

Special Granny Bulletin

June 15, 2007

*The **Granny Bulletin** is a bi-weekly update on the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign, intended to keep grandmothers' groups across Canada informed about, and connected to, the grandmothers and grassroots projects in Africa, that are supported through their dedicated fundraising and awareness-raising efforts.*

Inside this Bulletin:

Welcome to a special edition of the Granny Bulletin! Inside this issue, you will find all the news on the May visit of nine grandmothers from South Africa, Kenya and Uganda to Toronto, Halifax, Ottawa, Saskatoon and Calgary.

Mother's Day weekend was an especially meaningful one as grannies Alicia, Constance, Rita, (South Africa) Irene, Florence, Joyce, Zubeda, (Kenya) Freda and Matrida (Uganda), along with project coordinators Jackson Kaguri and Rowlands Lenya, arrived in Canada for an important visit. Throughout their time in Canada, they spoke as experts about their experiences within the AIDS pandemic – a pandemic that continues to grow and evolve. They discussed the hardships of burying their own children and voiced their fears and their hopes for the next generation of children orphaned by AIDS. They shared their personal stories and experiences with some of the Canadians whose efforts and generosity have supported their families and their communities.

The African grandmothers were here for two main reasons:

- The African grandmothers are serious about follow-up; they were eager to continue the dialogue with Canadian grandmothers. They wanted to ensure that what happened at the Gathering and what was embodied in the Toronto Statement continued to be heard; that the incredible momentum built thus far is not lost. They were here to participate in meaningful discussions with Canadians in their own communities and to raise awareness and support.

To participate in the launch of the SLF film *A Generation of Orphans* — a documentary that tells the stories of six orphans and highlights the efforts of the community-based organizations that are working tirelessly on their behalf. At the premiere, the grandmothers spoke — to a captivated audience of nearly 500 people — as 'ambassadors' for the orphan grandchildren in their care. Their presence added deeper context to the situation of the orphans featured in the film and by extension, the situation of millions of orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. Each of these grandmothers has several orphans in their care and is struggling daily with the challenges of raising traumatized children, in extremely impoverished conditions.

A private screening was organized for the grandmothers before the official launch of the film, followed by an open discussion where they shared their thoughts on the film. Their discussion expanded on some of the issues that a 30-minute film on orphans in sub-Saharan Africa could not cover adequately. Granny Joyce asked “What happens to these children at night?” – opening a thoughtful discussion on the emotional trauma that these children endure, particularly for those in ‘child-headed households’. Another granny talked about her trepidation to broach the subject of AIDS with her grandson, whom she suspects is HIV positive. This launched an animated conversation on the difficulties grandmothers are facing in discussing ‘taboo’ topics, and their discomfort discussing delicate subjects and the fears they face, often alone, about the HIV status of the children in their care.

From Toronto, the African grandmothers went in groups (accompanied by SLF staff) to Halifax, Ottawa, Saskatoon or Calgary, where they were hosted by Canadian grandmothers’ groups. We cannot say enough about the grandmothers groups who hosted the African grannies and those individual grandmothers who put them up in their homes. In every city, they did an absolutely amazing job of planning for and warmly welcoming the African grandmothers. A very special and profound thank you goes out to the organizers in each city (and their colleagues/friends) for all of their stellar work in making the grannies’ visits a huge success. We know it’s never one person, but let us just mention the grandmothers who took the lead in each city – Ellen Monaghan and Rev. Cathy Fulton (Calgary), Orla Lockerbie and Sharon Maher (Saskatoon), Sue Bryant and Patti Koeslag (Ottawa), Jane Earle and Sarah Whitehorn (Halifax) – know that we thank everyone involved!

