

'Queen of Las Vegas' Entertainer, Lola Falana, Offers Hope to Orphans

The former showgirl and protégée of Frank Sinatra's is part of a relief agency that is helping African children

Lola Falana's 59th birthday is one she will never forget. She was awakened around 6 a.m. when her mother called, telling her to turn on the television. Two planes had hit the towers of the World Trade Center, and the terrorist attack that came to be known as 9/11 had changed America.

On the first anniversary of the attack, Falana, a Las Vegas entertainer-turned- evangelist, told Charisma she believed 9/11 was a wake-up call to the nation but that, as a country, "we still don't get it."

"Something changed America, but America has not changed," Falana said. "That's what worries me—we have to do the changing."

Since 9/11, Falana has become the spokeswoman for Save Sub-Saharan Orphans (SSSO), a nonprofit organization working to build orphanages and provide food and medicine for the 13 million African children orphaned by AIDS.

"There's so much to be done, and you would think that all the nations of the world would help do this," Falana said. "God is looking at America, [which] He's allowed to be this great power, [to] see what we give in return to the weakest."

SSSO President Nelson Miruka, a 32-year-old graduate student at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln (UNL), said the number of AIDS orphans has doubled in many African countries in just the last two years. He plans to build an orphanage dedicated to Falana in his native Kenya.

Personal experience is part of his motivation. Miruka has buried several of his own relatives, including two sisters who together left behind seven children. He returned to his village to find most of his peers dead. Many of them had left small children orphaned.

"Africa is going back to the pre-Industrial period," he said. "Most African nations are losing skilled labor.

"Imagine the child," he added, referring to nations where adults cannot find food. "I don't really know what to do. I've cried before boards. I prayed yesterday, 'God, can you drop me hope?'"

Hope has come, at least in part, in the form of a former showgirl who grew weary of the business at the height of her career. A protégée of Sammy Davis Jr.'s and Frank Sinatra's, Falana was the undisputed "Queen of Las Vegas" in the 1970s and 1980s and a leading black sex-symbol. But by 1975 she had told God she had made a mistake and felt "miserable."

For four years she endured multiple abdominal surgeries, then was diagnosed with pancreatitis, which doctors believed would kill her.

"I prayed, and I asked You let me live one more will live the rest of my life to Your glory, and I will serve You all my

days," she said.

Falana said she awoke the next morning and knew she had to keep her word to God. "My heart wanted to do that anyway," she added.

Since then, she has fought multiple sclerosis, and although she believes God healed her, she still experiences fatigue, which limits her ability to travel and speak. A Roman Catholic who considers herself an evangelist, Falana spends much of her time in Las Vegas seeking ways to minister by radio or via the Internet. And she lends her voice to millions of African children who can't speak for themselves.

"They [SSSO] just do what they can, and all [Miruka] had was \$6,000 to build a school," she said. "They built that so at least the ones who did not have AIDS could get an education. They could grow up and defend their country."

SSSO board member Michael Combs, a UNL political science professor and pastor of Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Lincoln, said Christians have a responsibility to help Africa's orphans. He said many African Americans in particular have been hesitant to get involved because they haven't known of an organized effort that they could partner with.

"By the creation of the organization, Nelson has given us an organization that we can lend money help give Africa a voice," Combs said. He added that SSSO has a track record—building an orphanage in Uganda, providing uniforms in Zimbabwe and beds and bedding in Cameroon, and supplying food in Sudan, Sierra Leone and Ghana.

“You can’t save the you can save a child,” adds SSSO board member Norman Leach. “You can ask yourself, ‘What one thing can I do?’”

-Adrienne S. Gaines