

AFRICAN CHILDREN'S CHOIR™

For more than 2 decades, Ray Barnett has rescued African children from starvation, war, and diseases such as HIV/AIDS. This is the story of how he helps orphaned children with the African Children's Choir™.

Friends in the West

Mr Barnett was born in Ulster. His parents died when he was a child, and he was raised in a foster family. In his late teens he traveled to Canada to study theology. His early career was dedicated to organizing religious conferences. Through his affiliation with Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, Mr Barnett founded Friends in the West (FITW) in 1974. Mr Barnett and FITW organized prayer campaigns, and lobbied national and international elected representatives and government officials to plead the cause of persecuted individuals and gain their release from prison.

Reaching Out to Uganda

In the aftermath of Idi Amin's rule in Uganda, Mr Barnett left his family and friends in Canada to gath-

er eyewitness accounts for a book he co-wrote.

In 1979 in Kampala, Uganda's capital city, Mr Barnett heard a report from the German Red Cross that 150,000 orphaned children were on the brink of death from starvation. This story resonated with Mr Barnett because he was himself an orphan. He and his team went to the Luwero region to see if FITW could provide assistance.

Mr Barnett walked across Luwero talking to eyewitnesses and recording their stories. According to his website, he recalled, "The real horror for me came when I was taken out to where government forces were holding refugees in a makeshift camp for what they termed 'processing'."

Recalling an experience from a prior visit to Kampala, Mr Barnett remembered the beautiful singing he had heard while visiting a local church, and an idea crystallized when he and a colleague gave a ride to a boy. Mr Barnett explained "We gave a lift to a very small boy and he sang all the way in the vehicle. My friend recorded it and we played that for weeks; we got a lot of pleasure from that."

This orphaned boy's unbroken, joyful singing during



Girl singing in concert. Photo courtesy of African Children's Choir™.

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Boys singing in concert. Photo courtesy of African Children's Choir™.

the ride inspired Mr Barnett to consider how Westerners might respond if they heard orphan children singing. Mr Barnett believed the children could effectively communicate the circumstances of their brothers and sisters back in Uganda.

THE BIRTH OF THE AFRICAN CHILDREN'S CHOIR™ AND MUSIC FOR LIFE

The notion of taking children out of war-torn Uganda to sing in the west initially sounded absurd. Mr Barnett discussed the idea with then Prime Minister Eriyasi Otema Allimadi and the children's guardians, who all agreed. With the assistance of a small group of Canadian volunteers, Mr Barnett's concept began to become real.

The 500 children who auditioned for the choir included many of the orphans Mr Barnett met when he visited the Luwero region. Over the next several months, 30 children chosen for the choir rehearsed for their concert debut.

Meanwhile, the volunteers worked long hours to assemble travel documents for the orphans and displaced children. The children's passports and visas in hand, FITW flew the African Children's Choir™ to Canada where they gave their first concert in the fall of 1984 in Vancouver, British Columbia. As Mr Barnett had predicted, the children "immediately

stole the hearts of everyone they met." By the end of the year, the choir had raised sufficient funds to open the Makerere Children's Home in Kampala.

Because of one man's vision and the generosity of humans who heard their songs, the children returned to Uganda where they continued their education and knew the love and comfort of being well cared for. Out of Mr Barnett's shared ride with a small boy, hearing his song, the African Children's Choir™ was born. Its mission is "Helping Africa's most vulnerable children today, so they can help Africa tomorrow."

Originally, Mr Barnett's goal was to start a choir only; however he soon recognized that the ongoing crisis in Africa warranted more. With donations and funds raised by the choir, educational opportunities were extended beyond the choir's members to children in Uganda through *Music For Life*, the choir's parent organization. A second choir was commissioned in 1985, and to date, 29 choirs have toured around the world and brought educational opportunities to thousands of Africa's children.

A CLOSER LOOK: WHO WERE THESE CHILDREN?

Orphaned children rescued by Mr Barnett and FITW in the 1985 choir included Dr Robert Kalyesbula, Mr

AFRICAN CHILDREN'S CHOIR™

Founder & President

Ray Barnett



As Founder and President of the African Children's Choir™, Ray Barnett serves as the visionary and innovation for the work of the Choir, raising funds to help thousands of destitute children receive an education and hope.

Under his leadership, the Choir has gained international recognition, performing before the British House of Commons and the Pentagon, and appearing at some of the world's most prestigious halls, including The Royal Albert Hall, The London Palladium, The International Club of Berlin and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels.

Through his work with the Choir, Ray Barnett has raised millions of dollars to establish numerous schools throughout Africa that serve children who would otherwise have no chance at an education. He has also been able to raise significant money for emergency relief and development programs in the **Sudan** and **Rwanda**. Currently he is working to help children in **South Africa** that have been orphaned by AIDS and who are battling starvation and disease.

Screen shot from <http://www.africanschildrenschoir.org>.

Moses Kalyesbula and Mrs Barbara Kayaga.

