

2005

South African Orphans Make Unlikely Journey to Brooklyn

The New York Times

May 7, 2005

Anahad O'Connor

The New York Times



Six orphans from South Africa performed traditional Zulu songs on Thursday in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, to raise money for a new orphanage. Photo by Andrew Testar

The six African orphans had traveled more than 8,000 miles to be there. Shortly after 7 p.m., they graced the makeshift stage, looking out at the crowd in the backyard of a brownstone in affluent Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

For the next 30 minutes, they did not disappoint their spellbound audience, working them up with a half-dozen a cappella versions of traditional Zulu songs.

The children, whose home is a cargo container in South Africa, performed for what seemed to be an unlikely crowd in this neighborhood of expensive town houses and boutique restaurants. But they had been invited there to strut and croon Thursday night by a group of people who were struck by their simple dream: to raise money for a new orphanage in their poverty-stricken village.

The young musicians, all girls 8 to 14 years old, arrived in New York on April 28. They were here for a week with the help of local charities and provided with a backyard stage - and an audience of some wealthy donors - by Dan Zanes, who was in the rock band the Del Fuegos and is now a children's musician.

They came from a province in South Africa called KwaZulu-Natal, where they lived in an orphanage with about 60 other children; most of their parents had died of AIDS. Last January, they were displaced when a fire destroyed their orphanage. About 25 of them, with nowhere to go, spotted the cargo hold of an old truck nearby and made it their home.

"We slept there because we didn't know what else to do," said Yilinas Mqadi, 14, the oldest of the six girls who came to New York.

The girls might never have left the container, had it not been for a chain of events that began in Queens. In May last year, an 11-year-old poet and gifted student in Sunnyside, Hallie Geier, was struck and killed by a car while she was walking her dog. As her parents were sifting through her belongings, they discovered that Hallie had saved \$398 of her lunch money to help African children affected by AIDS.



Yilnasi Mqadi, 14, lives with two dozen other orphans in a cargo container in South Africa because a fire destroyed their orphanage. Photo by Andrew Testar

That led the Geiers to call the charity Keep a Child Alive, which provides medicine to parents and their children struggling with AIDS in Africa. Based in Brooklyn, it is run by Leigh Blake, a friend of Mr. Zanes. She told the Geiers about the orphans.

When the Geiers heard that some of the children were in a choir and had put together a CD with help from a television producer to raise money, they paired up with Keep a Child Alive to cover the \$15,000 needed for them to travel here.

"It was just unbelievable, this very genuine tragedy that seemed fixable," said Ted Geier, who formed a foundation in honor of his daughter and called it Love Hallie. "Every once in a while you just have to throw out an outlandish idea like this and see if it sticks."

This one stuck. Since the girls arrived, they have moved in some prominent circles, picking up support and donations. Last Saturday, they sang at the TriBeCa Film Festival, where they collected \$17,000 from the audience, including a check for \$10,000 from Jane Rosenthal, a festival founder.

Three days later they sang for Alicia Keys at a studio in Midtown. "It was sad that we had to leave other children behind to come here," said Yilnasi, the oldest singer. "But we thought we could still do it."

On Thursday night the girls hooked up with Mr. Zanes and his eclectic group of friends in Cobble Hill. About 50 colleagues, neighbors and fans of Mr. Zanes converged on the brownstone, huddling in his backyard for 30 minutes as the six girls broke into song. By the time the crowd had cleared, \$10,000 in donations had poured in.

"One reason Leigh asked me to help out is that I have an audience of mostly families," Mr. Zanes said. "And if you're a parent, you can begin to comprehend the tragedy of this situation, where kids are losing their parents, and families are being torn apart by AIDS."

The Geier and Zanes families are among those who have opened their homes to the children.

The girls are scheduled to fly back to South Africa tomorrow. Until their orphanage is rebuilt, possibly in October, Mr. Geier said, they will be living in their cargo container. Mr. Zanes, meanwhile, said that as much as his audience on Thursday night had given, they had also taken away.

"I know that a lot of families went home that night and had discussions they never had before regarding AIDS, Africa, and what's going on in the rest of the world," he said.

Correction Monday, May 9, 2005

An article on Saturday about a group of South African children who traveled to New York to raise money to rebuild their fire-ravaged orphanage gave an incorrect date in some copies for their Brooklyn performance of traditional Zulu songs. It was Thursday, not the previous week.