Teach Your Children Well

January 1, 2001 By Griffin Shea

When it comes to AIDS, numbers in Zimbabwe are hard to comprehend because they're so big. When I visit the elementary school on Eskbank Farm in Mazowe, I know that one quarter of the students were orphans whose parents had died of AIDS. But I don't know what that looks like until the kids line up for an assembly. They sit in 12 rows, and then the first three rows stand up.

The children at this assembly are actually the lucky ones -- they can afford the public-school fees. Tuition has a big price tag: Most of them can't afford other essentials, such as shoes. The first three rows are standing up because each kid is going to get a pair of generic black tennis shoes, donated by British soccer star Andy Cole. He visited last year and asked what he could give them. They wanted shoes.

Today, the school is performing a program to say thank you. One class wrote a song-and-dance routine; the lyrics are in Shona, the most common language spoken here. Edmone Zhakata, a teacher sitting next to me, translates: *My mother has died and gone somewhere. But she says, "Don't cry, because I have gone someplace where you will go, too, one day. The only difference is the time. It's a place we are all on our way to."*

I couldn't remember giving the afterlife much thought in third grade. "Isn't the song a little serious for 8-year-old children?" I ask Edmone.

"Do you think so?" he asks.

The song *is* hopeful, and at the moment, many people in Zimbabwe aren't. These children all have, or had, parents who work on white-owned farms. At least half of those farms, including this one in Mazowe, are about to be seized by the government. The idea is that this will right a colonial wrong, when white settlers pushed blacks onto reservations and took the best farmland for themselves.

That leaves AIDS orphans in an especially tough spot. Sue Parry, the woman who brought the donated shoes to this school, runs a program that helps care for orphans in their farm communities. Her group estimates that more than 24,000 AIDS orphans could lose their homes because of the land reforms. That's far too many children for orphanages to take in.

The government is having trouble finding a solution, partly because legally most AIDS orphans don't exist: Some 70 percent don't have birth certificates. Without the document, children can't take exams to finish seventh grade and go on to high school. They can't enroll in government

welfare programs or get a national ID card, which they need to get a job. They can’t even receive a legal burial if they die, because on paper they were never born.

Maybe these children’s words aren’t too serious, after all, I think, as one boy begins a poem he calls “Life”: “Without parents,” he recites, “life is a nightmare.”

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