No Child Left Behind

When Jane Aronson, MD, started the Worldwide Orphans Foundation, she gave extra TLC to those children living with HIV.

January 1, 2010 By Willette Francis

For millions of children worldwide, living in an orphanage means growing up without the emotional support and individual care all kids need. For orphans living with HIV, the situation is all the more dire. But Jane Aronson, MD, a pediatric infectious disease specialist, is helping these kids get the love—and, in some cases, the HIV meds—they so desperately need and deserve.

In 1997, Aronson launched the New Jersey–based Worldwide Orphans Foundation (WWO). The organization improves the lives of orphans (both HIV positive and negative) by constantly identifying their health care needs, advocating for their well-being and designing programs to eliminate the negative effects that living in a orphanage can have on a child's physical, social and psychological development.

It was during her pediatric residency that HIV-negative Aronson first became aware of the developmental setbacks orphans experience. Since then, she has dedicated her entire career to helping these kids. "[Children] in an orphanage end up warehoused, underfed, undernourished [and without] enough calories to grow," Aronson says. Add the lack of human connection and nurture, and the results can be devastating. She explains: "You end up with tired, weak, depressed, traumatized little infants and toddlers [who are] punished by the lack of intimacy and social connection and human respect [at the orphanage]."

You also end up with HIV-positive orphans dying. "There are millions of children living with HIV in the world," Aronson says, "and a vast majority of those children are not getting medication or primary health care." To address this challenge, WWO, which works with orphanages in countries as diverse as Bulgaria, Ethiopia, Serbia and Vietnam, launched several programs to focus on orphans with HIV.

Through one such program, WWO trains health care providers to administer lifesaving meds to HIV-positive orphans. A different program in Vietnam imports pediatric three-drug antiretroviral medication with the cooperation of a UNICEF procurement program. A freestanding pediatric AIDS clinic in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, provides medical care to children in six orphanages. And WWO's orphan ranger program, which isn't HIV-specific, invites individuals from all walks of life to volunteer by contributing in whatever way they can to an orphanage.

But the organization offers more than health care. It is tearing down the barriers of stigma for orphans living with HIV/AIDS. In Adddis Ababa, it opened the WWO Academy, which offers better classroom conditions and proper tools for learning—in an environment free of stigma. “We saw that kids [who are HIV positive] could not attend with children who didn’t have the virus,” Aronson says. “They didn’t last here because when anyone found out they had HIV, they would be stigmatized and wouldn’t want to go anymore,” she says. The academy’s curriculum focuses on creative education including arts, sports, music, theater and dance.

WWO is also helping HIV-positive orphans in Vietnam get the education they deserve. WWO hires teachers and works with community organizations to ensure that these children can participate in activities and attend local schools.

HIV-related stigma remains a hot-button issue in Vietnam, and it recently made international headlines. In October, *The New York Times* ran an article titled “Exiled From School, H.I.V.-infected Orphans Learn a Bitter Lesson.” In response, Aronson wrote a letter to the editor, saying: “We must resolve to fight stigma and discrimination against HIV-positive orphaned children. Like any child, they have every right to gain an education and become full members of society.”

This past November, Aronson was one of 12 individual women (including Maya Angelou, Rihanna and Stella McCartney) to be honored at *Glamour* magazine’s Woman of the Year awards at New York City’s Carnegie Hall. Paying tribute to someone as dedicated and inspirational as Aronson is glamorous indeed.

To learn more about Worldwide Orphans Foundation and to find out how you can make a difference in an orphan’s life, visit wwo.org.

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