THE VISIT OF AFRICAN GRANDMOTHERS

*Welcome, dear Grandmothers from Africa
From Grandmothers here who care
Who join in wonder to meet you face to face
To hear the stories you will share.*

*We cannot know your deepest suffering
For so many of your children lost,
We do not know the grief and sorrow nor
How you have borne the painful cost.*

*You are left to rear grandchildren,
To live and work and love and cope,
You who struggle for a life that is good,
Have become for us a sign of hope.*

*Our work with the Stephen Lewis Foundation
Brings our love and support to you.
May we help lighten your heavy load
Of care, for those who depend on you.*

Your stay with us will be so short

*But we will remember you always,
Your courage inspires us
Uniting us in love's many hope-filled ways.*

Poem by Marie Dunn, Grandmothers 4 Grandmothers Saskatoon

Nyaka AIDS Orphans School Grannies in Saskatoon

By Julie Coultas, SLF Grandmothers Campaign Liaison

Saskatoon was chosen to host Ugandan grandmothers Freda Byaburakirya and Matrida Nyinebirungi, and Nyaka AIDS Orphans School founder, Twesigye Jackson Kiguri (Jackson).

Freda Byaburakirya, 67, is a mother of nine and grandmother of six, with four orphans in her care. She lives in Nyakagezi village, close to Nyaka school. A teacher by profession, Freda came out of retirement to serve as Nyaka's first headmistress. Upon their return from the Toronto Grandmothers' Gathering last August, Freda and fellow Gathering participant Leonarda Ndazororera began the Nyaka grannies project. Together, they helped to establish a grandmothers' support group that meets weekly in Nyaka, and are currently working to create a similar group in Kutamba.

Matrida Nyinebirungi, 73, is a mother of eleven and grandmother of twenty-one, with six orphans in her care. She lives in Nyakagezi village, close to Nyaka school. Matrida is an active member of the Nyaka grandmothers' support group, and volunteers with other guardians at the school once a month. Her determination and resilience has helped other grannies in the community to accept their roles of raising orphaned grandchildren.

Jackson Kaguri, 36, is a native of Uganda and the founder of the Nyaka AIDS Orphans School. In 1996-97, his brother and sister both died of AIDS, leaving four orphan children. Jackson was inspired to start Nyaka school for other orphans in the community who do not have an uncle or other guardians to care for them: "Now I am an uncle for hundreds of orphans – for all Nyaka students and hundreds more children that [Nyaka has] cared for through the provision of food, school fees, housing and sometimes just being there to talk when they need me."

Sitting in the airport in Toronto waiting to board our plane to Saskatoon was my first real opportunity to spend time talking personally with Jackson, Freda and Matrida. We

shared stories and photographs from Canada and Uganda, and Matrída said to Jackson that she didn't know how they could have navigated the airport without me. Jackson replied "anyone who can read English can do it by themselves". (Jackson is always mindful of the connection between his own experience of childhood and the role of education in a child's life and the realities faced by the children orphaned by AIDS for whom he created Nyaka). He told Matrída *that's* why getting an education at Nyaka was so important, and that the first time he ever came to North America, he arrived in New York City by himself, and was only able to find his way around because he could read English.

Day One in Saskatoon was filled with smiles, laughter and hugs – and a few tears too. It wasn't long after landing that we were leaving the secure area of the airport and were welcomed with almost twenty pairs of open arms by Grandmothers 4 Grandmothers Saskatoon. They carried a large Grandmothers 4 Grandmothers banner and greeted us warmly (with gift bags courtesy of Saskatchewan Tourism!) We spent almost 20 minutes in the airport, visiting and taking photos before Freda, Matrída and Jackson went to the home of Julia Davies – a lovely and dedicated member of Grandmothers 4 Grandmothers who opened her heart and home – to rest a little before their first scheduled media interview (there were six in all!) and the "Western themed dinner" planned for that evening.

The Western themed dinner also included a line dancing demonstration! The meal served – like all meals during our visit – was homemade and consisted of a buffet of rice, beans, fruit, bread and different kinds of chicken. At the end of the night when Freda and Matrída said thank you to their hosts, Freda said "it is the best food I have had since coming to Canada". Food was served at nearly every gathering and event held in Saskatoon and Matrída commented on more than one occasion that we "never stop eating" in Canada. The theme of hunger and the lack of adequate food to feed the family was repeated often during the visit of the African grandmothers to Canada. As we were getting ready to depart for the evening, one of the Canadian grandmothers asked if Freda and Matrída would like to share some traditional dancing from Uganda, and Matrída, who *had* looked totally exhausted, immediately jumped up and began to dance! It didn't take long for Freda to join in, and they soon had some of the Canadian grandmothers – and me! – up and dancing too. It was an energizing end to a lovely evening.

