

## **An Evening With Stephen Lewis**

**By Lyla Miklos**

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My activist crush on Stephen Lewis started during the 16th International AIDS Conference, which took place in the summer of 2006 in Toronto, Ontario. I was working a contract job in television broadcasting in Toronto at the time. During the conference I would run off to the event site on my lunch hours to catch, as much free programming that was open to the public that I could. I'd come back to the office, share the freebies I collected with my co-workers (what co-worker doesn't enjoy the gift of free condoms!?! ) and put the TV at my desk on Newsworld so I could listen to world leaders and activists talk, debate and envision what to do to solve the AIDS crisis. That incredible and unforgettable week was filled with poignant moments. I joined fellow activists by taking over Yonge Street to protest the closure of the only safe Methadone injection site in Canada. I also joined fellow world citizens in grieving at Yonge/Dundas Square at an emotionally moving AIDS vigil.

Still the moment that stayed with me the most was hearing Stephen Lewis' rousing speech at the close of the Conference. In 2006 Stephen Lewis was stepping down from his groundbreaking role as the United Nation's Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa. He didn't pull any punches in his speech. He let it be know who and what were to blame for why the AIDS crisis kept getting worse - even if it meant criticizing his own bosses at the United Nations. His speech was brave, bold, courageous, honest and unrelenting. It was no surprise that the loudest cheers and applause from the delegates at the conference were for Stephen Lewis who ended his speech with the fervent hope that the next UN Special Envoy for AIDS in Africa would be an African woman.

When I found out that Stephen Lewis would be visiting my hometown of Hamilton, Ontario to be the keynote speaker at an event organized by The City of Hamilton's Mundialization Committee honouring the group Grandmothers of Steel I knew I had to be there. The Mundialization Committee is one of several citizen advisory committees that advise city staff and politicians on issues that affect the greater Hamilton community. Their mandate is to promote Hamilton as "A World Mundialized City" dedicated to global awareness, international co-operation and world law. One of the ways this committee achieves this goal is by "twinning" with other cities across the globe to foster an understanding of the increasing interdependence of the municipalities, people and countries of the

world. One of the many events and projects that the Mundialization Committee organizes is The World Citizenship Awards.

On the evening of Thursday, May 8, 2008 at Carmen's Banquet Centre in the East Hamilton Mountain Grandmothers of Steel were to be honoured as the recipients of the 2008 World Citizenship Award. The group Grandmothers of Steel was formed in the summer of 2006. It began, as a small group of women from the Hamilton area who had known each other through various local social-justice networks. By January 2008 the group had ballooned to over 75 women.

Grandmother's of Steel is a part of the Stephen Lewis Foundation's Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign. The Campaign was launched by the Foundation on March 7, 2006, on the eve of International Women's Day. The Grandmother's to Grandmothers Campaign seeks to raise awareness and mobilize support in Canada for Africa's grandmothers. Since the launch, some 200 groups of Canadian grandmothers have taken up the call to action and the campaign has raised well over \$3 million.

The event in May at Carmen's was filled with a veritable who's who of Hamilton's social-justice communities and activists. Gary Warner, a past World Citizenship Award winner, was the Master of Ceremonies for the over 650 people in attendance. After greetings and words of welcome from several local politicians Anne Pearson spoke on behalf of fellow past recipients of the World Citizenship Award. Pearson was honoured in 2005 for her activities in promoting interfaith and intercultural understanding, and sincere respect and appreciation amongst Hamilton's diverse communities. The granddaughter of former Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson she began her observations on humanity's interdependence by evoking fitting words from the Bahá'í faith - "The Earth is but one country and we are its citizens".

Stephen Lewis after some self-deprecating comments about his political and educational careers at the top of his address highlighted the United Nation's eight Millennium Development Goals.

- Eradicate extreme hunger and poverty
- Achieve universal primary education
- Promote gender equality and empower women
- Reduce child mortality
- Improve maternal health
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

- Ensure environmental sustainability
- Develop a global partnership for development

These goals are to be reached worldwide by 2015. Lewis told the audience at Carmen's that a United Nations official informed him this year that not a single African Country will reach all of these goals by 2015.

