



Love rescues the lost

O.C. couple's charity organization provides shelter, care and a middle-class lifestyle for AIDS orphans in South Africa.

HOMES FOUND: Ryan Audagnotti, wife Gerda and daughter Melissa of San Juan Capistrano show photos of AIDS babies they've sheltered at their South African orphanage. Both have since been adopted.

EUGENE GARCIA, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

By JIM HINCH

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SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO – Gerda Audagnotti ushers a guest into what she calls the war room and gestures at an antique South African chair, an heirloom from her husband's side of the family. French-manicured toenails peek out from sandals as she plops down in front of her computer. She calls up a Web site and flashes a look of anguish.

" Look at that beautiful baby!" she exclaims, pointing at a South African AIDS victim she will probably never see, never get to usher into the network of Johannesburg orphanages she founded five years ago and now runs from a quiet house a stone's throw from Trabuco Creek.

Working three phone lines in a home office with a view of the garden, Audagnotti and her husband, Ryan, oversee one of South Africa's most unusual, and increasingly famous, responses to the AIDS crisis: four homes in a gated Johannesburg suburb where volunteers nurture AIDS babies abandoned in roadside ditches and dumped in pit toilets.

Since the Audagnottis started Acres of Love in the house they built shortly after they were married, the operation has grown to four homes where about 250 children have received free medication, round-the-clock care and immersion in a South African middle-class lifestyle they otherwise would never know.

Now that the couple live in Orange County, where Ryan opened a subsidiary of his consulting business a few years ago, neighbors here are getting involved. Friends have held fund-raisers on nearby estates and a group of volunteers from a San Clemente church plans to fly to Johannesburg this spring.

On Monday, Melissa Herrmann, a 22 year-old graduate of Vanguard University in Costa Mesa, leaves for a six-week training internship running a recently opened fourth house for eight school- age boys. Next year, she plans to become operations director of a new network of homes the Audagnottis are buying near Johannesburg townships where AIDS takes its heaviest toll.

The children cared for at Acres of Love are an almost invisible fraction of the 3 million AIDS orphans experts expect in South Africa by the end of this decade. But the Audagnottis, who are Christians, said

God told them: " 'It's not about the number, it's how to look at each child,'" said Gerda Audagnotti. "We have to do as much for the one as for the 99. ... We feel we are the body of Christ in action."

More than 20 percent of South Africa's population of 44 million is infected with HIV, according to UNAIDS, the United Nations coordinating agency for AIDS relief. Earlier this month, in a radical change of course, the country's government vowed to more than triple AIDS spending to \$1.7 billion over the next three years and provide free medication. Previously, officials disparaged AIDS-fighting drugs and questioned whether HIV caused AIDS.

Gerda Audagnotti said AIDS carries a heavy stigma in South Africa. Infected spouses and children are routinely abandoned or shunned by their communities. Some churches set up deposit boxes where parents dump children they are too poor, sick or unwilling to care for. The country's lingering racial divisions complicate relief efforts.

After the fall of the apartheid government in the early 1990s, white South Africans, fearing crime, retreated from sections of Johannesburg into gated suburbs to the north, said Ryan Audagnotti. Few still dare to venture into townships where AIDS is prevalent.

Gerda said that by bringing babies into white communities, Acres of Love provides a place where neighbors feel comfortable helping.

The social mix at the houses breaks down stereotypes on both sides - especially the notion that AIDS babies are doomed to die and thus unworthy of attention, Gerda said. Babies from some of the country's poorest and most ravaged communities are nurtured by a multiethnic, international cadre of doctors, caregivers and volunteers.

" Women in the community are wives of CEOs," said Ryan Audagnotti. "They tell their friends and parents at schools."

The message is also being spread in ways greater than word-of-mouth.

A PBS documentarian, in Africa to report on child rape, happened on Acres of Love, grew attached to one of the children and changed course to make a film about the operation. The South African subsidiary of Grey Worldwide, a multinational advertising firm, is preparing a TV commercial featuring Acres of Love that seeks to convince South Africans that AIDS babies can survive and lead normal lives, with proper care. And Ryan Audagnotti has traveled to Washington, D.C., to coordinate efforts with U.S. officials.

Gerda's recollection of why she started Acres of Love touches on South Africa's charged racial history. She said she remembers watching black laborers working her grandparents' farm. Memories of mothers holding their children flashed in her mind each time she read headlines about abandoned babies in AIDS-ravaged communities.

In 1998, she read a book about a man who started a hospital in his home. "I said, 'Why don't we do this?'" she recalled. So she got a permit from the government, and relief agencies began bringing abandoned babies to the house she and Ryan built in 1983, shortly after they were married. The family had moved into a larger home nearby, but had kept the old house as a rental. They put in an institutional kitchen, hired caregivers and began coordinating treatment for malnourished, infected children.

Now, a network of local private hospitals and clinics provides free checkups. Doctors and nurses supervise drug regimens. And the children are fixtures in local schools. The couple bought a second home when the first became crowded. Then, with an increasing flow of donations from South African corporations and American churches, they bought two more houses. At first, they worried that neighbors would object to orphanages proliferating down the block. Instead, community members came with donations to the houses, which are immaculately maintained by professional gardeners.

" We wanted home-based care so we could give the best care, what we would give our own kids," Ryan Audagnotti said. Part of the couple's mission is breaking what they call South Africa's cycle of poverty by raising children in middle-class communities with middle-class amenities, Gerda said. Previously, South African officials resisted help from international aid agencies, citing a desire to find what leaders called "African solutions" to the nation's problems.

Though Ryan acknowledged that he and Gerda ensure their employees "are of like faith," and seek to lift orphans from the impoverished lifestyles of township communities, he said Acres of Love steers clear of South African politics. The orphanage is registered in Johannesburg as a non-governmental organization and abides by the government's preference for reuniting orphans with located relatives.

On Tuesday, Gerda was near-frantic at news that a 2-year-old HIV-positive girl, found abandoned shortly after birth in a pit toilet, was likely to be sent back to a township to live with her grandmother. " Can they really give her the medication? Do they have fridges (to store medicine)? Will they be able to keep her alive as we can?" Gerda fretted. "You don't know if (the family wants the child) because they're going to get a (government) grant. ... She'll pass away and they'll say it's because she has AIDS. ...

" Sometimes I lie awake at night. How can people do ordinary things when this is happening? But that's when God's putting passion in your heart to help these kids."