The next day we headed to Waneskewin - a reserve and heritage park just outside of Saskatoon which was a traditional gathering place for Cree people to hunt buffalo and spend the winter. We watched a jingle dancer in full regalia and then Freda and I, with some of the Canadian grannies, participated in a round dance! There is a small museum at Waneskewin and Freda and Matrída exclaimed often at the similarities between their culture and traditional Cree culture. Freda and I paused to read a quote together: "When the old people will take the time to remember, the young people will take the time to listen." The similarities between the experiences of many First Nations/Metis people in Canada and the experiences of grandmothers across sub-Saharan Africa were poignant and meaningful throughout our visit to Saskatoon:

communities/women living in poverty, disproportionately affected by HIV and AIDS, experiencing alienation and ostracization, and having to step in and raise grandchildren in their old age.

Our third day in Saskatoon began with a tour of AIDS Saskatoon in the morning, including the planting and dedication of a cedar tree with Jackson, Matrída and Freda. Freda and Matrída were told that cedar has particular significance in many First Nations communities and is commonly considered women's medicine. Freda later said that this was one of her favourite moments. She stood for a few minutes in front of the tree just running her hands over it, as if trying to commit the texture of the leaves to memory. Each of us also took a turn with the shovel, ceremonially putting one "scoop" over the roots – except when Matrída took up the shovel she kept shoveling! Gina McKay, a staff member at AIDS Saskatoon said, "The planting of the cedar tree represented our dedication and commitment to our local, provincial and international grandmothers and as a result of the visit, we have named our garden space the "Grandmothers 4 Grandmothers Community Garden. Our entire neighbourhood and community will enjoy the Cedar's beauty and it will always be a reminder of the struggles and commitment Grandmothers face while raising their grandchildren. Just as a cedar tree grows – strong and determined – our grandmothers help us grow strong and determined to address local and international issues and concerns specific to HIV/AIDS."

Standing in the airport on the last day of our visit, saying our goodbyes and sharing memories, there was a palpable sense that our reflections marked a renewed commitment, rather than an ending. At Waneskewin, the grandmothers were told that in traditional Cree, there is no word that means "goodbye", rather words that mean "I'll see you later", or "goodbye for now" because we never really know if we'll see someone again or not. Freda, Matrída and Jackson were so thankful for the hospitality and incredible support of grandmothers in Saskatoon – and across Canada.

TAPWAK (The Association of People With AIDS in Kenya) Grannies in Calgary

By Leah Teklemariam, SLF Programme Officer

It was an inspiring four days spent in Calgary with the three representatives of The Association of People With AIDS in Kenya (TAPWAK); grandmothers Zubeda Jaffer and Florence Apondu, and project coordinator Rowlands Lenya. Mary Anna Beer, the SLF Special Advisor for the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign, also traveled with us.

While Zubeda, Florence, and Rowlands knew from the outset that they would be traveling to Calgary, the reality of the situation did not quite sink in until we were on the plane. "How far away is Calgary?" Zubeda asked "It's 3000 kms. It'll take about 4 hours

by plane” I said. “Wow! I think Canada is too much big! You could go across Africa in that time!” Calgary welcomed TAPWAK with classic Alberta blue skies and true western hospitality. Led by two members of the Purses for Africa group, Ellen Monahan and Cathy Fulton, we were greeted by a group of beaming, welcoming grandmothers. Judy Jackson and her film crew were there to record the Kenyans’ time in Alberta. Cameras were snapping, grannies were hugging, and videos were rolling. It was a warm welcome and would truly set the stage for trip based on personal connections.

We were generously hosted at Ellen Monaghan’s ranch. I looked out at the expansive vistas and views of the Rocky Mountains. The dinner conversation flowed easily and the Calgarys were very democratic in their rotation of seats at the table so as to ensure that everyone got a chance to interact with the Kenyan guests. One of the Canadian grandmothers asked about how to explain to young children about HIV. Rowlands was eager to engage, and suggested starting off by talking about how HIV is transmitted through open cuts and to be careful of sharp objects such as razors or needles and then incorporating sexual transmission when they are old enough to understand. It’s easy to imagine that in Canada one might have to explain what HIV is and what it can do to people – sadly, so many youngsters in sub-Saharan are all-too familiar with the ravages of HIV and AIDS.

