Cynthia Prime encountered child-led households on her first visit to Africa. At a panel discussion at the Herron School, she introduces an exhibition of photos of the children’s world.

Seeking Hope in Swaziland

“You see the faces of these children,” Prime said, “and you see a desire, a burning desire, a hope to live. Hope Seekers is about the power of small beginnings. We look at the enormity of the challenges and become overwhelmed.”

Swaziland has the highest incidence of HIV/AIDS per capita of any country in the world. The disease hits adults of child-bearing age hardest. In Swaziland, as a generation of parents dies, a generation of children takes on parental roles. Children as young as eight cope with the grief and loss of parents and the stigma of association with the illness. They seek work that will give them the means of feeding and sheltering their siblings, and fend off adults who, with impunity, would rob them or force them into slavery and sexual exploitation.

In 2008, Cynthia Prime answered an invitation to speak in Swaziland. It was her first visit to Africa. There, she encountered household after household with no parents. “I looked into the faces of a thousand children, a whole generation in need of hope, and I knew I couldn’t come back and do business as usual.” Back home, she responded with SOHO, an Indianapolis foundation dedicated to Saving Orphans through Healthcare and Outreach. The foundation began by taking groups to Swaziland to establish rural clinics. “Hundreds would show up at the clinics to get a brief physical. After two years, little had changed. That’s when it occurred to me that strength is like the links of a chain.”

SOHO reached out to other organizations. Prime found help from Josef Kissinger, a photographer who was committed to using his skills “to better the
human condition.” Butler students added their link by assembling the photographs into a book. Students from Ball State University helped with social media. Crispus Attucks Medical Magnet High School in Indianapolis became part of the chain by sending a group of peer leaders, high school students who had undertaken training in substance abuse prevention and AIDS prevention, to Swaziland for a two-week stay, where they interacted with 2,500 high school students. Extending that chain to the largest campus in the city was a conundrum—until Prime and her husband showed up on the wrong night for a program on social entrepreneurship. They met Jane Luzar, dean of the IUPUI Honors College. Three-and-a-half hours of intense conversation later, SOHO had a committed IUPUI campus advocate.

“In my work for the IUPUI Honors College,” Luzar said, “I have a unique role where I interact with units all over campus.” She connected SOHO with the IUPUI Solution Center, a campus unit committed to building and funding university-community partnerships. The Solution Center brought the Herron School of Art and Design, the School of Liberal Arts museum studies program, and the Office of International Affairs to the table. That led to an exhibition of Kissinger’s photographs in Herron’s Marsh Gallery.

Those who visit child-led households in Swaziland bring back horrific stories. Crispus Attucks students told of seeing children using dirty water for drinking, lying on the ground sweating in sweltering, sheet metal shelters, wearing sunglasses to protect eyes infected as a result of the HIV virus. Prime herself spoke of the “grandmothers” (elderly caretakers who may not be related to the children) who have stopped growing corn because marijuana sells better (they call it Swazi gold), and growing it allows them to buy food for their children. She talked to a child who didn’t know when her baby sister was wet or what a pacifier was.

Children quickly learned how to keep their family and groups together. Their households might be sustainable, if it weren’t for forces beyond the children’s control. Two such forces are poverty and lack of education. AIDS orphans are ostracized. “They are nonpersons, without equal rights,” Prime said. “They are dispensable. Often, they work when they should be in school. They are a source of cheap labor.” Another force is the welter of predatory adults who steal anything not nailed down from the children, and who beat and take sexual advantage. “The children don’t even know that what is happening to them is abuse.” Children are not empowered, and abuse is so expected that there are few consequences for the abusers.
Some of these problems might be addressed by improving the living conditions of the children. SOHO has acquired 15 acres of land. The aim is to fill this space with safe houses. Beth Huffman, lecturer of interior design in the School of Engineering and Technology, linked her students into the chain of assistance by setting them the task of designing houses. Prime briefed the group on conditions that the children faced. Houses could not be large, and they needed to be built of local materials. They needed to provide protection so that the children could sleep safely. Students came up with a variety of approaches. One had sleeping quarters in lofts with rope ladders that could be pulled up at night. One had a hideaway room, the existence of which would be known only to the children.

SOHO chose as the winning design Hayley Earley’s plan of a house with a rainwater collection and filtration system, windows placed high on the walls, and a courtyard surrounded by high walls. Earley’s design provided a clothesline and lots of storage. Everything was built in so that adults could not take things away. Huffman approached the Indiana Kentucky Ohio Regional Council of Carpenters Local 1076 for help in building a full-scale cutout of the design and the council’s apprentices, along with council and IUPUI volunteers (45 people in all), spent three weeks acquiring materials and assembling the model. Chris Vance, one of the carpenter instructors, said, “The opportunity to help the students out and to build something that might possibly help these girls in Swaziland was really a gift.” The result was put on display first as part of the photographic exhibit, and then in the lobby of Hines Hall for all on the campus to see.

The plan is to ship the structure to Swaziland for use in a safe house once a container is secured.