During the period of persecution and civil war that Mr Barnett was researching when he and his team traveled to Uganda, government soldiers stormed the Luwero village of Dr Kalyesbula, who was 9 years old. He and his siblings lost sight of their parents, and never saw them again. The children tried



Photo courtesy of African Children's Choir™.



Screen shot from <http://www.africanschildrenschoir.org>.

to find their way to an aunt's house in Kampala. Not knowing which direction to take, the children's journey stretched from weeks to months. Day after day, they scavenged for food. As they traveled, they passed corpses of mothers and children who had been slaughtered by government forces or who had died from starvation or disease. Malnourishment and malaria ended the lives of Dr Kalyesbula's 2 little sisters who he and his brothers buried. Eventually, the boys reached their aunt's home in Kampala. Their aunt welcomed them into her home, but could not keep them because she was the sole provider for her 3 children, 2 sisters, and her parents.

Soon after Dr Kalyesbula and his brother Mr Moses Kalyesbula arrived in Kampala, a pastor introduced them to the choir leaders, and both boys were selected for the second choir. After returning from their choir tour, the brothers continued their education in Uganda. Fully supported financially by *Music for Life*, they graduated from Makerere University. Mr Moses Kalyesbula is now a civil engineer in Kampala, Dr Kalyesbula is on the faculty of the Department of Internal Medicine at Makerere University in Kampala after medical studies and post-graduate training in HIV/AIDS management. Dr Kalyesbula wants "to reach out to as many orphans and vulnerable children as possible to provide them with a future and a hope."

For 5-year old orphan, Mrs Barbara Kayaga, the choir gave love. Ugandan soldiers gunned down her father, a pastor, when her mother was 8 months pregnant. Her mother died when Mrs Kayaga was 2 months old. Mrs Kayaga graduated from Makerere University in 2005, with a diploma in Music, Dance and Drama and is now a director with the choir. She recalls her early days, "When we were on stage and people sometimes cried after [our] singing, I

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thought, 'What's the big deal? Why are they crying?' because I never knew how important [was] the message that I carried." Barbara was amazed at the reception of host families: "...people we had never seen before would be so kind and open their homes and welcome us as family members. It was a big contrast because our country was experiencing war. It was a breath of heaven seeing people love you so much when you don't feel you deserve to be loved." Mr Barnett has said, "We didn't know it when we started [the choir], but psychologists told us that

music is one of the best therapies; it gave them [the children] expression. They also respond to love; they get a lot of love. I think of them as a national treasure."

Two decades of caring

In addition to the educational and leadership programs initially launched in Uganda in 1985, the choir's parent organization, *Music For Life*, has established 3 primary schools, 3 literacy schools, an outreach academy, and a health clinic in this country. The Fields of Life Livestock and Agricultural Farm, the Fields of Life Primary School, and the Fields of Life Literacy School have risen from the fields where Mr Barnett initially met Uganda's orphans.

Music For Life has instituted educational and leadership training operations in Sudan, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya. Scholarships to trade schools, universities, and technical schools have been awarded, providing a means for children to extend their education. *Music For Life* programs supported nearly 7,000 children throughout Africa in 2005. In Uganda, 56 former choir members are in universities and technical schools.

nKomazi in South Africa

Three choirs have been touring the United States during 2006-7. The choristers are all Ugandan children between 7 and 12, all have lost parents to civil war, HIV/AIDS, famine, or poverty. The choirs aim to bring the plight of Africa's orphans to the rest of the world, with a current focus on thousands of children who have lost their parents to HIV/AIDS in the nKomazi region of South Africa. According to the African Children's Choir™ website, HIV/AIDS prevalence in nKomazi is among the highest in the world, with more than half the humans in this region under the age of 19. The African Children's Choir™ aims to raise awareness and funds to care for and educate these orphans.

One man, one song

Hope has replaced despair in the lives of thousands of Africa's youngest humans because one man, after hearing one song, believed he could make a difference. Through the songs of the children, and the support of thousands around the world, Mr Barnett believes that "by continuing to work together to provide an education and hope for children throughout Africa, we can change the future of an entire continent, one child at a time."

By JC Scherz

South Africa

Nkomazi children's lives uplifted after exposé on poverty

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Jo-Anne Smetherham

A year ago they were destitute orphans in the Aids-ravaged Nkomazi region of Mpumalanga. Today the 25 children are well fed, well educated and happy - and are a highly trained choir that is soon to perform around the world to raise money for their education and for the communities from which they come.

Ray Barnett, head of Music for Life, visited the Nkomazi region 15 months ago after reading the Cape Times's first exposé of conditions in the Nkomazi region.

The report related how Aids was wiping out villages.

In a series of reports this week, the Cape Times has disclosed that conditions have worsened and that the area has an estimated 6 000 orphans.

Music for Life runs 26 African Children's Choirs in East African countries.

Last year, the organisation spent several months auditioning children in the Nkomazi region and working with communities to gain their trust, then formed the first South African children's choir.

A second Nkomazi choir is to be formed soon.

The choirs perform around the world to raise awareness - and

Screen shot from

<http://www.capetimes.co.za>.