After dinner, Ellen took the Kenyans to the stable to look at the horses. They were each given white Stetson hats to wear and Rowlands was eager to try his hand as a cowboy and ride a horse with the assistance of Ellen’s daughter Leith. Zubeda and Florence politely declined! When we got back inside, Rowlands was busy calculating the time difference between Calgary and Kenya because he was so excited to tell his grandson that he had just ridden a horse!

It was a cold and rainy Mother’s Day morning when Florence and Mary Anna went to Woodcliff United Church to assist with the children’s service. Zubeda, Rowlands and I went to St. Stephen’s to attend the service. Following this, a group of about 40 reconvened at Woodcliff for a luncheon. Again, the warmth of those in attendance was overwhelming and Zubeda, Florence, and Rowlands made many meaningful connections with everyone — from journalists to young people.

Following the luncheon was a screening of the orphans’ film and a question and answer period. Zubeda, Florence, Rowlands and I each had some time to speak. I gave some context to the event from the Foundation’s perspective and the Kenyans gave their powerful testimonies. The crowd was visibly moved by the commentaries of Zubeda and Florence. It may have been different audiences who heard the Kenyans speak throughout the weekend, but the tie that bound them all together was the audible gasp that always resulted when they first heard that Zubeda cared for 20 orphans in her home and fed 40 more on a daily basis... or that Florence was the principal of a school with almost 500 students (one third of her pupils are AIDS orphans) and 8 teachers.

After the screening there was an opportunity to mingle in the foyer of the church where tables were set up with the purses made by the Calgary women and cards handmade

by a group of young people at Sir Winston Churchill High School who got a grant from the Calgary Youth Foundation. The proceeds from both of these creative initiatives went to support the grandmothers and orphans in Africa through the Stephen Lewis Foundation. It was inspiring for me to connect with the Canadian supporters of the Foundation. Their questions were thoughtful and, even if they did not quite know how, their desire to help was fierce.

The next activity on our agenda was a trip to Siksika Nation and the Sequoia Outreach School about an hour outside of Calgary. For me, this was a highlight of a trip filled with highlights. The programme included a mix of traditional and modern singing, dancing, and drumming. One young man wrote and performed a beautiful original song about grandmothers. Florence was so moved that she stood up and asked for the lyrics and music that accompanied the song. The young man beamed and happily obliged and the typed words and chords were given to Florence after the programme was finished.

The level of engagement of between the young people and the grannies was incredible to witness. Lisa Jo, who was the driving force behind the event, spoke of how she was so moved by hearing about the challenges faced by African grandmothers and the Purses for Africa project initiated by the Calgary women, that she was motivated to do something. She rallied her classmates to start making purses. It is difficult to describe what it was like to see those young people, the majority of them parents themselves - with their own stories of hardship - show such empathy for the plight of others. They gave of their time, their effort, and their possessions to recognize these grannies from half a world away. Florence observed that the programme with the traditional songs and dancing was similar to the presentations that they would have held back in Kenya if they hosted visitors. It was truly a lesson that even in the most unexpected places, there is more that binds us together than pulls us apart.

It was magnificent to see truly grassroots to grassroots connections. There were no flashy events; rather, there were potlucks in school gyms, local church services, and sliced fruit in small conference rooms. As ambassadors of the many grandmothers and orphans struggling to cope in the face of HIV/AIDS in Africa, Zubeda, Florence, and Rowlands were strong and passionate advocates – willing to share their stories and feel safe in the knowledge that people would listen and care.

The African and the Canadian in me had irrefutable reasons to be proud – at once amazed by the perseverance and determination of the Kenyans and impressed by the creativity and wholeheartedness of the Calgarian response. I think Rowlands summed it up the best when he said “this is a trip that I will remember for the rest of my life”.

