

African Children's Choir Founder: 'With God Nothing Is Impossible'

African Children's Choir founder Ray Barnett, who currently lives in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, had one of the quietest years of his life in 2020 due to worldwide travel restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A typical year for Barnett, now 83, and affectionately known by many as "Daddy Ray," would usually involve him travelling across the globe coordinating aid efforts in war zones or negotiating the release of hostages and imprisoned Christians.

Or he would spend much of his time with the African Children's Choir taking them to concerts in places like the White House and rubbing shoulders with an array of stars they have performed with like Paul McCartney, Mariah Carey or even working on a Christmas album with Annie Lennox.

I've known Barnett since I was a child when he worked with my father, Dan Wooding, on a book called *Uganda Holocaust*.

So it was very special to catch up with him recently to find out how he was first inspired to launch the choir 36 years ago:

"I was walking in a park in Vancouver with two of my friends who were working with me at the time. It was a time of great famine in Africa, and all we could see were these emaciated children. I was discussing that this is how the world saw African children, with no hope. I told them we needed to do something to bring about change in how the Western world sees the African child by establishing a choir.

"They thought that was absolutely impossible at the time. How

would we get passports and visas, for a start? But we prayed through it, and through a series of miracles we got everything we needed, and the first choir came on a tour of Canada. They've been touring the world ever since all those years, bringing hope and healing to countless lives."

Every time someone tells Barnett something is impossible, his response is always, "Don't tell me it can't be done," which is the title of his recently published biography.

The book tells the heartbreaking story of how as a young boy he struggled to find his way through immense poverty, family secrecy, learning difficulties and wartime suffering that gripped his life in Northern Ireland.

But it was his dramatic conversion as a young teenager that turned his life around:

"When I became a Christian at the age of 13, I was inspired by the ministry of David Livingstone. But the first time I attempted to preach, I fainted. The next day I read in the Bible that with God nothing is impossible. So, I never let anything stop me from pursuing my dream to help others because I always believed God could do anything. I want to encourage people through this book that with prayer and action they can accomplish anything in their life."

The book begins in a very tense moment in Barnett's life in 1987 when he was meeting with a notorious leader of Hezbollah while seeking to negotiate the release of hostages in Lebanon.

This dangerous work was part of Barnett's Christian human rights organization he established in 1972 called Friends in the West. Through this ministry he was able to coordinate many vital aid missions and secure the release of countless persecuted and imprisoned believers throughout the Middle East, Eastern Europe and Africa.

Just over a decade later, after launching Friends in the West,

Barnett had no idea of the impact of his decision to then pioneer the African Children's Choir. Through their Music for Life initiative they have now educated over 52,000 children in seven African countries. And hundreds of thousands of lives have been impacted by Music for Life's international relief and development programs over the last 30 years.

Now in his 80s, Barnett reflects on the legacy of his many years of ministry, particularly for the generations of African children:

"There's a place in the concert where the children get to say what they want to be when they grow up, and I think everything they've ever said they wanted to be when they grew up has actually happened.

"Many of those founding choir members are now doing great work across Africa and beyond as doctors, lawyers, teachers and UN workers. I hope my story will inspire many more African children to fulfil their God-given potential and never give up on their dreams.

"These children are a source of joy, and they are ministering in all kinds of places, not only in Africa but all over the world. And they have very moving testimonies of God's miracles not only for them but generally in the villages where they come from all around. You know their presence in the choir has changed the lives of people in their villages. And it's been a thing that God ordained to bring attention to the potential of the African child."

To find out how you can contribute to the current work of the African Children's Choir go to: African Children's Choir.
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