Rock Out

To soothe Africa's AIDS orphans, the world's artists craft funky cradles.

May 1, 2008 By Kellee Terrell

In 2003, when she was a photography student, Naomi Natale went to Kenya. Her mission: taking pictures of orphans for a nonprofit organization. She heard a story there of two young orphaned brothers who'd gone missing and were feared dead. Both kids were exceptional artists; they sold their creations to survive. "One brother made planes from scrap materials; they could actually fly," Natale says. "[But] because of these children's circumstance, [they] will [probably] never be able to nurture their talents." Indeed, they may never be found alive. The tragic pair is not alone; by 2010, an estimated 53.1 million African children will be orphaned by AIDS, war, famine and other illnesses. Few of them will live to exercise their potential, artistic or otherwise.

When Natale returned to the States, she called out to fellow artists to help draw attention to the plight of the parentless children—and to the fact that many will perish. Their response: the Cradle Project, for which artists have been designing and donating cribs since 2005. "An empty crib represents the loss of a child," Natale says. "By displaying [hundreds] of empty cribs, we are showing how serious [the AIDS] situation [in Africa] is."

On June 7, Albuquerque's Bank Building will host an online auction of cribs from around the world (bid on or donate a crib via thecradleproject.org). The event will benefit the Firelight Foundation, which funds African orphanages and schools. "We want to overwhelm people," Natale adds, "but inspire hope too." Let's hope the world wakes up.

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