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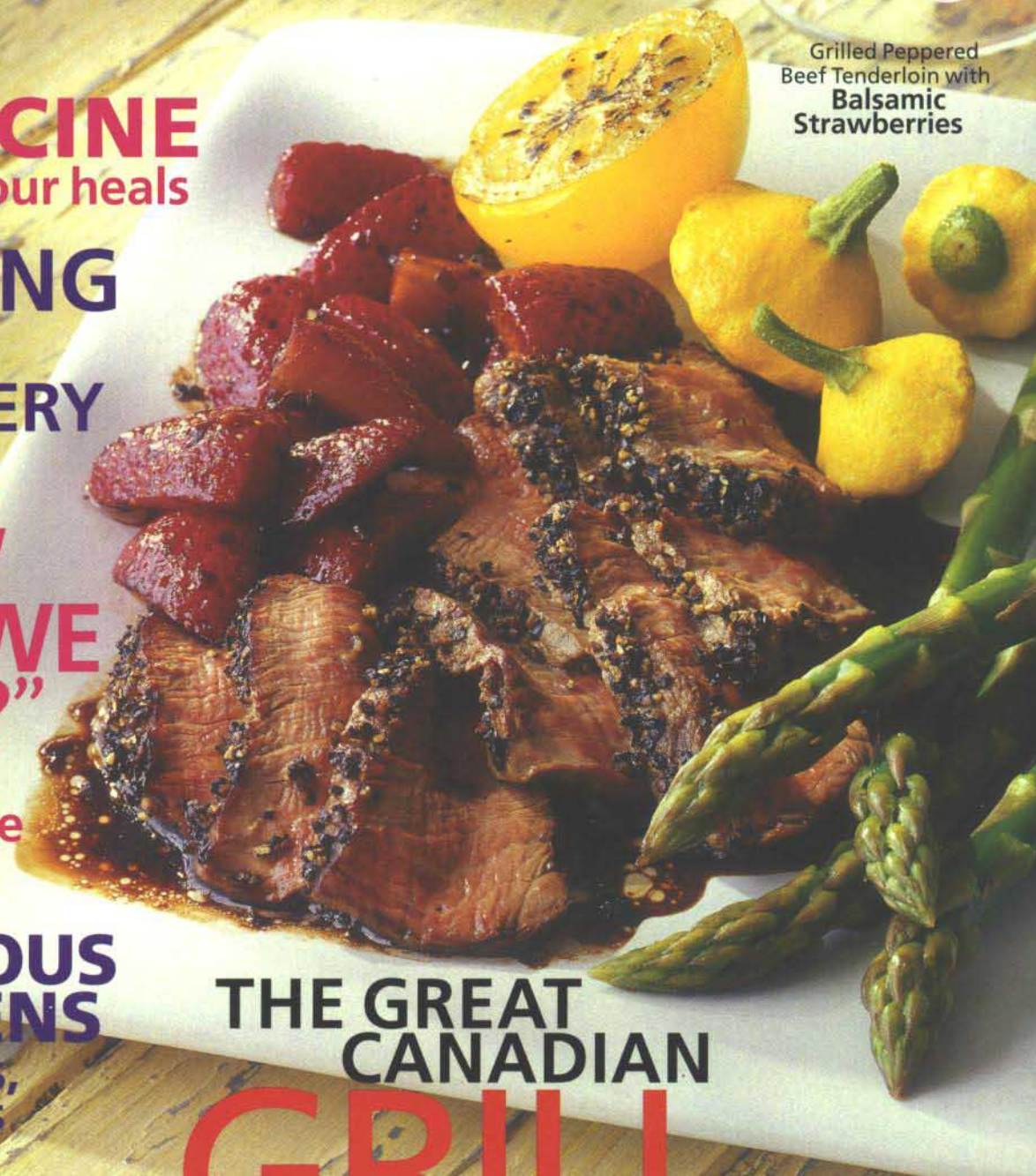
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THE GREAT CANADIAN

