

# *Women To Climb Great Heights For HIV/AIDS Awareness*

by Valerie McLaughlin (Nepean This Week, September 21, 2007)

And then there were six.

Gisele Mansfield, Liza Badham, Trudy Stephen, Tina Cuerrier, Barbara Carriere and Janet Carriere are about to embark on remarkable journey. Sitting around a picnic table at a west-end burger joint, the six women talk excitedly about their pending adventure of climbing more than 19,000 feet to the summit of Mt. Kilimanjaro.

"I am dreaming about it," Cuerrier says, smiling.

"I look in the mirror and I say, 'Oh my God, you are going to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro,'" Barbara Carriere says, laughing.

Time is ticking away as the first group of women are set to leave Oct. 1, with the remainder leaving two days later.

There is much to do before anyone grabs her backpack and heads for the airport. The women are hosting a send-off party at the Old Quarry Trail in Kanata where hikers and runners will participate in a 5.9 kilometre or 11.8 kilometre hike or run to raise money for the group.

"We'd like people to raise pledges and donate," Mansfield says.

She hopes the group can reach its fundraising goal of \$77,000 by the time the group summits the mountain on Oct. 13.

The group has already raised \$56,000 which will benefit the Stephen Lewis Foundation's Grandmothers-to-Grandmothers campaign. All of the women are paying their own travel expenses and related costs while travelling to and in Africa.

Due to logistics, Janet Carriere won't be making the climb. However, she will see the women off and welcome them home to base camp after they have completed the trek.

Getting to this point of the expedition has been a journey in itself for Mansfield. The Dunrobin woman decided more than a year ago she would climb the mountain not only to celebrate her 55th birthday, but to benefit an HIV/AIDS project in Africa. AIDS has touched Mansfield's family as her brother succumbed to the disease in 1995.

However, she didn't expect that she'd find so many travelling companions along the way.

"It was something I had thought about for many years," she says of the climb. "I don't know if it is the climb that is attracting them or the cause or a mixture of both. It has attracted women for different reasons."

"It is an adventure with a purpose and a result," Janet Carriere adds.

The Grandmothers-to-Grandmothers campaign helps African grandmothers caring for their orphaned grandchildren who have lost their parents to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. More than 25 million people in Africa are infected with the disease and about 14 million children in sub-Saharan Africa alone have been orphaned.

More than 50 per cent of orphaned children live in grandparent-headed households in Botswana and Malawi. In Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, this figure has reached more than 60 per cent.

All the women agree that more has to be done by governments to address a situation that has reached epidemic proportions.

"The fact that people don't know what is happening in Africa is beyond comprehension," Mansfield says, adding there is no excuse as the epidemic continues to generate headlines.

"It is so far away removed that people don't appreciate for what it is."

At a recent HIV/AIDS rally at Parliament Hill where a handful of African grandmothers addressed the crowd, no representatives from the government attended the event.

"Raising awareness starts at home with our families, with our friends and with our neighbours. Hopefully it will grow. These women need a helping hand to get going," Mansfield says.

Since Africa's young people are dying, the continent is losing its wage earners. To help grandmothers who are caring for their orphaned grandchildren, the foundation provides the women with a hand up, not a hand out, Mansfield explains, by providing money for economic development projects, education and transportation.

"A lot of the [foundation's projects] are to educate grandmothers on HIV/AIDS so they can pass that information on to their grandchildren," she says.

"The beauty of the Stephen Lewis Foundation is that they have made a commitment that no more than 10 per cent will go to administration. It is a promise they have kept."

Since launching fundraising projects and raising awareness, many of the women have experienced the generosity of the community first hand.

Stephen's church, St. Stephen's Anglican Church, was only too happy to help by pledging money to the project. To date, \$17,000 has been raised.

"I am eternally grateful and appreciative of their support," Stephen says.

After the trek is done, Cuerrier is planning to host a benefit dance on Oct. 27 at the Constance Bay Community Centre.

Generosity is desperately needed if Africa is to recover from the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

"The community is generous. The community needs to come out for the grandmothers because governments aren't doing anything and corporations aren't doing it. We are their hope, we are their voice," Mansfield says.

Hikers and runners can register for the hike and run in Kanata by signing up online at [www.gigiclimbskli.com](http://www.gigiclimbskli.com) or by calling 613-720-4599.

Future fundraising projects led by the group could be in the works.

"We have been so busy and so hectic that we haven't had an opportunity to sit down and decide. We still want to support the Stephen Lewis Foundation, but it is something we have to talk about," Mansfield says.