

# HARVEST OF HOPE

CC Santa Barbara partners with a South African ministry dedicated to serving abandoned and HIV/AIDS infants and children.



*Squatters' camps are common in Johannesburg, South Africa. Many children have come to Acres of Love from these communities.*

“... I see Jesus in their eyes.”

Ryan Audagnotti

**CC Santa Barbara partners with a South African ministry dedicated to serving abandoned and HIV/AIDS infants and children.**

*On the day you were born your navel cord was not cut, nor were you washed in water to cleanse you; you were not rubbed with salt nor wrapped in swaddling cloths. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things for you, to have compassion on you; but you were thrown out into the open field, when you yourself were loathed on the day you were born.*

*And when I passed by you and saw you struggling in your own blood, I said to you... “Live!” I made you thrive like a plant in the field; and you grew, matured, and became very beautiful. Ezekiel 16:4b-7a*

story and photos by Geraldine Wilkins



*This little girl is one of at least 320 children who have been in Acres of Love homes. Staff and volunteers are specially trained to care for HIV-positive babies and children.*

Spreading like a deathly shadow through South Africa, HIV/AIDS has left thousands of children orphaned or victimized in horrific ways. The Lord Jesus Christ is using His church to rescue many of these innocent children from a cruel, hopeless fate.

CC Santa Barbara recently opened a Christian family home in South Africa with eight babies and children abandoned or orphaned because of HIV/AIDS. The church partnered with Acres of Love, a ministry dedicated to reaching some of the 750,000 orphans and abandoned children in South Africa affected by HIV/AIDS.

Looking at the chubby, dimpled faces, one could hardly imagine that their stories started out almost too terrible to be real.

After her mother died of AIDS, one baby girl was found locked in a filthy outhouse where food was pushed under the door for her by relatives—themselves victims of poverty, myths, stigmas, ignorance and an unrealistic fear of HIV/AIDS.

In a nearby one-room home in a squatter's camp, a malnourished toddler was found sitting alone beside her dead mother. Medical personnel said the 3-year-old had been there at least a week.

Throughout South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, little girls are routinely violated by HIV-infected men who have been persuaded by witch doctors that they will be cured by this unspeakable act.

"Some of the children have come from the most horrific backgrounds," said Gerda Audagnotti. She and her husband, Ryan, founded the non-profit Acres of Love by opening up their home in South Africa in 1998. "We are really dealing with tough issues, but we have seen the grace, presence and anointing of God."

More than 300 children have been rescued from life-threatening situations in the hard-hit Johannesburg area and brought to the eight homes run by Acres of Love.

Visiting the CC Santa Barbara home was a deeply moving experience for the team members who helped make it a reality.



*Acres of Love co-founder, Ryan Audagnotti, far right, dedicates the children of the Santa Barbara Forever Home to the Lord with CC Santa Barbara team members.*



*Jodi Thomas enjoys one of the boys from the new Santa Barbara Forever Home.*



*Ryan holds a child living in the Santa Barbara Forever Home, while enjoying a light moment with house parent David Ndblovu, after the dedication.*

Ten thousand miles from home, six people from CC Santa Barbara each held a child and stood with Acres of Love co-founder Ryan Audagnotti for the dedication of the Santa Barbara home and its children.

John Schuck, from CC Santa Barbara, burdened for the children since he first heard of their plight in 2004, described coming to the Santa Barbara home.

"It was humbling and awe-inspiring," John said. He recalled holding a deaf 6-year-old boy named Prince in his arms as Pastor Daniel, a South African pastor and house-parent, prayed for each child to be dedicated to Jesus. "I remembered dedicating my own children, and I thought, 'These children are just like mine.' I felt very close to him, and I felt a little sadness, thinking about his parents and that he had come from such an incredibly stark background. But there was joy in knowing that he will have the best he possibly can with Acres of Love."

"Walking into the prettily landscaped, three-bedroom house felt just like walking into a home in Santa Barbara—nothing like an orphanage," John said. In the bright South African sunshine, team members played with children, ages 9 months to 7 years. "It was clean and bright; children were laughing." John and his son, Jordan, 15, returned to the home on their last day in South Africa. "My son and a new boy were sitting on the sofa watching TV together, smiling. I thought, 'Wow, this is just like a home.' There's no sadness in the house—just great joy and peace."

