

## *Woman readies to climb Mount Kilimanjaro to raise funds for grandmothers in Africa*

(West Carleton EMC, June 23, 2006)

A Dunrobin woman will be taking her love for family to new heights in October.

Gisele Mansfield has set the goal of climbing Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania, Africa to celebrate her 55th birthday and raise funds to fight HIV/AIDS in memory of her brother who succumbed to the disease in 1995.

Michel Lalonde faced many challenges upon being diagnosed with AIDS and Mansfield says it was heart-breaking to watch him struggle as the disease spread to his lymph nodes, taking over his entire body.

However, she says his biggest source of pain was feeling that he couldn't tell his family.

"People don't like to talk about AIDS," says Mansfield. "He was even reluctant to get medical help because of the way people responded to him."

She describes Lalonde as a generous, kind man who loved to have fun. It was utterly devastating for Mansfield to watch her brother's health deteriorate in the final months of his life.

"He couldn't eat and his mouth was so full of sores that he could barely drink water," she says. "He couldn't even stand us touching him because he was in such pain and there was nothing we could do to ease that pain."

Mansfield chokes back tears as she speaks about her brother's life and the many challenges he faced.

"His whole life was so different and he was so afraid of being rejected," she says. "It took him a long time to accept who he was and I'm really sorry that he didn't know that he could."

After witnessing the devastation of AIDS on her family, Mansfield decided to help the approximate 25 million people in Africa afflicted by the disease.

"Africa is a dark continent and no one seems to care," she says. "Very little has been done about this."

Although her brother is a huge motivation for Mansfield's climb, becoming a grandmother two years ago has changed her outlook immensely.

"I want to do something for my grandson Ryland," she says. "He is my joy and has changed my entire life."

On March 7, 2006 the Stephen Lewis Foundation launched their 'Grandmothers to Grandmothers' campaign to raise funds to help African women raise their grandchildren who have been orphaned by AIDS. According to HelpAge International, over 60 per cent of orphaned children live in grandparent-headed households in Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe and over 50 per cent in Botswana and Malawi.

Mansfield has set the goal of raising \$19,335.60, the height of Mount Kilimanjaro, for the campaign.

On August 12 Mansfield will travel to Toronto for the Grandmother's Gathering, hosted by the Stephen Lewis Foundation. The event will bring

together grandmothers from 13 countries in sub-Saharan Africa.

"I am hoping I will get a chance to visit them after my climb," she says. "I would like to go out and visit the community and hand out some gifts to the children."

Although the exact dates are still tentative, Mansfield plans to begin her seven day climb this October. She also hopes to embark on an African safari and experience a new culture.

This will also be the longest amount of time she has been away from her husband Michael who requires special care following a stroke that left him in a wheelchair in 1999.

"I have only been away from him two times since then," says Mansfield. "We talked about my idea one night and he said to go for it."

She plans to call Michael as soon as she reaches the summit and looks forward to enjoying the view and watching the sunrise from the great height. Mansfield is fiercely determined to make it to the top and says that nothing will stop her from achieving her goal.

"When I start something, I want to finish it," she says. "I know I need to be mentally and physically prepared. I don't want to waiver once out there."

Mansfield is funding the entire trip herself and stresses that 100 per cent of funds raised will go directly to help African grandmothers provide food, clothing, schooling, counseling and social support for their orphaned grandchildren.

Mansfield, who works as a financial analyst for the National Arts Centre, says she has received tremendous

support from co-workers, friends and family so far.

"The response has been just awesome," she says. "When I'm climbing, every step of the way I will think of the people who have helped me get there."

To make a donation to Gisele Mansfield's fundraiser for 'Grandmothers to Grandmothers' visit <http://www.gigiclimbskili.com> or send them to her home at 4197 Armitage Avenue, Dunrobin Ontario, K0A 1T0 or directly to the Stephen Lewis Foundation at 260 Spadina Avenue, Suite 501. Toronto, Ontario M5T 2E4. Please specify that donations are for "Gigi Climbs Kili" fundraiser to ensure that the donation goes directly to the 'Grandmothers to Grandmothers' campaign.