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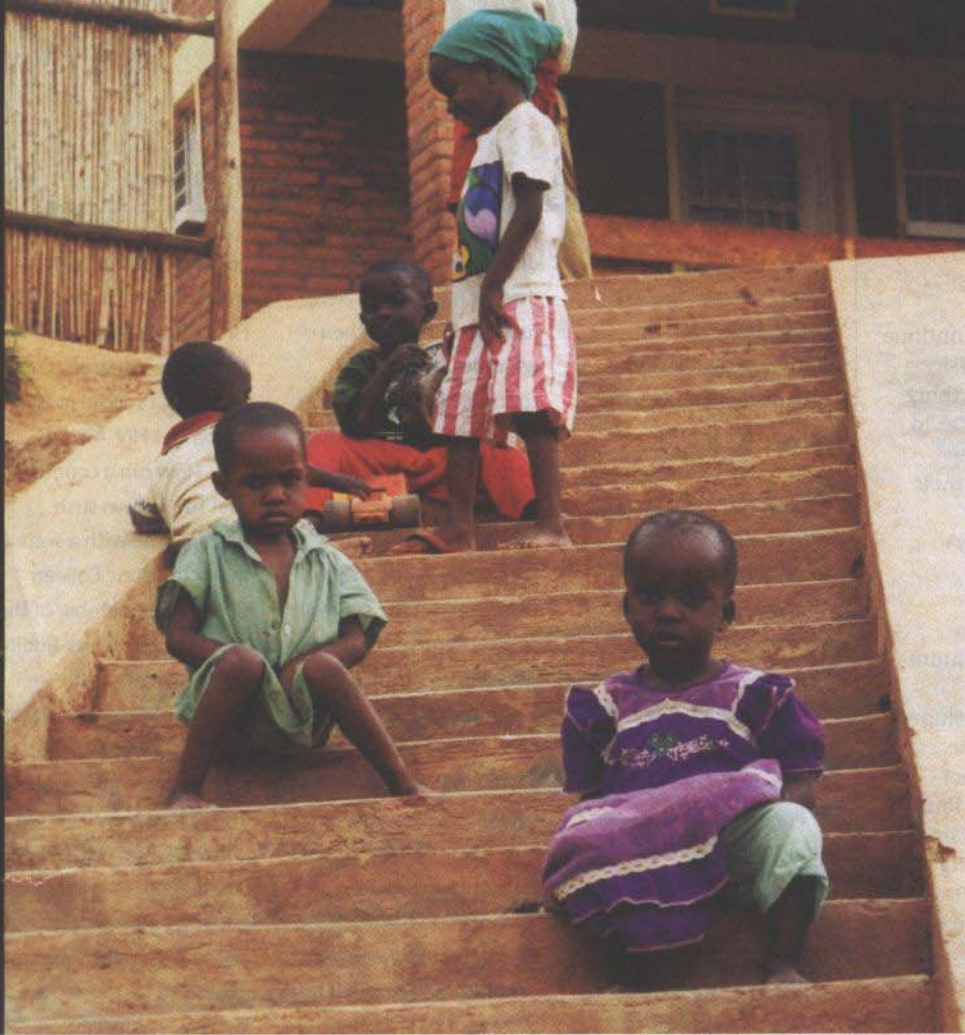
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“What Can We Do to Help?”

After hearing how the wealthy West is committing “mass murder by complacency” regarding AIDS in Africa, a small Canadian university stepped forward with an idea. Now St. Francis Xavier University is setting an example for the rest of the world.

By Silver Donald Cameron



Though they're worlds apart, St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, N.S. (opposite), and the Amidor Orphanage in Kigali, Rwanda (left), share a close connection.

Zimbabwe and Swaziland, more than 30 per cent are infected. Half of the poor families in Malawi are affected, including farmers, which means that food is becoming scarce. Zambia produces about 1,000 teachers a year – and loses about 2,000 annually to AIDS. Millions of dead parents have left armies of orphans behind. Strained beyond bearing, the social order is gradually disintegrating. What is unfolding in Africa is a catastrophe of biblical proportions.

"Ambassador Lewis," asked Coyle, "what can our university do to help?"

This is not the sort of question that university administrators usually ask, but then Coyle is no ordinary administrator,

and St. Francis Xavier is not your run-of-the-mill university.

Founded exactly 150 years ago, StFX looks like everyone's idea of a small-town liberal-arts institution. Its red brick Georgian buildings and 3,800 students dominate the serene cathedral town of Antigonish. Its alumni include Brian Mulroney, Frank McKenna, members of the Rankin Family and Allan J. MacEachen, who was a young professor at StFX when he began his illustrious political career. Last year the annual *Maclean's* ranking of colleges and universities judged StFX the best small university in the country.