PDI (Participatory Development Initiatives) Grannies in Halifax

By Alexis MacDonald, SLF Director of Programmes

Saturday, May 12th, 2007

Joyce, Irene, and I left the hotel in downtown Toronto for the airport at 9am. On the flight to Halifax, Irene nervously held my hand during the take-off. Joyce shooed my hand away with a firm smile, insisting that Irene must become strong and used to flying. Joyce is a self-acclaimed flying pro. She flew to the Grandmothers' Gathering in August and had flown once before, when she was young, from Nairobi to Mombasa. Irene, on the other hand, had never flown before her flight from Nairobi to Toronto only a few days ago. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that Joyce wasn't scared the first time she flew and that Irene would be scared on take-off and landings for the rest of her life.

When we arrived in Halifax two hours later, we were greeted by Jane Earle, one of the grannies who had attended the Grandmothers' Gathering in August (along with three other Nova Scotian grannies). Jane had started a grandmothers' group in her home community, outside Halifax, in St. Margaret's Bay. Jane was ecstatic to reunite with Joyce, whom she met at the Gathering, and to meet Irene for the first time.

While we were waiting for our bags to arrive, Joyce noticed weird glass balls filled with coloured candy up against the wall. In her sixty-five year old voice that still holds child-like wonder, she exclaimed, "What are those?!" Jane proceeded to give Joyce a quarter and explained how to lie the quarter flat in the slot and then turn the metal knob all the way around, and then some. Joyce was so excited to hold her hand under the mouth of the machine and release into it half a dozen jelly beans! Irene tried it as well, choosing chocolate covered peanuts. They are small details, but there were moments of simple delight and newness throughout the weekend.

We drove for 45 minutes from the airport to St. Margaret's Bay. Irene laughed as she went to get in the car. She was inclined to sit in the driver's seat because Kenyans and Canadians drive on opposite sides of the road. Joyce and Irene found it surprisingly colder in Nova Scotia compared to the city heat of Toronto, so their red fleecy donated jackets from Mark's Work Warehouse were much appreciated. Joyce wore her XS jacket to almost every event. From the back seat, Joyce asked Jane many questions about the natural landscape as we drove along, to which Jane could easily answer given her deep knowledge of the area.

We arrived at a community 'tea party', a traditional event in rural Nova Scotia, organized by the St. Margaret's Bay grandmothers' group. The grandmothers had no sooner stepped out of the car, when they were asked for interviews by the Chronicle Herald and the Daily News, the two Halifax-based regional papers for the Maritimes. Both articles appeared in the newspapers the next day, on Mothers' Day, including a photo of Joyce on the front page of the Chronicle Herald, the most well read paper in all of Eastern Canada.

Joyce and Irene were overwhelmed with joy to find over 200 people, (almost exclusively women!) crammed into the local St. Andrew's Anglican Church hall. There were balloons, streamers, Ghanaian drumming and singing, and booths of home-made goods and plants being sold with proceeds going to the Foundation's Grandmothers Campaign. The grandmothers groups had mounted pictures of their own grandchildren

on the wall and they were also selling black t-shirts with a beautiful South African embroidered picture of a granny with two of her grandchildren. The grannies from the St. Margaret's Bay group must have spent days and nights baking the delicious sweets and sandwiches that covered every single table. They really out did themselves!!

One of the highlights of the tea party was the Halifax Raging Grannies choir. They are an infamous group of 50 to 90 year-old grannies who are veteran activists that sing at every social justice event in the area. With Joyce and Irene sitting at the front of the room as the guests of honour, the Raging Grannies came out singing the song by the Busy Bees, a grandmothers' group in Zambia, featured in the Foundation's film, *Grandmothers: The Unsung Heroes of Africa*. The significance wasn't lost on Joyce, who knew the song well from singing it at the Gathering, and her eyes (and mine) filled with tears as soon as she heard it.

