Child, Alive

A visit from Keep a Child Alive's cofounder Leigh Blake took Noah Mushimiyimana from his small village in Rwanda to the bright lights of American Idol. Together, Mushimiyimana and Blake show that living with HIV doesn't have to stop you from reaching for the stars.

July 1, 2009 By Kellee Terrell

I meet so many inspiring young people in Africa, who constantly amaze me with their resilience and courage," says Grammy-winning soul songstress Alicia Keys and cofounder and global ambassador of the organization Keep a Child Alive (KCA). "You're about to meet one such person. Noah lives in Rwanda and has a dream. To make an album so that he can help children living with HIV/AIDS in his country." As Noah waits in the wings, Keys introduces him to the *American Idol* audience. "He learned this song in English in just one week.... Coming out to perform 'I'm the World's Greatest' all the way from Rwanda is Noaahhhhhh!"

As the stage's glass curtain opens, Noah Mushimiyimana, 15, runs out. He's decked out in an outfit that seems handpicked by Kanye West himself—a blue leather Members Only–looking jacket and baggy jeans with the bottoms tucked into multicolored high-top sneakers. He grabs his mic with the swagger and ease of a seasoned hip-hop vet and lets its rip.

When Noah finishes, the crowd jumps to their feet, and Keys and Idol host Ryan Seacrest join him onstage. Noah is the ultimate pop star.

Performing for millions of viewers and having a single on iTunes would be a huge accomplishment for anyone, but given Noah's circumstances, it's nearly unbelievable.

Born in 1994, during the Rwandan genocide, Noah, the elder of two boys, came into the world HIV positive but didn't know it until he was 10 years old. His mother, who is also positive, suffers from a mental illness and roams the streets and neighboring towns for long periods of time. No one really knows what happened. Noah believes that doctors poisoned his mother, but British-born Leigh Blake, the cofounder of Keep a Child Alive who discovered Noah and his incredible talent, believes that his mom's state could be a result of witnessing the horrific violence, murder and rapes of a 100-day civil war that stole the lives of almost a million and left the country in ruins. "Living through that, anyone would be crazy," Blake says.

Noah was conceived when his mother met a stranger during one of her excursions. "That's why he doesn't know his father," Blake tells me. Yet, a loyal son, Noah has nothing but love for his mother.

“I was my happiest when I was going anywhere with [her, even wandering through the streets],” he tells *POZ*.

In 2004, Noah’s grandmother took him, his brother and four cousins to a nearby AIDS clinic to get them all tested for HIV. Noah’s results were positive. “I was so angry and depressed,” he says. “[After a while] I told myself, ‘Okay, I can deal with this,’ and I started taking my meds.” But the adjustment hasn’t been easy. Stigma is very prevalent, especially in the schoolyard—his classmates tease him cruelly. “I cry a lot—it really hurts my feelings,” Noah says.

Noah also took care of the household while his grandmother worked in Burundi, 85 miles from their home in Kigali because she couldn’t find work locally. (Thanks to a generous donation from supermodel-turned-talk-show-host Tyra Banks, Noah’s grandmother now has her own business in town and they all live in a new home.)

When he and Blake first crossed paths, Noah was getting by on one bowl of porridge a day. But he never lost sight of his dream—to record an album. And thanks to his natural talent, tenacity and pure luck, it’s going to happen. Since meeting Blake and appearing on American Idol, Noah is in serious talks about getting a record deal.

The two met last summer, when Blake took a four-country tour of South Africa, Kenya, Uganda and Rwanda to conduct site visits of KCA’s numerous clinics. Blake asked if she could visit three people at their own homes—Noah, a client of the Icyuzuzo clinic, was one of the three chosen.

“When I saw Noah, he was wearing a tiny Spider-Man shirt and was filthy,” Blake says. “He lived in a one-room house that had only two chairs, a small table and two tubs, one with their food for the day and the other with brown water in it.”

She asked him what his dream was, and his answer shocked her. “The other children said they wanted to be a nurse or a teacher, but he wanted to record an album,” she says, laughing. “I was like, ‘What?’ Where did he get that from?” But Noah, like the rest of the world, was deeply influenced by music—hip-hop and R&B especially. “At my friends’ homes, I would watch television and YouTube videos,” he says. “I would see [singers and rappers like] Ciara, Lil Wayne and Jay-Z and say, ‘I want to be like them.’”

Blake, intrigued, asked for him to rap with her tape recorder in hand. “He had such stage presence,” she says. Having worked as a music producer, Blake knew raw talent when she saw it. When she got back to the states, she asked Keys if his song was as good as she thought. “Alicia is going to tell me the truth,” Blake says. Keys emphatically agreed: It was a hit.

From there, Blake and her staff worked “their asses off” to get Noah to New York City to perform at the Black Ball, KCA’s annual fund-raiser. Simon Fuller, the creator of *American Idol*, was being recognized at the event for *Idol Gives Back*, a television special that raised money for charities. “Noah really moved him,” Blake says, and as a result, Fuller wanted him to appear on *American Idol*.

“Noah’s story just shows that if you are HIV positive, the world is not ending,” Blake says, “you can be whatever you want to be, you can live your dreams.” Keys agrees. “I believe he’s been chosen to be a light for his community and the world. He inspired me to continue doing this work,” she tells *POZ*.

Despite living in poverty and taking on the role of father figure, Noah is, remarkably, a typical teenager—exploding with energy and exuding that naïve sense of being invincible. (A week before his May 13 performance on American Idol, I asked him if was he nervous. He shook his head and said, “No,” as if I was silly for even thinking that was a possibility.)