Although it attracts students from far afield, StFX is also unusually close to its home community. Most of its students come from Nova Scotia, including Cape Breton, and many continue to live in the area after graduation. Their badge of belonging is the gold "X ring," which bears a raised black X on a gold background. In eastern Nova Scotia, you are likely to see the X ring on the finger of your doctor,

The children at the Amidor Orphanage in Rwanda had never heard of Halloween, but they squealed and laughed when the pirate, the witch and the mouse came through the door. The masked visitors made scary noises, but they passed out candy and painted the children's faces. And the children knew the people behind the masks: three young Canadians who frequently visited them to sing songs and play games.

Rob Ives, Jessica MacKay and Cathleen Connell – all in their early 20s – are recent graduates of St. Francis Xavier University – "StFX" – in Antigonish, N.S. In Kigali, Rwanda, they worked full time as part of a remarkable program called Xtending Hope Partnership, one small university's homegrown effort to fight the HIV-AIDS juggernaut, which threatens to destroy whole societies in Africa.

Xtending Hope was sparked when Mary Coyle, the vice-president of St. Francis Xavier University, heard an impassioned address by Stephen Lewis,

the United Nations' special envoy for HIV-AIDS in Africa. Lewis's message was simple: with enough money and people power, the AIDS pandemic can be stopped – but the wealthy West is standing idly by, watching with "pathological equanimity" while Africans are dying by the millions. The First World's inaction and indifference, Lewis has said, amounts to "mass murder by complacency."

Strong words, but this is a plague comparable to the Black Death, which killed one-third of the population of Europe in the 14th century. About 2.4 million people died last year in sub-Saharan Africa, where nearly 30 million – roughly the population of Canada – are living with the HIV-AIDS virus. Three million of those infected are children. Lewis recently visited a Zambian hospital where, he says, "The infants were clustered, stick thin, three and four to a bed." During his visit to the hospital, a child died every 15 minutes.

In several countries, more than one-quarter of the adult population carries the virus. In Botswana, Lesotho,

your child's teacher, your lawyer or your priest.

These nearby alumni often continue their involvement with the university, returning to the campus for everything from short courses and conferences to football games and evenings at the theatre. In due course, they send their own children and students. Not surprisingly, *Maclean's* researchers found StFX at the top of the heap when it came to alumni support.

Alumni support also stems in part from the most remarkable feature of StFX – its deep and enduring commitment to social justice, developed in the early 20th century under the influence of two dynamic professor-priests, Fathers Moses Coady and Jimmy Tompkins. The two were first cousins, Irish Cape Bretoners from the Margaree Valley, and they passionately believed that the university existed to serve the working people of eastern Nova Scotia.

They also believed that if the farm families, men and women in the fishing industry, steelworkers and coal miners could not come to the university, then the university should go to them. So they travelled the region ceaselessly, setting up schools, study groups, credit unions and cooperatives of all kinds – fishermen's co-ops, farmers' co-ops, consumers' co-ops. Many of those cooperatives are thriving to this day.

The commitment of Coady and Tompkins to adult education and social development eventually gained international attention, and their following became known as the Antigonish Movement. At StFX, the international work of the Antigonish Movement is carried on through the Coady International Institute, which trains development workers from all over the world. More than 4,000 students from 120 countries have attended "the Coady," learning to fight poverty and disease through their professional work in education and literacy, health care, sustainable agriculture, environmental management and human rights. They give the Coady a unique worldwide network.

And the director of the Coady is Mary Coyle. After conferring with Lewis, Coyle put together a fact-finding team of

Horror, Hope and Survival

Stephen Lewis directed the StFX effort toward Botswana and Rwanda because both have political leaderships that are committed to the fight against AIDS, and both have effective organizations to partner with StFX. In other respects, however, they are very different countries that face very different challenges.

"I started my work in international development in Botswana 23 years ago," says Mary Coyle, vice-president of St. Francis Xavier University and director of the Coady International Institute. "I went there when I was 25 with my husband and two children, and I had another child while we were there. So these are people I lived and worked with – people I really care about. Botswana is the African success story: it's a strong democracy that has invested the resources from

diamond mining in social development. They were really thriving and then – wham! – AIDS hit the country." The virus affects 38.8 per cent of the adult population, the highest rate in the world. Coyle says, "And now here was the president saying, 'We're talking about the survival of our country.' He also said, 'It's very difficult for me to say that we need outside help again, as we did in the 70s and early 80s, but we do.'"