The affects of the AIDS virus infect every facet and sector of African societies. Lewis shared a story that night about visiting a classroom in which a teacher was conducting a life skills class for her students. The teacher asked the students to write on a piece of paper what worries them the most. Eight out of every ten students wrote death. Lewis was startled by the magnitude of this fear and asked the students what they do. They said they pray. When you spend your whole life going to funerals your only solace is prayer.

The children of Africa are deeply traumatized. Africa has become a continent of orphans — an estimated 13 million children have been orphaned by AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa and the numbers are expected to reach 20 million in the next four years. In the midst of this devastation, grandmothers have emerged as the 'unsung heroes' of Africa. They bury their own children and then in their 50s, 60s and 70s begin to parent again, raising their grandchildren with little or no support. In some countries, 40-60% of orphans live in grandmother-headed households. These courageous and resilient women have no time to grieve. Their priority is the next generation: the infants, toddlers, and teenagers who are left behind. Although there is never enough for their burgeoning households, somehow these grandmothers attempt to feed, clothe and comfort their grandchildren.

What these children and their caregivers need is hope. Grandmothers of Steel through the Stephen Lewis Foundation's Grandmothers to Grandmother's Campaign gives hope by providing grandmothers with much-needed assistance, including: food, educational fees, income-generating projects, counseling and social support, and coffins to allow for a dignified burial of their loved ones.

Stephen Lewis' closing words at the awards dinner were "Hope is Everything!"

Thank you Grandmothers of Steel and Stephen Lewis for making hopes realities.

## **BOOK REVIEW: Race Against Time by Stephen Lewis**

“There is a tendency to think that dissent should be contained or that self-censorship is to be applauded. I regard both sentiments as the last refuge of an intellectual whimp.” – Stephen Lewis

After the awards dinner Stephen Lewis happily signed copies of his book “Race Against Time” for appreciative audience members. The books were being sold at the event for \$20. This collection of CBC Massey Lectures is part of a series of books published by Anansi Press.

In his forward, Lewis expresses that he believes that the power of the spoken word is lost in the translation to printed page. I beg to differ. The passion that Lewis feels for his work on fighting AIDS in Africa leaps off of every page.

To have a full understanding of the idiocy of world political and economic organizations that block the most practical and sensible remedies, which can ward off the ravages of the AIDS crisis you must read this book. We have the means to stop this plague right in front of us, but bureaucratic red tape of the most moronic variety keep holding us back.

One of the most powerful sections from his lectures is quoted below:

“I shall inevitably talk a lot about death in these lectures, but let me be intensely personal about it for a moment. I was completely unprepared for the pervasiveness of death. It has shaken me to my core. I must admit that from time to time the enveloping cloak of death, combined with the appalling paucity of response has made me feel futile in the face of the pandemic. I never submit to those momentary lapses because futility leads nowhere, but the way in which death seeps into every crevice of life shift’s ones view of the world . . . There is just no way to convey the atmosphere of death which hangs life a Damoclean hammer over these countries. I have heard the President of Botswana use the word “extermination” to describe what he feels his country is dealing with. I have heard the Prime Minister of Lesotho use the word “annihilation” to describe what he feels his country is confronting. In my last close conversation with the President of Zambia, he used the word “holocaust” to describe what he feels his country is facing. In June 2005, the new deputy Prime Minister of Namibia said publicly that her country was “on its knees”. Its heartbreaking to see the Africa I once knew reduced to such desperation”.

Probably one of my most fun moments of the evening was making Stephen Lewis blush as he signed my book. I told him I would proudly wear a Stephen Lewis for PM button any day! (sigh) One can only wish.

### **WEBSITES WORTH VISITING**

**The Stephen Lewis Foundation:** [www.stephenlewisfoundation.org](http://www.stephenlewisfoundation.org)

**Grandmothers to Grandmother Campaign:** [www.grandmotherscampaign.org](http://www.grandmotherscampaign.org)

**Grandmothers of Steel:** [www.grandmothersofsteel.blogspot.com](http://www.grandmothersofsteel.blogspot.com)

**City of Hamilton's Mundialization Committee:** [www.mundialization.ca](http://www.mundialization.ca)