

Helping the orphans of AIDS victims
The Oakville Beaver
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The face of Northern Tanzania's HIV/AIDS pandemic is in its orphans.

That's what Bronte native Kristy Vanderplas has discovered while working at a hospital in the Kilimanjaro region as an HIV/AIDS Project Manager for Canada Africa Community Health Alliance (CACHA).

"There are so many children who have been left without parents or are currently caring for sick parents and are missing out on what they need for survival, growth and development," said Vanderplas, 29, who has been working in Tanzania just over a month. "Most children are living with grandparents, extended family or in child-headed households."

In Tanzania, where an estimated nine per cent of the population is HIV positive or living with AIDS, there are more than two million orphans, many of them orphaned by the pandemic.

"Unfortunately," Vanderplas says, "this number will continue to climb."

In recognition of World Aids Day today - a yearly event that mobilizes people worldwide to unite in the fight against HIV and AIDS - The Oakville Beaver has been in e-mail correspondence with Vanderplas to find out more about the work she's doing and to shed light on the pandemic in Tanzania.

With an honours degree in BioMedical Sciences from Guelph University under her belt, Vanderplas is on this volunteer internship until April as part of her program in International Project Management at Humber College.

It's through Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), which works with partners around the world to reduce poverty, support sustainable development in developing countries and to offer humanitarian assistance in areas of need. CIDA provides the money to the CACHA, an Ottawa-based ngo, to send volunteers to Tanzania.

Vanderplas is currently working with local partners to create a sustainable orphan support program in Tanzania in response to the increasing number of children orphaned by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

"To see the situation that some of the vulnerable children live in is quite difficult," she said. "Some of the children are also HIV positive, which is a whole new set of challenges for them to deal with. Many of the children live with elderly relatives, who will not be around much longer themselves. To see a child without support (both economic and psychosocial) of parents is heartbreaking."

While the HIV/AIDS pandemic is an everyday part of life in Tanzania, in the northern rural areas where Vanderplas is working, many won't admit they're affected because they're afraid of negative reactions from the community.

"Overcoming the stigma," says Vanderplas, "is one of the huge issues."

"I have also heard that often when people do pass away from AIDS, it is said that they have passed away from tuberculosis or something other than AIDS," she adds, which points to the fact that discussion and acceptance of AIDS is limited.

Today - for World Aids Day - Vanderplas will be assisting in running a program out of Kilema Hospital, which is on Mt. Kilimanjaro in the Moshi Rural District.

Since the late 1990s, the hospital has been inviting orphans on the first Friday of every month to come to the hospital to receive things like medical attention, tea and bread and a package of various foodstuffs, including sugar, rice, maize and beans to take home with them.

On Nov. 3, more than 400 orphans made the walk from their villages, said Vanderplas.

"This number increases every month, and we expect even more on World AIDS Day," she added.

World AIDS Day at the hospital will also feature a series of speakers, performances and a lunch. They're expecting to draw more than 600 people.

While performances and free lunches for all don't happen every day at Kilema Hospital, there are certainly no typical days at the hospital, or in Tanzania in general.

"There may or may not be power, a meeting may or may not happen, a trip to town that should take two hours may take six, there may be no one at the market because of rain, the vehicle may break down," said Vanderplas. "You get the picture."

Each day, though, she works towards building what's currently called the Kilema Orphan and Vulnerable Children Support Program.

"We aim to create a program that is cost-effective and sustainable," she said, adding the basics of the program will include providing food, clothes, bedding, school-related expenses, shelter and psychosocial support to children who need it.

They'll be starting with the 60 most vulnerable children in the area, Vanderplas said, "and expanding from there."

"We hope that this support will lead to giving these children a chance at becoming productive members of their communities," she said. "Part of the program is to empower the local community to run the program."

And when it comes to community support, there's nothing lacking there. It's the funding that's hard to come by.

"The community mobilization here is incredible. People are organized and willing to help," said Vanderplas, who noted many volunteers have formed groups to help people in their communities living with AIDS, including one organization that raises pigs to sell for money to fund hospital visits and check-ups.

Other volunteer groups focus on promoting AIDS education in the community.

"These groups have formed out of necessity and the number of people that work tirelessly with no pay is astounding," said Vanderplas. "It is these people and their efforts that have had a real impact on me.

"I think that is why the lack of action globally on the AIDS issue is so striking, those who have the means are doing very little - again not everyone, there certainly are notable exceptions - but those with the least seem to me to be doing the most."

To get involved or to find out more about the Canada-Africa Community Health Alliance, visit www.cacha.ca.

Updates on the orphan program Vanderplas is working towards will be available on the site soon.

She also invites anyone with questions about the program to contact her at krist.vanderplas@gmail.com.

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