

Woman on a mission

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Her personal loss has given AIDS orphans a chance in life

Albina du Boisrouvray has lived a charmed life—spent her childhood in New York, traveled around the world and settled in the Canton of Valais in Switzerland.

She was a successful producer, having founded Albina Productions that produced 22 films in 17 years; founded a literary magazine and ran the real property and hotel business of her family. If it were a fairytale, there would have been a happy-ever-after ending.

But tragedy struck. On a mission to Mali in 1986, du Boisrouvray's 24-year old only son Francois-Xavier, who was already then a rescue pilot, died.

"It took me a while," du Boisrouvray says describing her pain and sense of loss.

Part of her may have died when her son perished but her loss has given countless children a chance in life.

In 1989, she decided to sell her inheritance, including some of her father's prized collection, which drew close to US\$100 million.

"I sold these things that were not part of our lives five years before (Francois died). We were already thinking about selling things that we don't need or the business that we don't need," she says recalling her plans together with her son.

The plans did push through, for a greater cause. "It was a tool. It was a seed money to be able to set up something, to continue best Francois's sense of rescue and also the things that he is deeply interested in." Half of the money was devoted to Francois's personal interests such as scholarships to his alma mater, the University of Michigan. The other half was devoted to programs on AIDS.

"We wanted to continue his spirit of rescue so we chose what was coming up as the big, big disaster from which one could rescue in a large scale, which is the AIDS epidemic. And because Francois was a child and he cared very much about the children and I cared about the children," du Boisrouvray says.

In Francois's memory, she, along with family and friends founded the Association Francois Xavier-Bagnoud (FXB International), which focuses on caring for children orphaned by the AIDS pandemic.

"As they (children) have a very short life to live, I wanted them to have the best quality of life...rescuing them from suffering, from lack of love and to give the best quality to compensate the short quantity of life."

FXB started to build houses for AIDS orphans during the time when anti-retroviral drugs were not available yet, explains du Boisrouvray. But when the drugs became available, FXB's focus shifted. It pioneered an integrated approach to help Aids orphan by integrating them to mainstream society, with the support of family members and community and by inter-linking health and access to basic rights. This kind of holistic approach to developmental health worked well in Uganda and other parts of Africa.

"We should really try to keep pushing families to keep the people at home. And if they want to die at home, let them die at home. And if they want to go to the hospital, help them go to the hospital and accept them as patients," she says adding that 'ghettoing' people with AIDS does not help in the de-stigmatization process.

FXB offers comprehensive support to families and communities in 18 countries in Asia, Europe, Africa and Latin America, the idea of which is to rescue people from poverty.

The model communities in Asia—India, China and Thailand—started two years ago but FXB has been in these countries for more than a decade. Du Boisrouvray hopes to establish another one in Burma where FXB has also been active.

Despite making life better for countless AIDS orphans, du Boisrouvray still hopes "to see a more acute awareness of all the governments of the world of the plight of these children...who are slowly drifting from the global society and in deep misery because they don't have access to their basic rights".

Her son Francois would have been so proud of her. And if she could talk to him now, she would ask him if he is pleased of what she has done to continue his commitment. Du Boisrouvray says with a nod, "I think he would."