Equally meaningful, one of the raging grannies, Molly Austen, wrote a special song for the occasion and they sang it to Joyce and Irene. Of their own volition, Joyce and Irene spoke to the attentive audience. Irene spoke first, to thank the grannies for the special afternoon. She told them how shocked she was to realize that it was all for them. "When Jane told us we were coming to a tea party, we didn't expect this. She never told us!" Irene said that she and Joyce were touched and on behalf of all the grannies in Africa, she thanked them for caring. She wanted to let them know that the SLF funds really reach the people it intends to reach. Joyce then spoke in detail about her own life and about the work of PDI and how both she and Irene were benefiting from their small loans programme – a revolving fund – through support from the Foundation and the Canadians donors who make it possible.

When Joyce sat down, Irene spontaneously stood up again, much to the delight of the audience, and told the crowd, "Oh, I forgot to tell you I'm a grandmother." After much laughter, Irene explained that she looks much younger than Joyce because Joyce is sixty-five years old and she is only fifty-two years old. She was here in Canada representing the 'younger grannies'.

For the rest of the afternoon, Joyce and Irene moved around the room like seasoned politicians, greeting everyone they met. They didn't get to move very far from their seats because people clamored around them at all times, eager to meet them, to give them a hug, or to just tell them how much it meant for them to be there in person.

That Saturday evening, Jane and Gordon Earle welcomed a group of African-Nova Scotian community leaders from Hammond Plains into their home for an intimate evening. We had blueberry pie (Joyce and Irene's first time!) and watched the Orphans film together. This was a moving and eye-opening experience for these Hammond Plains grandmothers as they found it hard to imagine what was happening to their sisters in Africa – they were inspired beyond belief by Joyce and Irene. We went to bed that night with a full stomach and heart.

Sunday, May 13th, 2007 – MOTHERS' DAY

On Sunday – Mother’s Day – we went to the First Baptist church in Halifax. Joyce and Irene shook hands with every single member who filed into the church. The Associate Pastor, Rev. Timothy McFarland, dedicated the entire church service to grandmothers. It was a youth service, so three local children stood up and read their own personal stories about the importance of their grandmothers in their lives, which were very sweet and touching. Both Joyce and Irene spoke from the pulpit about their experiences – you would have thought they both had years of doing these sermons. They were fantastic! The other grannies in Toronto teasingly referred to Irene as “their Pastor” because she is so religious, so you can imagine how much of an honour it was for Irene to speak in a church. This church has already begun to mount a huge fundraising campaign for the SLF’s Grandmothers’ Campaign. CBC Radio attended the service and interviewed both grannies. The following morning, Irene was shocked to hear herself on the radio, and was radiant with pride and as she put it, with a “new sense of self-esteem and purpose”.

That Sunday afternoon, we went to the lounge in MP Alexa McDonough’s apartment building for a potluck. ATV (CTV in the Atlantic Canada) followed the grannies from the church to the potluck, and it aired that evening on the 6 o’clock news. Over thirty women were invited to this event, primarily those who had started grandmothers’ groups in the Halifax area or those who were starting a group.

Joyce gave one of her best speeches yet – it focused on the women’s movement and how the grandmothers’ campaign is an extension of this. It was jarring to hear her say in her soft voice, “What about when Joyce goes to sleep, and doesn’t wake up? What will happen to my grandchildren?” Joyce is a grandmother of five adopted grandchildren who were left in her care after her dear friend died of AIDS. After nursing her friend to the end, Joyce took on the role of caring for the woman’s young children who are the same age as Joyce’s own grandchildren.

It is hard to imagine anything stopping this woman. She is a diminutive dynamo. Joyce’s small stature makes you want to hug her endlessly, but she is fiery and independent. She is fond of telling people that “precious gifts come in small packages.” Irene also made everyone cry at this event. She was astonished to realize that she was visiting the home of a Member of Parliament. She said, “I can’t believe the way that you are treating us here, given our status back in Kenya. We are just grandmothers back in Kenya, with barely any income, but here we are being treated like dignitaries. We can’t believe that you really want to hear what we have to say, that you respect us so much.”

Alexa McDonough’s speech reflected this profound admiration and respect for the work of African grandmothers. She admitted that she wasn’t quite sure what to expect when she went to the Grandmothers’ Gathering in August, but it blew her away. It was an emotional lunch.

