

## Alumnae Matters

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### Alumnae Profile : Michelle Blake Kew '73

“It’s as if something just reached out of the sky and said, ‘Okay, Chellie, now it’s your turn.’” These were the thoughts of Michelle Kew, class of ’73, as she embarked on an adventure that would change her life. In 1997, Chellie’s husband, Kevin, and their two children, Jeannette & Octavio, traveled to Johannesburg, South Africa, where Kevin would pursue a job through his high-tech computer firm and the family would live for two years. From Lake Oswego, Oregon, the family had no idea what to expect. Chellie admitted to being unprepared for her voyage into an unknown land. She says, “A quick read of Karen Blixen and Graham Greene – the only pertinent books on our shelves – did not, of course, introduce one to Africa, but to its colonial sins in beautiful prose.”

She describes, “Stucco, yellow, pillared with French doors, I hadn’t expected the opulence, but was even less prepared for the squatters’ camps rammed against the perimeter of the property. Security guards with automatic rifles patrolled the massive stone walls.” Chellie insisted to her husband that they could not stay, and she immediately booked return flights for her children and herself. The morning before their flight back to Oregon, however, something happened. Chellie noticed that one of the gardeners had gone missing. “It was Isaac, the thin one, the one who’d instructed so carefully about the names of bushes and blooms,” recalls Chellie. She approached one of the other gardeners, only to find out that Isaac had died of a sickness his co-worker could not name. It took Chellie 24 hours to figure out that the sickness that Isaac and 24 million other Africans had been suffering from was AIDS.

When Chellie asked the doctor at her son’s school what was being done locally about HIV and AIDS, his answer shocked her. “Mrs. Kew, in Zambia, for example, the national cry is, ‘Everyone is either infected or affected by AIDS.’ We in Johannesburg have a more difficult time with numbers because most lie if they have the illness. But do you know about the children?” he asked. “The adults who’ve died left behind thousands of orphans. The AIDS orphans. If they are not on the street, or foster homes, one finds them in camps and mission schools throughout Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa.”

Chellie cancelled the airplane tickets. “Whatever talents I had – photography and healing – I promised would be devoted to finding out where the orphans were and how they lived.” Without knowing exactly how to use her talents to help this situation, Chellie spent two years looking for the organizations and foster homes that helped AIDS victims. But, because she had blonde hair and blue eyes, she was told, a representative from the U.S. Consulate she wouldn’t be allowed to go into the heart of some of the villages that were too dangerous for ex-patriots. Instead, she spoke with missionaries, domestics,

rangers, drivers, hotel personnel, and anyone else who could give her a better idea of what was truly going on. And for two years, Chellie prayed she wouldn't be murdered or raped (Every 6 minutes, someone is murdered or raped in Johannesburg, the highest crime capital in the world).

Chellie returned home, but she says, "I felt as if I had left half of myself in Africa." She had been back in the States for 6 months when Chellie had a dream of a little girl with dark deep-set eyes. She woke up and wrote a poem about this child and sent it to five of her closest friends. A good friend Alicia Thom, sent a reply and reminded Chellie of a photo book she had talked about doing 10 years prior. Chellie remembered her original idea— to create a book about American children with AIDS. When she proposed the idea to a publisher, it was turned down, and, discouraged, Chellie buried the idea. But now, she knew exactly what she needed to do. Return to Africa. Stay with the children orphaned by AIDS, record their amazing stories, change the image of AIDS, Africa and orphans by using the lens of her camera to focus on the beauty of each child and not on the disease.

One thing led to another, and soon enough, Chellie found herself publishing her own book, *African Journal: A Child's Continent*, which was released just this year. She believes that everything that has happened was meant to be. "The more I stop questioning things, the more doors open," explains Chellie, who will begin a book tour this coming June that will take her all over the world. Already, her book has been received with praise and support. She has been interviewed for radio and television, and has created a portfolio of newspaper and Internet articles. Chellie has also started the Q-Fund, a non-profit program that donates contributions to local organizations dedicated to improving the quality of life for African children through continued education, healthcare assistance, and shelter. Currently The Q Fund is building a Community School in Zambia to feed and educate the AIDS affected orphans. Chellie is scheduled to give a presentation to the Oldfields community in April.

Because of her connection to Oldfields, Chellie is planning a stop at the School on her book tour in September. She remembers her days at Oldfields well. "I loved Oldfields," says Chellie. "I loved Hawley Rogers and Dotty Hordubay. They were like my new parents, especially Dotty."

From Oldfields girl to a career in modeling, to owning her own successful alternative medicine practice, and now to The 'Q' Fund, Chellie has lived many exciting lives. Today, she is doing the distribution, PR, and signing of her books on her own. But, she reports, "I keep finding more energy." Chellie gains her inspiration from her children and from the orphans in Africa. Oldfields is proud to have Chellie among its family. Students, faculty, and Chellie's fellow alumnae support her efforts and gain inspiration from her work. If anyone is interested in supporting Chellie and The 'Q' Fund, please contact [info@qfund4aids.org](mailto:info@qfund4aids.org). <http://www.qfund4aids.org>.