

Welcoming Words
International Grandmothers Gathering 2023 Winnipeg
Vicki Strang, The GANG, Edmonton, AB

I was at that memorable first 2006 Grandmothers Gathering – 100 grandmothers from African countries and 200 Canadian ones coming together to hear the stories about the impact that the HIV and AIDS pandemic had on families and communities where it was being experienced first hand. And what overwhelming stories we heard! Why was I there? I had been a visiting professor at University of Ghana in Accra, Ghana guiding nursing graduate students in their thesis work related to the people living with AIDS. And then, having climbed Kilimanjaro as a retirement project in 2006, I had many questions swirling around in my head about issues, health care systems, international responsibilities linked to the pandemic. One evening I happened to be listening to CBC radio as I was washing dinner dishes – what came on, of all things, was Stephen Lewis. He spoke about all the issues, problems, international shortcomings related to the AIDS pandemic – the very thoughts and questions I had been struggling with. I was deeply moved by his analyses and suggested solutions! I was hooked! I tuned in every evening that week as Stephen delivered that powerful and insightful Massey Lecture-series we now can read as *Race Against Time*.

What do I do now? Having witnessed and learned about the inequality driving the HIV and AIDS epidemic, I wanted to be involved in some way. I started searching online and discovered that the SLF was planning a Grandmothers Gathering to coincide with the International AIDS Conference being hosted in Toronto that year.

And so I came, hesitantly at first, just to find out what this was all about. And wow did I learn in a hurry!

There were many presentations, both plenary and smaller break out sessions, all powerful and informative. There was much joy and celebration in bringing the grandmothers together. There were demonstrations and marches to draw the plight of the grandmothers to the attention of the AIDS conference attendees. But there was one smaller breakout session, lead by a theatrical group, that moved me deeply and sealed my commitment to the *Grandmothers to Grandmothers* movement. We were a smaller group, a mixture of Canadian and African grandmothers (with their translators). We were asked to reflect on a significant emotional event in our lives and then act out the emotions of that event. The Canadian grandmothers were constrained, hesitant, and proper in demonstrating the events they portrayed – maybe a child leaving home, a wedding of a daughter, birth of a grandchild. But the African grandmothers had no hesitation, no constraints in demonstration their emotions. There was no need for words in this forum. They wept, wailed and writhed as through their movements and actions and through the translators we learned that this was the first time they had the opportunity to tell their stories of their many losses and the struggle of looking after the grandchildren after their parents had either died or left. They shared and showed it all for us to see and experience. There was not a dry eye in that room. The Gathering closed with a final joint pledge – The African grandmothers pledged **We Will Not Raise Our Grandchildren For The Grave** and the Canadian grandmothers pledged that **We Will Not Rest Until They Can Rest.**

Coming back to Edmonton, there was no option but to get started - a grandmother group had to be formed. With the help of full page article with pictures no less in the Edmonton Journal, the Edmonton group was formed with the creative and cheeky name GANG and acronym for Grandmothers of Alberta for a New Generation. We started small with a Speaker's Bureau to raise awareness about the African grandmother situation and with many fund-raising activities – Scabble Tournaments, garage, scarf, and bake sales, Kazuri jewelry sales, etc. As we continued along, we grew stronger and more confident. Now we're an established group of grandmothers and grand-others, well-recognized by the community and beyond for our fantastic Fabric Frenzy sales. I can only speak about the group and region I belong to but I know from the information sharing that happens the many other grandmother groups that formed as a result of that 2006 gathering have followed a similar trajectory.

It is through the strength and resilience of the relationships that developed within the groups that the many groups across Canada, and in the UK and Australia, have continued to be so active and productive. We have remained focused on our founding mission - to stand in solidarity with our African sisters and to amplify their stories as best we could. There were times when that mission had to be re-visited and firmly re-enforced as new members became active in our groups. But we've always, collectively and as individual groups, engaged in the many varying forums of support for our African sisters – as speakers raising awareness, film screenings, and a great variety of fund raising activities and events.

In closing,

- as we have seen the AIDS pandemic, with it's pending death warrant, becoming the HIV epidemic, a chronic condition with victims having the possibility of a full and productive life (ARVs becoming widely available)
- as we've seen our resilient African sisters assume leadership within their communities;
- as we've seen those grandchildren of yesterday become adults forging productive and active lives, taking on leadership within their communities;
- we are humbled by their courage, deeply moved by their profound commitment to keeping their families and communities together, amazed by their strength to continue despite the aches and pains of an aging body.

We stand in awe of what they have and are achieving; they are not giving up!!

They are definitely not raising their grandchildren for the grave

So - we cannot rest until they can rest.

Thank you