



University of Phoenix
ONLINE



Get ahead with an
Organizational
Leadership degree.

Earn it at
University
of Phoenix
Online.

>> Click here

TIME

FROM THE MAGAZINE

Sunday, Aug. 6, 2006

Madonna Finds A Cause

She wants to help Malawi. But will people buy the mistress of reinvention as a philanthropist?

By BELINDA LUSCOMBE

Malawi is a Pennsylvania-size country in southeast Africa that has four things in abundance that the West doesn't much covet: AIDS, malaria, drought and tobacco (its major crop, now not so lucrative). On the plus side, it has a functioning democracy and no full-blown war. That may explain why, to date, Malawi has not attracted much attention from the rest of the world. But that's about to change. Malawi will soon be hit by a force that has thrown far more robust countries into chaos. Her name is Madonna.

And being Madonna, she's not going into Malawi quietly. She has already promised to raise at least \$3 million to fund programs that would mostly help orphans there (another thing Malawi has in excess, thanks to AIDS. Of its population of about 13 million, 1 million are children who have lost at least one parent). Ground will soon be broken on an orphan-care center, which aims initially to feed and educate at least 1,000 children a day. She's financing--to the tune of about \$1 million--a documentary about the plight of Malawian children. And she has met with Bill Clinton to see whether they can work together to bring low-cost medicines to the area, as well as partnered with several other aid organizations.

Given that Madonna has never actually set foot in Africa (husband Guy Ritchie went earlier this year), the whole enterprise has the pungent aroma of a coordinated act of publicity. But one of the partnerships she has formed is with developing-world economic guru Jeffrey Sachs (who suffers no dilettantes): an agreement to provide \$1.5 million for one of his millennium villages. They want to end poverty in one community--in this case the village of Gumulira, outside the capital Lilongwe--by simultaneously improving the health, agricultural productivity and education of its people.

"For the last few years--now that I have children and now that I have what I consider to be a better perspective on life--I have felt responsible for the children of the world," says Madonna, resting before a London concert. "I've been doing bits and bobs about it, and I suppose I was looking for a big, big project I could sink my teeth into." The "better perspective" she attributes to Kabbalah, the study of Jewish mysticism. Her co-founder in Raising Malawi, as her new organization is known, is Michael Berg, the head of the Kabbalah center in Los Angeles and one of the driving forces behind the practice's growing popularity. The Malawi care center--which

will be a day camp for orphans whose relatives can take them in but struggle to feed them--will be run by Consol Homes, which does not have a religious affiliation. But the center will offer programs based on Spirituality for Kids, Kabbalah's children's program. Malawian teachers are already being trained to use and adapt it. "One of the main precepts of Kabbalah is that we're put on this earth to help people," says Madonna. "And your job is to figure out how you can help and what it is that you can do."

Why Malawi? It's a nation, after all, that used to enforce, by law, modest dress. Jeans on women are still considered by many to be unacceptable. It doesn't scream Madonna. But that didn't faze Victoria Keelan, the managing director of a Malawian agricultural-supply company, who got in touch with Madonna's Spirituality for Kids foundation a year ago. "She basically said, Look, things are crazy here," says the star, who has not yet adopted the argot of development experts. (Raising Malawi is probably the only aid organization with a staff member who would describe some poorly built wells as "chintzy.") "Victoria said we've got a serious problem here with the orphans and we need your help. And a lightbulb went on."

It's true that as causes go, Madonna did not choose a difficult one to champion. African orphans--photogenic, sympathetic, innocent--are not a hard sell. (An A-list star brave enough to fight for the rights of, say, the mentally ill has yet to emerge--unless acting crazy counts as advocacy.) But she recognized, as she has so often before, an opportunity to really make an impression. "My first thing was, I'm going to call people who I know have money, and I'm going to call people who I know want to make a difference in the world," she says. The first 10 phone calls she made "came out all very positive," as she puts it. "I know it's going to be expensive, but I'm not worried about raising the money because my whole thing is, I'll back it up. I like to go to people and say, I'll put in what you put in. So there's a feeling of camaraderie."

There is also a feeling of fatigue--among people who pay any attention at all to celebrities, with stars who try to turn fascination with them into fascination with those who need help. Madonna is the latest in an endless line of "celanthropists" who have been trying to nudge some of their limelight onto the situation in Africa. And her protestations that "this is why I am famous, so that I can help people," do nothing to stop skepticism. But Sachs, who will accompany her to Malawi in October, is not among the cynics. "Of course there are people who on a fling say something, but that's not what Madonna's doing," he says. "In the very noisy and complicated world that we have, people that reach large numbers of people, like Madonna does, have an extraordinarily important role to play. When they're devoting their time, their money, their name, a lot of effort, a lot of organization skill to all of this, it makes a huge difference. The cynics are just wrong. They don't get it."

In Mphandula, the dusty, thatched-roof town where the orphan-care center is to be built, villagers look blank when shown a picture of one of the most famous women in the world. Since this is a place where people can afford to eat meat or wear shoes only on very special occasions, a place with no electricity or piped water, her anonymity is not surprising. But when the name Madonna is mentioned, they have heard of her: she's the woman

who's building the center for their children. And they have no use for cynicism. "The orphanage project is about serving humanity," says the head man of the village. "It will mean so much to us. We can only ask God to bless this person for her kindness."

With reporting by With reporting by Peter Kumwende/Mphandula, Sarah Lilleyman

Copyright © 2006 Time Inc. All rights reserved.
Reproduction in whole or in part without permission is prohibited.

[Privacy Policy](#)