

The Agape Choir and a Gift That Keeps Giving
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SCOTT SIMON, host:

Every year a group called Keep a Child Alive hosts a benefit concert called the Black Ball. The concert raises money to fight AIDS around the world. One of the stars of last year's concert was the Agape Choir, a group of AIDS orphans from Durban, South Africa. As Jocelyn Frank reports on their trip to New York, the choir connected with the family of a little girl whose generosity inspired a circle of giving.

JOCELYN FRANK: In Durban, South Africa, in the beginning of 2005, the children's choir of the Agape Orphanage was just about done recording their first CD.

(Soundbite of music)

FRANK: Before they could celebrate, though, a fire severely damaged their orphanage and left the 60 children homeless. As the kids scrambled to find makeshift shelter, their CD found its way to the right set of ears and the Keep a Child Alive Foundation invited a handful of the children to New York City.

On a quieter street in Queens on the middle of the block there's an unassuming house. But when you walk up its three cement steps, and open the door to the mud room, you find...

(Soundbite of music)

FRANK: ...ten aspiring musicians, all under 16, armed with shiny new harmonicas. They hop over well-worn couches, drag and dodge squeaky wood dining room chairs, and dance around the kitchen to the music they create. Their host dad, Ted Geier, is beaming.

Mr. TED GEIER (Host dad): There is just an extraordinary amount of love bouncing around our house all the time.

FRANK: When Keep a Child Alive contacted the Geier family to host the Agape Choir, they felt drawn to help, in large part because of their daughter Hallie. In the spring of 2004, the Geier's youngest daughter was just 11-years-old when she was killed, struck by a car in front of her house. After the family came home from the hospital, Ted found something unexpected.

Mr. GEIER: Hallie's kindergarten notebook was for some reason sitting on the piano right by the door when you walk in, and we opened the book and in the very first page it says in big black letters, people be nice to each other, love Hallie.

FRANK: It turns out from kindergarten forward, Hallie Geier was committed to community service. But not until she died did her parents realize how dedicated she really was. They discovered that Hallie had saved nearly \$400 of her own money to donate to fight AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa. The Geier's decided to set up a nonprofit organization inspired by Hallie's goals. They called the group Love Hallie. It works to engage children to help other children through community service. And they decided that in Hallie's memory, their family would help sub-Saharan Africa directly in their living room.

(Soundbite of children)

FRANK: The 10 Agape kids know all about Hallie. Yilnasi is the oldest member of the choir. She's a tall, confident 15-year-old girl with a coffee complexion and fluffy hair. When the memory of Hallie slips

into the room, Yilinas's great sense of timing seems to fall into place. One day she called the choir together to sing a special song just for Hallie. It was called, "Sleep, Our Fallen Hero, and Rest."

(Soundbite of song, "Sleep, Our Fallen Hero, and Rest")

AGAPE CHOIR: (Singing in foreign language)

FRANK: It was finally the choir's big night. The Keep a Child Alive Black Ball fundraiser in New York. Backstage, following the twists of the dull gray hallway, lined with rejected equipment and hollow instrument cases, you find a large corner dressing room, hot bright bulbs circle the mirrors and add to the energy already inside. Yilinas was excited, but the strain of two months of smaller performances was taking a toll on her voice.

Ms. YILINASI MQADI (Agape Choir): Singing (unintelligible) we like singing because it's like an advantage to us. It helps us. It's the only thing we have, so even though it's tiring - and it is really, really tiring - we like it.

(Soundbite of music)

FRANK: The Black Ball AIDS benefit had their red carpet out. The Agape Choir had a starring role, but they had to share the spotlight with some other perhaps better known performers.

Mr. PAUL SIMON (Musician): (Singing) Somebody sing. Somebody sing, hello, hello, hello.

AGAPE CHOIR: (Singing) Hello, hello, hello.

Mr. SIMON: (Singing) Somebody sing. Somebody cry.

AGAPE CHOIR: (Singing) Why, why, why.

FRANK: They collaborated with Paul Simon, Alicia Keys and Usher, among others. And in one evening the black tie fundraiser collected a million dollars.

AGAPE CHOIR: (Singing in foreign Language)

FRANK: Since the Black Ball, the children of Agape have returned to South Africa. With the help of the money they raised singing, they watched the burnt ruins of their home cleared away and replaced with a new, modern facility. In fact, Yilinas say the choir was so successful that they decided to do something additional with the money they raised. It's in the spirit of what Hallie Geier of New York began.

Ms. MQADI: Hallie built like a foundation for us that we can carry on building; that's how we see it. Like as children we decided that maybe we should also help other children like donate ten percent of the money that we raised for our orphanage (unintelligible) to give to the Cachina children victims, because they're suffering.

FRANK: Thousands of hours, millions of dollars and ten harmonicas later, children are helping children from the United States to sub-Saharan Africa and back again. For NPR News, I'm Jocelyn Frank.

AGAPE CHOIR: (Singing in foreign language).