**"He called them out, saved them from certain death, and they have been rededicated to Him."**

Kim Schuck



*Peter de Luca feeds an Acres of Love child who came to the home with severe skin allergies. He is now completely healed after Peter's wife, Jenny, helped the boy overcome his painful condition with a natural food diet.*



*Acres of Love Forever Homes have backyards with a variety of children's playground equipment, sand boxes and swimming pools.*

### Bearers of Hope

"I don't think you can be a believer in our world today and not have a burden—or at least a concern—for the plight of children and babies in Africa with the AIDS virus," said Pastor Ricky Ryan of CC Santa Barbara. Though many feel overwhelmed to the point of inaction or apathy, Ricky and the church family in Santa Barbara have found a way to help these children.

CC Santa Barbara's involvement began in January of 2004, when Ryan Audagnotti—successful businessman-turned-founder of Acres of Love—first shared his family's burden for the HIV/AIDS-impacted children of his home country.

"When you look at HIV and Africa, you just get overwhelmed: the suffering is too intense," Ryan said. More than five million people in South Africa are living with HIV/AIDS—the largest number in any one country. But Ryan shared there is still hope.



*Kim joins boys from another home as they give thanks to the Lord for their lunch.*



*Piled on a sofa in a Forever Home, Susan Weibel, the house mom for six girls, listens as they each take turns identifying objects in a book.*

“It’s critical that the message gets out that it is not hopeless. That is a deception of the devil used to paralyze believers not to do anything. That is exactly what he wants—inaction,” Ryan said. “Don’t get overwhelmed with 800,000 children that have no parents; instead, let’s just save one life—then 10, then 20 and then 100.”

And they are saving lives. Some children come with AIDS; some are HIV-positive and some are simply abandoned. Many have thrived beyond expectation. “In some cases, traces of HIV inherited from a baby’s mother can disappear when the baby’s own

antibodies develop,” reports Acres of Love. Some have been taken off their antiretroviral medication altogether—the virus in their blood so low that it is nearly undetectable.

Other healthy babies were misdiagnosed and left to die. One little boy had been waiting for death in an AIDS ward. He recovered after being brought to one of the homes. He is now a healthy 3-year-old living with his adoptive family in Sweden.

Rob Laskin, who attends CC Santa Barbara, remembers when Ryan first shared his vision with tears. “He was saying that these are

God’s children and they deserve the same opportunities that his own children have.”

When Ryan addressed the whole church, many at CC Santa Barbara were moved to take action. Two months later, the church sent the money needed to purchase a new house—the Santa Barbara Friends Forever Home—in a suburb of Johannesburg. The home opened this past summer and houses eight children.

“There are lots of other ministries for AIDS orphans, but there was something about the Audagnottis’ hearts for these kids that stirred



*A baby sleeps soundly in a new crib in the Santa Barbara Forever Home.*

and the courage of Ryan and Gerda. On the other hand, it seemed like what they were doing was understandable—a home, kids, houseparents—it just made sense.”

Located in middle-class neighborhoods in Johannesburg, the Forever Homes provide children with a family atmosphere and a place to call their own. A Christian couple committed to being full-time parents heads each home.

“One of the things the Lord said to me at the beginning was that if I would look after the children like my very own, we would never lack funding and provision,” said Gerda. “There has never been a month when God did not supply; His goodness has been incredible.”

Ryan added, “Ironically, we are creating a lot of heat here because we are raising the bar. Many said a bowl of rice and a blanket are good enough, but these children are God’s gift. When I look at them, I see Jesus in their eyes. So why not give Jesus our best? There’s no reason to cut corners because there is unlimited funding when God is the provider.”

all of us,” said Rob. “We realized there is something we could do to change a life.”

Ricky agreed. He saw a special burden in the hearts of the CC Santa Barbara believers. “Like Nehemiah, who was not going to rest until his burden for Jerusalem was relieved, I look for that in our people—that there’s not just a concern or an interest, but a burden for a ministry.”

John and his wife, Kim, felt that burden from the start. “It just touched my heart,” said John. “I could not believe the depth of the problem, the sadness of the situation

dime from the government. That just means God will supply. Secondly, we do not have bureaucrats breathing down our necks.”

CC Santa Barbara plans to be part of the children’s lives long-term. “The commitment that Ryan and Gerda have for the children is for a minimum of 18 years of each child’s life,” said Ricky. After the initial trip, several church members began planning the next one.

Kim Schuck, part of the initial team, said, “I believe these children were hand-picked by God and brought to Acres. He called them out, saved them from certain death, and they have been rededicated to Him. I know that He has a plan and a calling on their lives. It is exciting to think how God is going to use them.”



*Children carry chairs for the Santa Barbara home dedication.*

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