

Uganda came to the Blues and Jazz Festival

Last Saturday, June 1, at the Orangeville Blues and Jazz Festival, there was an exciting new act on Broadway, just in front of the Town Hall. They sang and drummed and danced, bringing people watching them into the action.

The entertainers were young, in their teens. The music was deeply energetic and their bodies flew and pounded with the rhythms that echo our oldest souls.

These were the children from Uganda and theirs was the music of Africa, lifting the listeners with a joy so basic, it was fundamental. This is the Neema Children's Choir. The music they were playing, singing and dancing appeals to the listener in a way that is hard to understand, outside its vibrancy. The intensity but joyousness of the dancing, the light within the dancers, their total commitment, in the moment, to the music, is the kind of captivation that is present in the best of jazz.

When their section was finished and they had cleared their instruments, we happened to meet their guardian and director for the trip, Pastor Francis Daniel Mutibwa, and to ask how they came to be here in Canada and in Orangeville.

He told the Citizen, "We've been doing this and coming to Canada since 2013, every year, in the summers. We are to raise awareness of the stories of the suffering of the children in Uganda. They are the victims of HIV which has killed so many of their parents. All of these children are orphans, as I am myself."

He said, "I was raised by a priest at a Bible college in Uganda. I come to give back to the community that raised and cared for me. I am a pastor myself," he explained. "I came to Canada as a missionary to give small help and it meant I could bring the kids choir. They could dance and give testimony."

"We have a lady with us, Mama Palua. We go to schools everywhere and festivals in Barrie, Orillia, Midland and, now, here. The Lord lead me here. Canada has touched Africa; many missionaries have come to Africa to help and do good there. Many missionaries have studied in Canada."

In fact, while he did not tell us so, Pastor Mutibwa and his wife, Winfred Tumu Mutibwa have been raising this choir of children, ages eight to 18, by running their orphanage Naioth Children's Home. Here is a long term home for 25 youngsters and a temporary shelter for those in need.

The Neema Child Project was founded here in 2016. It is a Canadian, faith-based volunteer program within DevXchange, a registered Canadian charity.

In Uganda, half the population are people under the age of 16.

"This is a critical time for Uganda, as all these youngsters grow up," Pastor Mutibwa pointed out. "And we are working to make sure they get education. We raise money for their education and all their needs, especially to send girls to schools, to give the power of education to girls. Also to provide shelter for the children, food."

From their on line information, "through education ... a child's life can be positively impacted and hope can be created. ...well educated children, with hope and inspiration ..will develop into community leaders who ...develop ways to lead their people and their country out of poverty."

Said Pastor Mutibwa, "The money we raise pays for the choir and their experience of coming to Canada and bringing to the music of Africa to festivals, but it also helps to pay for children in Uganda; many are homeless."

Many are likewise being raised by their grandparents, who are elderly and need assistance.

In their mission to bring their music to Canadians in all venues, including churches, markets, community events, summer camps, they are pleased to go to private events too and can be booked to attend those and entertain guests at parties or functions.

Part of Francis Daniel Mutibwa's life is also taken up by the Masunkwe Sustainability Project, which is a long term plan of acquiring 20 acres on which to farm and raise live stock sustainably, to drill water well, build homes, a school, a church and a larger orphanage, with a view as well to bringing children and families out of overcrowded slum areas.?

To book the choir or find out more about Neema Child Project and all the work that is being done in Uganda, the website is neemachildproject.org. At the very least, it makes interesting reading.