

# Tiny symbols of hope

Little Travellers HIV/AIDS initiative needs your support to keep making a difference

news  
LITTLE TRAVELLERS

Marlo Campbell

“Everybody has this goal of saving the world and doing something positive, and then for some reason they’re not connected to the right opportunities and they lose their idealism,” says Ilan Schwartz, founder of the Little Travellers HIV/AIDS Initiative.

“I want to use this project as an example — to show that all it takes is a couple people to get together with a vision of making a difference.”

Two years have passed since Schwartz returned from a volunteer stint in South Africa, rallied a few friends together, and began selling the tiny, hand-beaded pins known as Little Travellers.

The initiative has definitely made a difference. It’s now raised over \$100,000 for South Africa’s Hillcrest AIDS Centre; money that supports about 100 women, including those personally infected/affected by HIV/AIDS, and those who volunteer as caregivers.

Remaining money has been used to fund a 12-bed respite unit run out of a once-vacant wing of the local hospital, a much-needed addition that Schwartz says is “probably the most significant and important change to the AIDS Centre since I was there.”

He gets teary talking about little Luyanda, an 18-month old orphan who was brought in at the brink of death — so ill his



Selling Little Travellers helped Francisca Mbele, 73, pull herself out of poverty.

skin was peeling off in sheets and he was cold to the touch. Volunteers fed him with a syringe, cuddled him, and cried for him. Miraculously, he survived and has since been adopted into a loving home

“It’s because of the dolls that they’ve been able to keep this respite unit open,” Schwartz says. While over 75 per cent of the unit’s patients still die, he says that at least now, “they’ve been given the love and the dignity that they deserve.”

Unbelievably, Hillcrest officials learned

this June that the hospital wants its wing back, which means the respite unit will be evicted in February 2008. An architect has already stepped forward with plans for a new building, but the centre now needs to raise \$2 million rand (about \$290,000 CAD) for construction costs.

“That’s been some added incentive for the Little Travellers community,” Schwartz says grimly.

Now in his third year of med school at the U of M, the 25-year-old divides his time between schoolwork and marketing, trying to keep the momentum going.

His latest scheme is a photo contest, cooked up over drinks during a trip back to Hillcrest this summer. People are to send in pictures of their Little Travellers (with prizes courtesy of Hillcrest), and the best of the bunch will be displayed alongside photos taken by the beaders themselves at an exhibit hosted by the Durban Art Galley in early spring. Deadline for entries is Oct. 15.

Meanwhile, a group of teachers are creating lessons centred around the

dolls — a project spearheaded by a Grade 3 teacher from Fisher Branch, Man., who was given a Little Traveller as a gift — while other volunteers have begun stockpiling the pins for the upcoming holiday season.

True to form (and unable to resist the opportunity) Schwartz describes each one as a “magical emblem of hope in hardship,” and says they make great gifts.

For more information, check out [www.littletravellers.net](http://www.littletravellers.net)

# Taxes and death are inevitable...

But poverty shouldn’t be — which is why the province should use our tax dollars to fight it



...and another thing!

Marlo Campbell

I approach the issue of taxation with a hefty dose of empathy — the ability to identify with another person’s experience, even if you haven’t actually walked a mile in their shoes.

While I might not benefit directly from everything my tax dollars buy, I understand the value of a system of wealth redistribution in which governments take a cut of our earnings and use it to deal with things that we as individuals can’t. That’s what living in a society is all about.

I do have a problem with our *current* system of wealth redistribution, however. Specifically, my problem is that it’s not helping our country’s less fortunate in the way that it should.

Helping poor families should be a high priority — a task funded with the same passion and fervor as military missions or infrastructure repairs. Instead, when it comes to using tax money for anti-poverty strategies, people get all weirded out.

Part of the problem has to do with the way we stereotype poor people — as lazy, stupid, and basically deserving of the messes they find themselves in. (God help them if they dare have kids — on several occasions, I’ve come across the opinion that people on social assistance should be sterilized so as not to breed another generation of welfare bums.)

The other part of the problem has to do with how governments are dealing with this issue. In 1989, federal politicians unanimously promised to eliminate child poverty in Canada by the year 2000. It’s now 2007, and nothing much has changed. Why?