With the help of Frances and Bonnie, two Darmouth grannies, we rushed from that event to the Cherry Brook Baptist church, in one of the oldest black communities in Nova Scotia. They were having an afternoon service for Mothers’ Day and they were

honouring grandmothers in that community who had been raising their own grandchildren. This service was exceptionally beautiful with its gospel music and warm reception. Each grandmother attending the service received a red rose. Joyce and Irene spoke again from the pulpit with many welcoming shouts of "Amen" from the congregation. Joyce again spoke like a pro – thanking the community members by name. They donated the collection (taken twice!) to the Foundation, which came to over \$700. This was a very, very generous contribution.

That evening, I was able to spend Mother's Day with my brother and mother while Joyce and Irene spent it with Jane's grandchildren.

Monday, May 14th, 2007

On Monday morning, Joyce and Irene went to St. Patrick's High School in downtown Halifax. The grannies were proud to stand in front of the massive sign on the school property, which is on one of the busiest streets in Halifax, which read: "St. Pat's welcomes Grannies Irene and Joyce from Kenya." When they arrived at the school, the choir welcomed them. They proceeded to the school auditorium which was at capacity with almost 500 high school students to watch the Orphans film.

The choir sang another song "The Storm Will Pass By." Joyce and Irene delighted the students when they got up to dance with the choir. The teacher who had arranged the entire event at the school (and the church service the morning before), Mrs. Kathy Reid, also made a PowerPoint presentation to show the students. The students then watched the documentary in complete silence – it clearly captured their attention like nothing before. The grannies spoke afterwards, for which they received a standing ovation!

After the interviews we had an intimate gathering of students for a question and answer period. One of the students broke down sobbing because she was so upset by the injustice these children are enduring. We learned later that this particular young woman is quite a tough character in school, and significance of her empathy and expression of emotion was not lost on her schoolfellows. The school is very interested in starting a campaign for the African grandmothers, to incorporate it into their new international issues programmes.

ATV showed up with two television crews, one for LIVE AT FIVE and another for Breakfast Television, as did CBC Television and CBC Radio Canada. They even watched the entire film and then interviewed all three of us. There was a short clip on both CBC and ATV that night. The Weekly Daily News also published an article in their weekly paper.

On Monday afternoon we were very tired, but we spent some time looking at the Waterfront. Joyce and Irene tried Beaver Tails and the young girls making them let us go in the shop and watch how they were made. We went up Halifax Citadel to get a view of the city. Joyce was fascinated by the non-responsive and non-expressive British royal foot guard. She exclaimed to us, "He was real. I saw him blink!"

We drove out to Peggy's Cove, the spectacular natural wonder of Nova Scotia. The grannies were awed by the rugged beauty, particularly Joyce. It was so windy that Joyce had to wear Jane's husband's mother's old fur coat. It wasn't politically correct, but perfectly warm for the occasion! Jane was worried about the grannies slipping on the rocks, but that only spurred Joyce on to make her way down as far as she could.

That evening, we were giddy from exhaustion. We had a lovely last meal with our hosts Jane and Gordon. They gave Joyce and Irene copies of photos from the past few days and souvenirs.

PERSONAL ANECDOTES

Irene

Irene started crying in the Halifax airport, as we waited to board the flight, because she was overwhelmed with gratitude for this experience. She had been so proud to tell people in her community (especially those who mocked her) that she was going to Toronto. When it looked like she couldn't get a Canadian visa, Sarah (the PDI Coordinator) told her that they might have to choose someone else. Irene had been devastated. It meant so much to her that the Foundation worked hard to make sure the visa came through. Irene was also crying from the memory of the painful gossip and stigma that she faces at home by her neighbours. She went through a really difficult time not too long ago, when she couldn't find even one shilling to feed the children in her care. She had lost so much weight that everyone thought that she had AIDS. She said she felt entirely rejuvenated from this Canada trip and that she'd be an even stronger person when she went back to Kenya. I couldn't agree more. It seemed to be a transformative experience for her. I know it was for me.

