

She's adopted the world's AIDS orphans as her cause

By Helena Smith, Globe Correspondent | April 9, 2007

JAIPUR, India -- When Countess Albina du Boisrouvray appeared at the litter-strewn railway station of this chaotic regional capital last month, she was met with paroxysms of euphoria. Among the assembled crowd of children, everyone, including the freshly washed toddlers tugging at the hems of her traditional Salwar kameez, wanted a kiss and a hug from the warm-eyed stranger.

It was quite a different reception from her last visit, a year earlier. Then, the French campaigner encountered the runaway children who have made Jaipur Station their home, milling around in rags, bruised, dirty, and malnourished. This time they were apple-cheeked, wide-eyed, even buoyant.

"When I was last here they were all coughing and spitting and scratching," said du Boisrouvray, founder of AFXB, the world's preeminent nongovernmental organization for orphans affected by AIDS. "Now that they've been given access to medicines, to basic rights, I can really see the difference. These children need help. They could very easily become vectors of the disease."

Health and human rights are what du Boisrouvray (pronounced doo bwa-ru-vray) know best. As the creator of the first global center dedicated exclusively to the two, at the Harvard School of Public Health, the crusader probably has as much hands-on experience in both as anyone.

Tomorrow, 14 years after its founding, luminaries from the fields of health and economics will meet in Boston to map out the center's future. Amid worrying signs that AIDS orphans are on the rise, du Boisrouvray estimates there will be as much 100 million by 2010. She feels renewed debate is needed on how best to deal with the crisis.

The center is the academic and advocacy arm of AFXB, an organization that has set up housing for abandoned and HIV-positive children in Washington, D.C.; Newark, N.J.; Brazil; Colombia; India; Thailand; and Uganda. Through its humanitarian programs, it has reached more than 1.4 million people in some of the remotest corners of the world.

Du Boisrouvray, who injected \$20 million of her personal fortune into establishing the institution -- at the time, the biggest gift ever to the School of Public Health -- will be there. Other luminaries, such as Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, will also attend.

"Albina has been a strong advocate of children orphaned by AIDS since the early days of the pandemic, at a time when few people had the understanding, courage, and determination to make their voices heard," said Peter Piot, executive director of UNAIDS.

Unlike other organizations, AFXB has won plaudits not so much for its philanthropy (du Boisrouvray said she does not believe in hand-outs) but for its ability to teach AIDS-affected communities self-reliance in the face of grinding poverty and ignorance.

In India, some 5.7 million people, more than in any other country, have been infected with the AIDS virus, according to UNAIDS. All too often, it is orphans who have remained the invisible victims of the health crisis.

Few people know this better than the indefatigable, no-nonsense du Boisrouvray. For the past 18

years, she has exploited the advantages of immense wealth and a mental acuity that in earlier days saw her establish one of France's most successful movie production companies. But whereas other do-gooders happily dispense with six-figure sums from the comfort of their conference rooms, du Boisrouvray prefers to get dirty, upset, and even horribly exhausted in her search for practical, low-cost solutions to the chronic problems caused by the disease.

"I do walk my talk," she said as she monitored the progress of projects in India. "But people always have to put you in a box. Yes, I invested three-quarters of my money in a foundation, but I don't consider myself a philanthropist. I also fit the social worker box, the human rights activist box, the lobbyist box, and design my own programs for AIDS orphans and all our other initiatives."

It is a caprice of fate that the twice-divorced du Boisrouvray is walking this talk at all. At the time of her birth in Paris in July 1941, her maternal grandfather, the Bolivian tin magnate Simon Patino, was one of the richest men in the world. As the daughter of the French count Guy du Boisrouvray, whose blue-blooded connections crisscrossed Europe, she seemed destined for a hedonistic life of luxury and society parties.

But just as cognizant of her Bolivian roots -- "I recognize my mother in a lot of women that I work with" -- she also became aware of social injustice early on. Growing up on Fifth Avenue -- she was raised in New York until age 6 -- she still vividly recalls the unhappiness she saw etched on the faces of residents in Harlem.

"We'd be in the car, en route to Connecticut or Long Island, and we'd pass through Harlem and I'd see all those derelict houses, as if they'd been bombed, and the poverty and misery, and the contrast struck me as so unfair."

In her teens, du Boisrouvray was reading the likes of "The Death of Ivan Ilich," Leo Tolstoy's famous critique of the materialism and insincerity of privileged bourgeois culture.

By the time she was in her 20s, living in Paris, she said she was a militant anticapitalist, participating in the student protests of 1968, and hanging out with Maoist and other leftist groups. In 1978, the charismatic countess stood as a candidate for the Friends of the Earth party in parliamentary elections.

Then tragedy struck. On Jan. 14, 1986, she was notified that her only child, Francois Xavier Bagnoud, a rescue pilot, had been killed during a mission in Mali. A sandstorm had brought his helicopter down. He was 24. "Francois was my central pillar. I was shattered," she said.

Her life poised to become a slow diminuendo into despair, she decided in 1989 to turn her grief into a gift for others by selling off an inheritance that included prime real-estate, jewelry, silver, a fabulous pre-Columbian art collection, and paintings by masters such as Auguste Renoir. Together with her film company, the entire lot amounted to \$100 million.

Du Boisrouvray then founded AFXB in her son's name (the A stands for Association) to perpetuate "his compassion and rescue spirit."

"I would have been too ashamed, after all my loud anticapitalist protests, to have done anything else."

Few people or organizations have made more of a difference than she has.

"AFXB has saved me," said a smiling Iswar Chand, 16, who has lived on the tracks at Jaipur for five years. "Before I was into drugs. Now its doctor has made me better and I have a new life designing jewelry."