

Grandmothers stand united in Canada and Africa

By David Lea
OAKVILLE BEAVER STAFF

In many parts of Africa, when a person gets old their children become their sole means of support.

For many of these seniors however, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has not only robbed them of their children, but also left them in a position where they must care for their orphaned grandchildren.

Oakville grandmothers groups, who are fighting to support these African grandmothers, heard all about this predicament at The Kensington retirement residence Thursday in a presentation by ROTOM (Reach One Touch One Ministries) Director and Founder Kenneth Mugayehwenkyi of Uganda.

It was part of the launch party for Halton's Stride to Turn the Tide Walk, an annual fundraiser for the Grandmothers to Grandmothers Campaign of the Stephen Lewis Foundation, which will take place here June 9.

Those at Mugayehwenkyi's presentation also heard about how just a few dedicated people can make a real difference in the lives of many.

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A HELPING HAND: Kenneth Mugayehwenkyi, executive director of Reach One Touch One Ministries (ROTOM) spoke to Halton of rural grandmothers in Africa who are raising their grandchildren and holding their communities together as the result of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in sub-Saharan Africa.

communicate to them is to thank them very much because grandmothers in Canada have stood with grandmothers in Africa for a long time now. Most of the support we get is from grandmothers here," said Mugayehwenkyi.

"Secondly, I want to give them a message of hope. To tell them that it is

possible to turn the tide and change the impact of HIV/AIDS if we just continue. I would encourage them to just keep going."

Born in a remote Ugandan village in 1968, Mugayehwenkyi immigrated to America where he began a promising career as a social service worker.

During this period he and his wife

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Kenneth Mugayehwenkyi, executive director, Reach One Touch One Ministries

Miriam sponsored two orphaned girls in Uganda, ages five and seven, who were living in the care of their elderly grandmother after their parents' death.

"On one of my visits home I went to visit them. The first thing I saw was that their house was really broken down. I was afraid it would collapse on them so I helped them to build a new house," said Mugayehwenkyi.

"During that process I watched this family and I could not tell who was helping the other. The children are too young. The grandmother is too old. The grandmother was

depressed, stressed, lonely and miserable because she had lost her whole family."

Mugayehwenkyi said the experience had a profound impact on him and forced him to question why he was working in America when there were so many suffering in his homeland.

After returning to Uganda, Mugayehwenkyi began by just giving the grandmother of his sponsor children someone to talk to and helping her around the house.

She directed him to some friends of hers who were in the same situation and also needed help.

As time went by, Mugayehwenkyi became aware of other basic needs these grandmothers and grandchildren had, such as medical care, which were not being met.

Eventually Mugayehwenkyi was able to get some funding from the Stephen Lewis Foundation (SLF) and bring on staff to create ROTOM.

"I started this organization nine years ago and we now reach out to 600 older people and 120 grandchildren in Uganda," he said.

"When AIDS took away their children, who are their providers, it took

See Stride page 11

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