A new report, *Summoned to Stewardship*, provides the obvious answer: significant policy changes will yield significant reductions in poverty rates, while minuscule tinkering with the status quo will yield diddly-squat.

Consider what’s happened in Quebec and Newfoundland/Labrador: several years ago, both provinces adopted comprehensive anti-poverty action plans, complete with time-lines and goals to which they would be held accountable. Governments raised welfare rates and indexed them to inflation, introduced additional child benefits, increased the availability of subsidized child care and expanded drug coverage for low-income people. In short, they got serious.

In five years, the child poverty rates in both provinces have plummeted — a whopping 40 per cent in Quebec and 39 per cent in Newfoundland/Labrador.

In contrast, Manitoba has tweaked our existing social assistance policies without establishing any measurable targets with respect to poverty reduction. We’ve chosen to tinker, and our child poverty rate reflects our efforts — in five years, it’s dropped by only 13.8 per cent, giving us the second-highest rate in Canada.

With the capacity for empathy, we shouldn’t have to be poor to understand poverty, its causes, its consequences on quality of life and human dignity, and the solutions needed to end it.

The more apathetic we are, the easier it is for our governments to ignore the issue. Ultimately, though, governments work for us. Our taxes pay their salaries, and if we demand it, they’ll do what we want with the money we give them.

Housing and child care, anyone?

# The numbers don’t lie

New study links rising poverty rates to rising number of single-parent families

news  
POVERTY

Marlo Campbell

Are Canadian social policies adjusting to our changing family structures?

According to 2006 Census data released on Sept. 12, the number of married-couple families in this country has declined over the last five years, while the number of common-law-couple families and lone-parent families has increased.

In Winnipeg, 35,010 families are now headed by single moms and dads — an increase of 8.1 per cent — with the overwhelming majority of these families (28,885) headed by women.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

Single women with children have the highest poverty rates of any family type, and new research published by the Prairie Women’s Health Centre of Excellence confirms that low-income moms are still struggling to make ends meet.

Researchers interviewed 56 women — most of whom were raising their children alone — who used the services of four Family Resource Centres, including the Andrews

Street Family Centre and Wolseley Family Place in Winnipeg, and two centres in rural Manitoba. Twenty-nine service providers and centre volunteers were also interviewed.

Rachel Rapaport Beck, the study’s co-investigator, says the goal was to recognize women as experts in their own experiences, and to that end, *Including Low-Income Women with Children* lists six key issues identified by the moms as integral to improving their current situations: the need for safe, affordable housing and accessible child care, more access to health and social services, food security, education, and a safe, nurturing place to go for support.

Tax cuts remove money from these types of programs and services, Rapaport Beck says, while poverty itself has become highly stigmatized.

“The dominant discourse is one of blame,” she says. “It’s that whole mythology that you get what you deserve, and if you fight hard enough, you can claw your way out of poverty.”

“There’s this idea that the government, through policy, has very little impact, when in fact, they do — they have a huge impact.”

Echoing the findings of *Including Low-Income Women with Children* are those of a national study, *Summoned to Stewardship*, which was sponsored by Campaign 2000, a national non-partisan network committed to ending child and family poverty in Canada.

The group is disappointed that Canada’s child poverty rate remains virtually unchanged — in 2005, it was 11.7 per cent — and it’s advocating for a 25 per cent reduction by 2012, and a 50 per cent reduction by 2017.

To achieve this, they’re recommending policy changes which include an increased minimum wage, indexed social assistance rates, and universal accessibility to — you guessed it — safe affordable housing and child care.

“It is fair that people working have more income than people not able to work,” says Laurel Rothman, Campaign 2000’s national coordinator.

“But we would also argue it’s fair that those who are not working not be left in destitution.”

Although Manitoba’s child poverty rate has decreased by 13.8 per cent since 2000, our rate is still the second highest in Canada, hovering just under 18 per cent.

Rapaport Beck is not surprised, and says reductions in child poverty will only come when we support low-income families. That means policy-makers in all levels of government need to make the necessary changes in order to help break the cycle of poverty once and for all.

“There needs to be a recognition that this is not an acceptable way for people to live,” she says. “Keeping people poor is not in anyone’s best interest.”