

# “No One Is Alone: Africa Rises Against AIDS”

## “The Grandmother’s Story”

Editor’s note: (1) Ruth Engo-Tjega’s contemporary story of “Grandmother” who survives the death of her eleven children to AIDS, bearing her loss with courage and faith in the future of the youngest generation, has a remarkable resonance. It brings to mind the strength and character of a fictional woman who survived her loss of children to the medieval plague in Norway in Sigrid Undset’s great novel *Kristin Lavransdatter*. The novel, written in the early 1920’s must have found echoes in the experience of mothers after the first World War. Undset won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1928. (1) INTERNATIONAL WOMEN SPEAK: The Emergence of Women’s Global Leadership, Women speak series N°3, Alta Vista Press Davis, CA USA - 2000

In a recent visit on the continent, I witnessed an unfolding tragedy: the death of the eleventh adult child of a strong African woman. It will be known as the “Grandmother’s Story” to protect the family against the stigma. The news of the death of this important man had spread throughout the country. On the date of the funeral, I travelled with my family friends. When we reached the village, we immediately went to the tent where the important man’s body lay in state, and joined in the traditional cry and greeting of widows and other close family members. After some time, we were led outside the main tent, to allow new visitors to go through the same process. It took me some time to get out of the main tent because I had yet not greeted the mother of the important man. After leaving the room, I sat nearby, waiting for the next occasion to go back in to greet her. While I was sitting outside, I saw an elderly woman, well dressed and visibly giving instructions on the other side of the compound to a group of women who were actively cooking. I recognized grandmother in this elderly woman and ran to her. As we embraced, I said, Grandma, I worry about you, now that your sole support is gone. Without saying a word, she took my hand and led me under a big tree in the middle of the compound, where a number of graves could be seen. She said: I gave birth to 11 children. I will bury the last one today. She continued saying: I stopped crying the week I had to bury five because of this epidemic. After a few minutes of silence during which I felt completely inadequate, she extended her hand again; but this time, she was showing me a group of young children at play. Then she said: Our ancestors sent me in this world with a clear mission which was to bear and bury 11 children. Today I will start my own mission, which is to ensure that what happened to my children will never happen to my grand children. With that hope and strength we embraced again. I left with my own determination, that my little light will shine as long as I live.

African Action on AIDS was created at the end of 1990 by a group of people who believe with grandmother that those who die should die in peace, fully aware that they are leaving behind the strength of a caring world where no one is alone. It was in the spirit of solidarity with the children like the one grandmother had to raise that African Action on AIDS was created,

to promote and support the laudable actions initiated either by individuals or communities in the fight against AIDS and its debilitating effects. Since its inception, AAA has sponsored the education of numerous orphans of AIDS victims, who might have dropped out of school. The first five AAA – sponsored students are enrolled since 1997 in National Teachers' College, the College of Commerce and Makerere University in Uganda. We are proud to announce that since 1992, more than 600 students have successfully completed six years of schooling in Benin, Cameroon, Rwanda, Sierra-Leone, Uganda, Tanzania, Zimbabwe. We have more than surpassed our initial goal of sponsoring the education of 200 teenage orphans by year 2000. During the next academic year 1999-2000, we are committed to sponsoring 650 children.

An important part of AAA activities is AIDS prevention, and activities to keep Africa's youth off the streets. This part of the project is undertaken through the establishment of Centres of Excellence, where young people are trained to know and protect their body, and where they engage in other healthy activities. Each centre has a library, sometimes with computers. These centres are located in Benin, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mali, Tanzania, Sierra-Leone, South-Africa and we intend, with your support, to create more.

AAA has many supporters who give their time, money, computers and mostly love and hope. Some of them are in this room and must be recognized:

\* The organizers of this event: Mariama Djibo, Nana Fosu Randall, George Lamptey, Mariama Darboe Diop, Herta Kaschitz, Nguru Karugu, Rose Arungu Olende, Marie Louise