Huffman is planning a study abroad course that will take class members to Swaziland in 2015 to build the houses they design. She expects the house plans to change once the students get there. “What will be built there is what works best in terms of safety. We can only speculate here. I think the ability to think of an issue outside of what we experience on a daily basis can only help us.” The hope is that future classes will also design safe houses and take their designs to Swaziland until an entire safe village is created.

Another force that defeats the best efforts of child-led households is disease. The IUPUI Honors College developed a new study abroad program, “Healthcare in the Kingdom of Swaziland,” available to Honors College students and to students in the School of Nursing and in the School of Public Health. The first group went to Swaziland during the summer of 2014. During pre-departure classes, students read about and discussed issues related to health care in Swaziland, to health care and especially HIV care generally, and to the cultural dimensions of working in southern Africa. Once on the ground, they assisted in community to health care outreach at clinics in rural areas. They compiled inventories, help set up nursing stations, or took weight, height, and other basic measurements, and generally assisted the local nurses and doctors any way they needed. They also collected information to assist the nutritionist in organizing parts of the SOHO feeding program.
The nursing students did maternity, pediatric, and intensive care rotations at the hospital in Manzini. Dawn Whitehead, course instructor, notes that the students “were open and willing to do and try everything. In maternity, they saw babies being born; in intensive care, they saw patients die. When you add the dimension of health, the level of seriousness goes up. People were expecting a lot, and it’s important that you respond accordingly.”

The students saw hundreds of patients at the community clinics, and although the arrangement did not offer opportunities to establish close relationships, there were unexpected connections. “I remember two sisters,” Whitehead relates. “The older was very friendly, but the younger one barely said anything. But when we took her outside and let her play on the swing, her whole demeanor changed. No one had told her she could play on the swing. Our schedule then took us to the sisters’ community, where we discovered that the girls didn’t have a lock on their door. The SOHO drivers put on a new lock. At our clinic in their community, the girls took on a leadership role, explaining to the other children what was going to happen and reassuring them.” Similar leaders among the children appeared at other SOHO sites.

“I don’t think the study abroad students realized how connected they would become to the people, especially the children, at the sites,” Whitehead said. “They really forged a deep, deep bond. There was a special cohesiveness with this group. Because they were all so locked in and connected with SOHO and with the local community, when it was time to go they realized that their lives were not going to be the same again.”

Links continue to be forged all over the IUPUI campus on behalf of the Swazi children. Potential connections with public health, with philanthropy, and with medicine, are being explored. Luzar hopes that other Indianapolis high schools will consider programs like the one at Crispus Attucks and that students returning from study abroad will apply the skills they have learned to work with HIV/AIDS in Indianapolis.

“You see the faces of these children,” Prime said, “and you see a desire, a burning desire, a hope to live. Hopeseekers is about the power of small beginnings. We look at the enormity of the challenges and become overwhelmed. Some of us have options; some don’t. When you use what you have, whatever that may be, you make the world a better place for someone who has no options. When you embrace the idea that you have the power of change, it becomes exhilarating.”

Saving Orphans through Healthcare and Outreach (SOHO), www.savingorphans.com
IUPUI Solution Center, www.iupui.edu/~solctr
IUPUI Honors College, honorscollege.iupui.edu
Office of International Affairs, international.iupui.edu
Herron School of Art and Design, www.herron.iupui.edu
School of Engineering and Technology, engr.iupui.edu
Josef Kissinger, www.josefkissinger.com
In 2008 Josef Kissinger, on behalf of SOHO, spent a month in Swaziland taking 8,000 photos documenting the lives of AIDS orphans. These images formed the core of an exhibition last February at the Marsh Gallery in the Herron School of Art. The photographs capture grinding poverty, but also the competence and resourcefulness of children who have had to learn to be parents with no one to teach them how. “I want to photograph in such a way that not only brings dignity to the subject,” Kissinger explained, “but also produces a positive change.”

Prime told the stories behind some of the photos: “You see a picture of a girl walking through a field on her way home from school, but what you don’t know is that for her, this was a dangerous path because as she passes, she remembers that her sister was attacked by a gang right there in that field.” Then there is the photo of the little girl holding a grandmother’s hand. The grandmother joined the household as caretaker, but became incapacitated when she was struck by lightning. The twelve-year-old now had one more member of the family to care for.

Kissinger’s photos also show several sides of the orphans’ condition. “I think it’s important to know what the kids are actually like, so different from what we may be used to. Completely unselfish. We sometimes took candy to them and noticed very often that the older children make sure all the little brothers and sisters have a piece before they get any. They are wonderful and polite, their houses swept and immaculate.” Rachel Philips, of SOHO, confirms the unexpected. “A boy SOHO sponsors lost one parent to HIV and was abandoned by the other. He wants to go to school, but has to work in the fields. He lives in a house with rusted corrugated tin roofing surrounded by a rusted corrugated fence, mostly mud, stone, and sticks.” But she added, “What is creative, though, is that his tiny compound is orderly and well kept. The few clothes he had were folded. There was a chicken in the corner that was going to be his dinner sometime that week. I saw a space in the corner of the yard where he cooked his food and I saw the burns on his forearms from teaching himself how to cook. I was touched by seeing the colored bottles he had collected and put in front of his home. It showed his care, his sense of dignity and pride.”