

“Granny Brigade” Seeks to Comfort HIV-Positive Children in South Africa

The group’s 78-year-old leader says she wants “to love and to rock and to hold” the children as only a grandmother can

Miriam Machovec said her heart broke last year as she watched a 12-year-old HIV-positive child in South Africa playing both mother and father to her nine younger siblings after their parents died of AIDS.

The 78-year-old grandmother said she returned to her Fort Lauderdale, Fla., home with a heavy prayer burden. During intercession for the children, she said God told her to organize a Granny Brigade to take grandmotherly love and care to the orphans infected with HIV and living in African refugee camps.

“I had to look in the dictionary to see what the word “brigade” meant,” Machovec said. “I knew it had a military meaning. I changed the definition a bit. The Granny Brigade is a group of grannies with a purpose to accomplish much.”

The widowed mother of three, grandmother of six, and great-grandmother of three is leading a group of 11 women, whose average age is 60, back to South Africa from April 29 to May 9 to minister to thousands of kids.

Book of Hope, a Pompano Beach, international ministry focused on reaching children with the gospel, is sending the Granny Brigade under its umbrella, but the women are paying their own way.

The grannies will visit an orphanage, a refugee camp and a small village to bring the love of God to hurting people. The brigade will also visit public schools to distribute Book of Hope's Scripture books to schoolchildren at the request of the local government. Book of Hope books contain all four Gospels.

"We can't cure AIDS, but we can hold and rock and love the children of the world that have AIDS, as only a grandmother can do. And we will," said Machovec, a longtime member of Christian Life Center, an Assemblies of God congregation in Fort Lauderdale. "We are going to hold them and love them and tell them grandma stories."

While the Iowa native enjoys rollerblading with her grandkids, Machovec is not content to live a leisurely life in the warm South Florida climate when so many children are suffering in remote South African villages. Even while she is on the home front, Machovec has the work of the ministry on her mind.

This out-of-the-ordinary near octogenarian has been a full-time volunteer with Book of Hope since 1988. Before taking the gospel to South Africa last year, Machovec made two trips to Siberia, two trips to Russia, and individual trips to Poland, Ukraine, Lithuania and the Dominican Republic. But God has put South Africa's children on her heart.

"How easy it is for me to hold my own healthy grandchildren and so many other children in my life—and give them the love they need," Machovec said. "But how much more do these dying children need the human touch and genuine love in their lives, which will be cut short by AIDS?"

Book of Hope executive director Rob Hoskins said he immediately embraced what he believed was an inspired initiative and set out to help the can-do granny make the vision a reality.

“The love that the grandmas are going to provide to those desperately needy kids will be powerful,” Hoskins said. “Miriam is my hero. I wish every grandma in America had her spirit and vision. She always says to me time after time that a vision without action is just a dream.”

Hoskins still remembers overhearing Machovec making calls to other grannies across the country in what he calls her “no-nonsense Iowa way” and telling them, “You’ve got to come with me to South Africa!”

One of the women she called was Arlene Allen, national director of Women’s Ministries for the Assemblies of God. Allen rallied behind her, helping her recruit willing women.

“The Granny Brigade is right up my alley,” Allen said. “I am 60 years old and have two wonderful grandkids. I am excited about the work we will be doing to train older siblings how to take care of their little brothers and sisters whose parents died of AIDS.”

Machovec believes the Granny Brigade will make additional trips to South Africa. She says the Lord knows how old she is, and she’s depending on Him to help her carry out this mandate.

“If He tells me to train someone else, then I would be happy to do that,” she said. “So far no one has shown up to lead the Granny Brigade into South Africa.”

Jennifer LeClaire