GAPA (Grandmothers Against Poverty and AIDS) Grannies in Ottawa

By Aissatou Diajate, SLF Senior Programme Officer

On Saturday May 12th, I left for Ottawa with the GAPA grannies: Alicia Mdaka, Constance Sohena and Rita Hoza

The flight to Ottawa was smooth, and we arrived 25 minutes earlier than scheduled – nevertheless, we found the Ottawa grannies' 'welcome committee' waiting for us. As we walked to the airport lobby, we heard one passenger in front of us say: "Oh my God, look at these grannies!" Before us all – a large group of grannies in their various granny group t-Shirts waiting for GAPA with beautiful bouquets of flowers. Their excitement was palpable, and the GAPA grannies even more so! They laughed, hugged, kissed! The Ottawa grannies were very organized with a thoughtful agenda covering each of the activities planned for this two-day visit.

Key Moments

Church service on Sunday morning with Riverside grannies:

Granny Rita and I were asked to speak during the service. Granny Rita spoke very eloquently about GAPA's work, her role at GAPA and the situation of the many orphaned children in Africa. The church members were very touched; they gave her a standing ovation. The minister said granny Rita will "go down in history as the woman who received a standing ovation during service. I've been speaking for ever and had all kind of visitors but we never had a standing ovation!"

This was followed by a clip of the Grandmothers film – Matilda's story. It was such a beautiful and emotional moment. Because it was Mother's Day, the theme of the service was mothers and grandmothers, their heroic acts and enduring love and hope for their families and communities! The Riverside Grannies put into motion a marvelous idea: they asked everyone coming to church that Sunday to donate a loonie for each grandchild they have/had or knew or cared about and a toonie for each great-grandchild they have /had, knew or cared about. It was such a lovely gesture. I later heard that between the three churches, they raised quite a lot of funds, all to be sent to grandmothers in Africa through SLF.

While Rita and I were at Riverside Church, grannies Alicia and Constance were at the First Unitarian Congregation of Ottawa Church with Sue Bryant and May Chazan This service started with the church choir greeting the grannies outside with 'Siya hamba/ We are marching in the light of God'. During the service, Jane Lindsey from the First Unitarian grandmothers group gave a very touching talk about AIDS orphans and the roles grandmothers are playing. Her message brought many in the congregation to tears. The reverend warmly welcomed the grannies in his sermon, which raised equally strong emotions. At the end of the service, the Reverend asked the choir to sing 'We Shall Overcome' in honor of the grannies' struggle. Members of the congregation spontaneously joined hands across the pews as they sang, with Alicia and Constance in the centre.

Northwestern grannies' concert at the First Unitarian Church: This was a beautiful event organized by the grannies with various young Ottawa musicians who volunteered their time to honor the GAPA grannies with a beautiful Mother's Day celebration. It was very moving for grannies Rita, Constance and Alicia to see that "young high school students in Ottawa know and care about our struggle, and wanted to honor us through music". The emotions were even more intense when the church choir dedicated a song titled "How Could Anyone Tell You" by Libby Roderick, to the grannies:

How could anyone ever tell you

You were anything less than beautiful

How could anyone ever tell you

You were less than whole

How could anyone fail to notice

That your loving is a miracle

How deeply you're connected to my soul

Overall Feeling

Canadians and Africans alike were so generous with one another and enthusiastically engaged throughout this weekend of sharing, caring and learning from one another. The African grannies were amazed and gratified to discover that they had similar fundraising strategies to the Ottawa grannies: gardening, arts and crafts, knitting and sewing. Canadian grannies were eager to gain in-depth knowledge of the African grandmothers' challenges in raising their grandchildren. Unsurprisingly, many of the grandmothers' challenges were similar to those of many *parents* in today's world – but then deeply complicated by the ravages of the pandemic and extreme poverty. The grannies shared their conviction that they must remain strong and boost their grandchildren's self-esteem and confidence in order to help them deal with stigma and rejection. Granny Constance said that “despite the hard work and the frustration that comes with raising teenage orphans, [we] must not give up, because we must make sure that the children have a better future”.

The GAPA grannies were deeply touched and honoured to find out that they were not alone in their struggle. They arrived here to find over 150 Canadian grandmothers' groups working hard to raise awareness and funds to support the efforts of many more grandmothers groups in Africa, doing similar work to GAPA.