In the Eye of the Beholder

Photographer Kristen Ashburn has documented AIDS in Africa since 2000. Nominated for an Emmy in 2007 for her Bloodline project, she shows how AIDS continues to affect children in her new book, I Am Because We Are. The book is a companion to a 2008 documentary of the same name narrated by Madonna.

July 1, 2009 By Oriol R. Gutierrez Jr.

POZ: Why did you become a photographer?
Kristen Ashburn: Photography has always been a passion of mine. What led me to photojournalism was working as an aid worker in Romania with orphans. The organization I worked with asked me to document what they were up against. These images helped me realize the power of photography.

What led you to photograph AIDS in Africa?
After graduating from college I lived in New York City and worked for a photographer as his studio manager. I read "AIDS: The Agony of Africa" by Mark Schoofs, the Pulitzer Prize–winning series of articles that he wrote for the Village Voice. His series and other articles really moved me. The statistics were staggering.

I first went to Botswana in December 2000. My goal was to understand the human toll of the pandemic. From Botswana I went to Zimbabwe where I worked under the radar. Robert Mugabe made it very difficult for journalists to work there. I entered the country as a tourist, but it became increasingly risky and dangerous. In the end I was rejected access to Zimbabwe and ended up working in South Africa as well as Malawi.

What is the Bloodline: AIDS and Family project?
Bloodline: AIDS and Family is my work spanning from 2001 to 2007. There is no way to encapsulate my experience covering AIDS or to show exactly what is happening in each country. Each place is incredibly diverse. What stood out again and again were the personal, individual stories. This is what I believe is more important to focus on.

I published in magazines worldwide, but I was frustrated by the limitations of the printed page. I collected enough audio and video for [the Emmy-nominated] multimedia presentation. I fused these mediums together to offer people a better sense of what I experienced.

How did the *I Am Because We Are* book originate?
The photographer I worked for after college is the person who introduced me to Madonna and her

work covering the effects of AIDS. Madonna was already working on this documentary. I worked closely with her video team to document a number of stories in Malawi [but the book also has photos I took from other African countries].

Any final thoughts?
I find it difficult to verbalize or to write about my experiences. This is partly why I picked up a camera. Photography has its own language. What's important is to look into the lives of people and let the images speak for themselves.

Visit kristenashburn.com for more about her work. Proceeds from the book are donated to Raising Malawi, an organization founded by Madonna that assists orphans affected by HIV/AIDS. Visit iambecauseweare.com for more about the documentary and to view the images.

© 2026 Smart + Strong All Rights Reserved.
http://beta.docker.poz.com/article/photographs-Africa-Madonna-16794-5437