Rwanda, by contrast, is the nation where Canadian peacekeepers found themselves unable to prevent the 1994 avalanche of genocide that killed 800,000 people in 100 days. It is "dirt poor and still reeling from the genocide," says Coyle. "People are working hard to rebuild their country, keep the peace and address the pandemic. They need all the help they can get." And Rwanda has a strong

political commitment to dealing with AIDS. First Lady Madame Jeannette Kagame sponsors a special program to combat HIV-AIDS.

How can a country that has known such horrors cope with a second major disaster? Colleen Cameron, a member of the Xtending Hope fact-finding team, notes that the two are related: during the genocide, many women were raped, impregnated and deliberately infected with HIV. And yet "when you meet people there, you're impressed with how positive they are," she says. "There's a lot going on in terms of reconciliation. It's mind-boggling to think that you really can move along as a country after something like that – but then you take South Africa and you realize that we in the West can learn a lot from the way that African nations have coped with these catastrophes."

four: herself; Colleen Cameron of the nursing school; Ann Sherman, the chair of the school of education; and Noreen Nunn, an alumni association member. Lewis had suggested they focus on Botswana and Rwanda, and the four flew to Africa in January 2002.

"We had lots of connections set up by Lewis, so we got to see a lot in a short time," says Cameron. "We wanted to find out what was going on – to see what a Canadian university could do and whom we could partner with." The group met with "everybody," including officials, citizens, health workers, volunteers, the president of Botswana and the first lady of Rwanda.

Back in Antigonish, the team organized a public forum on campus. More than 250 people showed up – and Xtending Hope was born. Its goal was – and still is – to support and strengthen African efforts in three areas. First, it would improve the capacity of Botswana and Rwanda to provide training and information to help stop the spread of HIV and care for those suffering its effects – including the 69,000 orphans in Botswana and the 260,000 in Rwanda. Second, it would provide people to substitute for workers felled by illness or death by arranging for StFX graduates to fill in for varying periods as teachers, doctors, administrators and so forth.

Third, it would strive to increase Canadian awareness of the situation in Africa.

The university obtained funding from the Canadian International Development Agency and Human Resources Development Canada for Xtending Hope. Last August seven volunteers began working in Africa.

In Botswana Sarah McDermott of Ottawa worked in Gaborone, the capital city, with the Coping Centre for People Living with HIV-AIDS (COCEPWA). Carolyn Doyle of Toronto worked with COCEPWA in Francistown, nearly 400 kilometres away. Maggie Macdonell and Kim MacPherson – both from Antigonish County – worked at the Shining Stars Orphanage, a “day orphanage” that provides meals, training and recreational programs for as many as 200 children in Francistown.

In Kigali, Rwanda, Rob Ives, the former student-union president from Antigonish, worked with the National Youth Council to help create innovative programs that will educate young people about the disease. Jessica MacKay of Amherst, N.S., is a nurse with the National Association Supporting People Living with AIDS who helped develop a training manual for home care. Cathleen Connell of Miramichi, N.B. – also a nurse – taught public health to nursing students at the Kigali Health Institute and worked in the Kigali Hospital. On weekends the Kigali interns volunteered at the Amidor Orphanage, the unique institution also known as Mariam’s Orphanage.

The orphanage began in June 1994, says Ives, when desperate children who had been orphaned by the genocide were taken in by “an absolutely wonderful woman named Mariam Nyirabuhake.” She was hiding from the carnage herself, but “She loves to help those in need, and she had the idea of opening an orphanage for a very long time. She got the inspiration she needed from the Qur’an,” says Ives.

During the next six months, Nyirabuhake helped place 508 children in foster homes. Now, says Ives, “Rwanda is facing a second genocide of sorts.” In 2001, 49,000 Rwandans died of AIDS, many of them parents. The Amidor



Rob Ives is surrounded by fellow soccer players (left) at the Amidor Orphanage. The StFX fact finders meet with a health-care instructor at the Kigali Health Institute.

“This place prides itself on building communities, and that should carry on when you leave here.”

– Mary Coyle



Orphanage takes in abandoned babies and children whose parents have died from the virus. The staff consists of three nannies and one guard – when Mariam can afford to pay him. In the two small houses, 90 children share 26 beds.

