

Portrait of Africa's plague

'A different lens'—A woman who grew up in Pinehurst documents the lives of African children in the time of AIDS.

By Matt Leclercq

Staff writer

PINEHURST, North Carolina — October 1, 2003 — Chellie Kew sped down a desert road through southeastern Africa, surrounded by miles of scorched emptiness in a race against the setting sun.

If night fell before she reached the village, she would be lost -- alone to sleep in the cold, dark wilderness in Namibia.

Suddenly the road curved and dropped out from beneath the truck. An impala caught her eye and she swerved. She lost control. The truck hit a boulder at about 60 mph, flipping over and over. She smashed her head against the window.

It was dark when she awoke. Her head was bleeding, and she struggled to concentrate. Her ribs were broken. Lying in the cold, she thought she heard leopards and lions outside the truck. No one would miss her for at least two days.

Should she start walking 8 miles to the nearest farm during the night, she risked animal attacks. Waiting until morning, though, meant a hike through stifling daytime heat with just three figs in her pocket and no water.

"It felt like God and the devil were tearing me in two," Kew said last week in Pinehurst, where she grew up. "One voice said, 'Surrender, it will be fine.' The other voice said, 'Don't you dare!'"

In all the time Kew had spent risking her life to document the ravages of AIDS, she never feared for her life. But on that night in March 2002, she thought she was going to die.

The world of southern Africa that Kew first met five years earlier had been one of luxury and ambivalence. Her husband's high-tech job brought the family to a gated community of villas and golf courses on the outskirts of Johannesburg, South Africa, where they planned to live for two years.

Within days of arriving, a gardener at their home died of AIDS. No one would talk about it. The disease, though affecting millions on the continent, was shrouded in superstition and secrets. The suffering seemed everywhere but somehow remained invisible.

“There’s such a stigma against anyone infected in the country,” Kew said. “They’re afraid not only of being ostracized, but even murdered.”

Kew, now 49, grew up in Pinehurst and spent part of her college years working as a fashion model in New York City. She met her husband, Kevin, and had two children. Frequent moves were a part of life for the family.

Over her two years in South Africa, Kew explored the dangerous squatters’ camps of Johannesburg and villages across the region. Few foreigners seemed interested in the AIDS epidemic, even as thousands of children were orphaned by the disease.

In 2000, after her family was once again living at home near Portland, Ore., Kew returned to Africa on her own. She carried her camera through poverty-stricken South Africa, through Botswana, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Her plan was to publish a book of pictures showing the children she met, all to raise money to build a school.

Focus on children

In some villages, all the adults were dead. Children clamored for her attention. She learned their names. Some days she spent hours crouching in shadows to snap candid pictures of life as few foreigners have ever seen, she said. Unlike the images commonly associated with AIDS -- gruesome scenes of bodies eaten away by the disease -- hers were of children smiling or lost in thought.

“I’m not a doctor, I don’t have a cure for AIDS,” Kew said. “I’m one person going in to try to show children in their real grace and innocence.”

She befriended a South African who once worked for the CIA. He protected her on excursions to villages. She met missionaries and community leaders. The work was dangerous. But she rarely thought about safety until the night she lay bruised, bleeding and semiconscious on a roadside in the desert.

Last chapter

Kew was on her way to photograph a nomadic tribe in Namibia for the last chapter of her book when she had the accident. After she spent most of the night in the wrecked truck, she set out for the farm 8 miles away. Her lips were so dry and swollen that she couldn’t lick them. An old baboon with yellow teeth followed her. She heard birds making the sounds they make when leopards are nearby. She prayed.

It was a turning point, she said. She was powerless to protect herself from the elements that could so easily kill her.

"I realized then -- I'm just a visitor," she said. "Now I know I'm walking the same footsteps of orphans. They're thirsty, they're hungry and they know no one cares to help."

Kew made it to the farm, and she spent weeks recovering. She returned to Oregon with her pictures and, in March, finished her book.

"African Journal: A Child's Continent" is a collection of her photographs, journal entries and poems. This summer, she said goodbye to her husband in Oregon and set out on a book tour across the country. She will sign copies at The Country Bookshop in downtown Southern Pines on Friday at 7:30 p.m.

Raising money

Donations and sales of her book and photographs have surpassed \$30,000, which is funding the construction and staffing of a school in Zambia. Her nonprofit organization, The Q Fund, has raised thousands more since 2000. She has plans for two more books about other regions of the world, which will help build more schools.

She expects to return to Zambia in November. Attitudes are changing about AIDS, she said, but much needs to be done. She calls herself a simple messenger who hopes her work will touch people's hearts.

"As human beings, we need to step up onto a higher level and look at things through a different lens," she said. "In particular with the children, Africans believe if you take their photograph, you've captured a tiny piece of their spirit. And so it's my hope that when people look at these photographs of these children, that part of their spirit will come out and touch the reader the same way these children touched me."

CHELLIE KEW

Age: 49

Hometown: Grew up in Pinehurst, now lives near Portland, Ore.

Work: Kew has spent most of the past three years documenting African children orphaned by AIDS and putting together a picture book, "African Journal: A Child's Continent," to pay for new schools. In 2000, she started a nonprofit organization called The Q Fund to raise money.

In town because: Kew has scheduled a book signing and exhibit of her photographs Friday at The Country Bookshop in downtown Southern Pines.