhlongo has become a catalyst for transformation in her poverty stricken community. PHOTOGRAPH: JACKIE LARSEN

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applause comes from the crowds, it is frightening," she said. "I am not surprised famous young people like pop stars resort to drugs."

What are her plans for the future? "I like to move on when one thing is working well. I have an itch. I need to have knowledge about fund-raising so I can train others in accessing funds for small farmers. I want to teach people how to raise calves from birth to 12 months. I want to get people back to animal-drawn ploughing. I need to get a group of people together to receive land and implement this project."

What of her family's needs? "No more travelling around for me. My grandson needs me."

And her final reflection? "God is living more with the smaller people, because the big people think they are something without Him."