Yet when he tells his story, especially the parts about his mother and the ill treatment he gets from his peers, you recognize just how young and fragile he is. During our interview in Brooklyn, one minute he is dancing to Ne-Yo’s “Miss Independent” and laughing hysterically, another he is subdued and speaking softly. As he answers my questions, Blake, a mother of an 8-year-old boy, instinctively holds Noah tight. “He is scared and lonely,” she says softly. “[In Rwanda], they think he is contaminated. Here, everyone plays with him.”

The topic of isolation comes up often when Blake and Noah talk, especially when they discuss his doing HIV work back home. He’s afraid of the stigma associated with the virus that he might experience when people learn his HIV status. “I keep telling him that when he becomes a superstar—and he will because it is inevitable—they won’t care,” Blake says.

I wish that could be true. Perhaps in just a few years his tremendous fame and message of hope will overturn cultural taboos and debunk myths that have been ingrained in many minds for the past 28 years such as: People living with HIV are bad and should be avoided at all costs.

While she talks, I just nod. Blake, an optimist, has more faith in humanity than I do.

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Blake is clear though: She is not this decade’s version of Sally Struthers and KCA is nothing like Save the Children and other organizations that seemingly pimp out the individuals they are trying to rescue, using stereotypical images such as emaciated African children with protruding bellies to garner funds. Too many times, the lines between conveying the devastating suffering that people experience and downright exploiting them for profit are blurred. “I absolutely hate that,” says the 56-year-old Blake, who assures that KCA is sensitive to these issues. “We are dealing with people in the most awful circumstances. We don’t exploit them.

“We are all equals and treat our clients with dignity and understand that it’s not just about keeping the children alive,” she continues. “It’s also about helping the mothers, fathers and grandmothers, the entire community.”

Raising awareness and money around the epidemic is not a cause that Blake recently latched on to. Having spent the ’80s in New York City, the then-music producer hobnobbed with Andy Warhol,

Keith Haring and the Talking Heads. She recalls the early days of the AIDS epidemic being a hybrid of hysteria, extreme loss and rage. To deal with her utter disgust of what was happening, especially in Africa, she used music as a tool to raise money to fight AIDS. In the early ’90s she produced the popular *Red, Hot + Blue* and *Red, Hot + Dance* compilation CDs that raised millions for people living with HIV.

After working on and off with AIDS while attempting to have a “normal life,” Blake eventually committed full-time to her calling. And it was just in time: In 2000, she and her husband separated, leaving her a single mom. Blake needed to go back to what made her the most happy. In 2001, she phoned U2’s Bono and told him she wanted to re-create Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On” and use the proceeds to provide medications to people in Africa. “Bono agreed that we had to do something, especially since treatment was available.”

Six months later, after the “What’s Going On” campaign launched, Blake and Keys (who also worked on the campaign) had a conversation about the importance of getting antiretrovirals to Africa. Keys wanted to help by any means necessary. “I have heard that so many times from celebrities,” Blake says. “But Alicia really walked the walk.”

Using royalty money from *Red, Hot + Blue*, Blake and Keys created a clinic to prove the cynics wrong. “These experts were telling me that Africans were not worth the 11 grand a year per person of drug costs because they weren’t going to adhere to them,” she says with disgust. “If I opened my own clinic, I could see with my own eyes if it could work—and it did.” And thus—with the help of Blake’s and Keys’s friends, plus doctors, donors and partnerships—KCA was born in 2003.

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During the past six years, the organization has flourished: KCA has fed, clothed and/or provided meds for more than 45,000 people, built eight orphanages and clinics and created programs that address drug and alcohol addiction, among other issues.

And the need is great: According to the 2008 UNAIDS/WHO report, an estimated 22.5 million people are living with HIV in Africa, and more than 11 million children have been orphaned.

“It makes me angry as hell,” Blake says. “If this epidemic were to get the same attention as swine flu or receive the billions that Wall Street got, this problem would be solved.”

KCA allows Blake to pay respect to those she lost and to fight the rage that lives inside her. Her dedication also comes from her own nine-year struggle with hepatitis C—an infectious disease that affects the liver. Although hep C is treatable and curable for some, it can still be fatal.

It’s ironic, she notes with a laugh, that even though she has hep C, she’s known as “the AIDS woman.” She quickly assures me that she is doing well and is participating in a clinical trial in New

York City. But when she first heard her diagnosis in 2000, Blake wasn't as optimistic. "I kept telling myself that I am not going to live to see my son, India, grow up," she says. "In that moment, I could understand what these HIV-positive mothers in Africa were going through, being hopeless."

As Blake and I sit in her office in Brooklyn, she raves about Noah. "I am so crazy about that boy."

Noah doesn't look at his success as a means to escape from his homeland. "I want to [go back to Rwanda] and make orphanages for other children and teach people about AIDS," he says. "Also buy a house and have some cars."

He admits that it was crucial to turn on his charm for Blake if he wanted her help. "When you meet a muzunga, it means you are going to be something." (Muzunga is a Western foreigner, but also refers to someone who is white.)

I find his innocent admission bitterly ironic. The muzungas are mostly to blame for his situation and that of millions like him, thanks to centuries of colonization, horrific and oppressive policies and plain old complacency. Yet, Noah believed that these same people were going to be his salvation. And, it has proved true, in a way: Westerners did drastically change Noah's life for the better. And while we have our own AIDS epidemic to deal with in the United States, the role we play in this inherited global catastrophe is not going away, nor will our responsibility to help solve it.

"Noah, do you want to show Kellee what you are doing for *American Idol*?" Blake asks.

Noah nods emphatically. He's been practicing at Blake's office all week, yet no one seems tired of seeing him perform. As the music starts, I take a seat. After 30 seconds, I begin to smile.

I think to myself: Noah's going to make it. He's one of the lucky ones.

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