Back in Antigonish, students had formed an undergraduate Xtending Hope Society and had raised \$500 for the orphanage from the student population. At the suggestion of the three Kigali interns, they sent it to Mariam. She bought chicken feed and 100 chicks, which will be raised for both food and income. The arrival of the chicks sent the children into transports of delight.

The first wave of volunteers returned to Antigonish this February, in time to brief their successors. But the interns may be just the beginning. Xtending Hope is strongly supported by the entire StFX community: students, faculty, staff and administrators. But its most effective participants may prove to be its alumni.

Typically, the purpose of a university’s alumni association is simply to pluck the pockets of graduates and socialize, concedes Bill Kiely, a retired teacher and alumni president of

St. Francis Xavier University. But, he says, “We felt ours should go beyond that. StFX has always put an emphasis on social justice, and we thought that emphasis should continue in the alumni association. And it does. With only minimal promotion, we’ve had about 60 alumni offer to work in Africa – medical people, such as doctors and nurses; farmers; teachers; social workers; and all kinds of people.”

Many of the volunteers are former volunteers with CUSO who worked overseas when they were students in the 1960s and 1970s. Now in their 50s, they are well established in their careers, and some are already retired. They can afford to volunteer the time but need their expenses covered. In addition, many midcareer alumni are willing to take a year of leave and spend it in Africa, so the alumni association is talking with the public-service unions, which represent Nova Scotian teachers, nurses and government employees.

“Most of these unions have midcareer leaves and sabbaticals written into their contracts,” says Kiely, “but government cutbacks

have meant that employees couldn't actually take them. But maybe something can be done about that now." In the meantime, Coyle trawls for funds among corporations, government agencies and unions such as the Canadian Auto Workers.

"This is a very special group of alumni," says Coyle. "The XYZ literacy conference and the Peter Gzowski golf tournament are being held here in June, and that was all organized by the alumni. This place prides itself on building communities, and that should carry on when you leave here. You should graduate with a sense of what you should be doing in the world."

Coyle is describing a process that goes beyond education in the usual sense. She is talking about what is known in the Roman Catholic tradition, in which the university has its roots, as *formation*, the shaping of moral and spiritual character. Once considered the true objective of education, it was



Cathleen Connell tends a new baby at the Ruhingeri District Hospital in Rwanda.

intended to produce graduates who would be an inspiration – today we would say a model – for others.

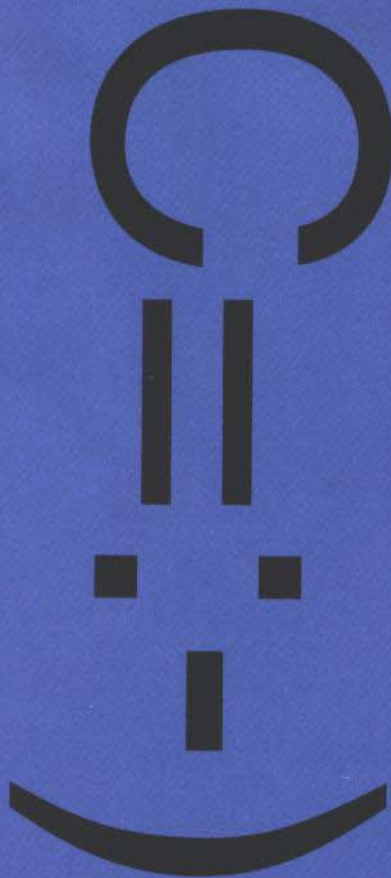
Lewis always viewed Xtending Hope itself as a model that could be adapted by other institutions – not only universities but also hospitals, governments, unions and even corporations. "Now that it's up and running," he says, "I talk about it all the time. When I talk to the Ontario Hospital Association, other universities or cabinet ministers, I talk about Xtending Hope as an example of what can be done. Everything they've done is first-rate, but, to me, what's really great is that they actually

persevered and did it. African countries host hundreds of consultative trips every year – visits from development and health agencies and universities and what have you – and very little ever comes of it. These delegations consume a great deal of time, and the people they're visiting don't have time – they're dealing with a crisis. But these lovely people actually delivered. When I go to Botswana and Rwanda, cabinet ministers and health officials thank me so fulsomely you would think I did it myself. But that tells you how important it is. It is fully and deeply appreciated." ■

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