



Billy Raftery Jr. Chronicles Street Kids

By PATRICK HRUBY

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What the world saw during this summer's World Cup in South Africa: spectacular goals, spirited sports fans, a global coming-out party for a nation still grappling with the toxic legacy of apartheid.

What the world didn't see: the disturbing plight of South Africa's street children.

For much of the last seven years, Billy Raftery Jr. -- the son of well-known college basketball analyst Bill Raftery -- has been living in Durban, South Africa, working with the nonprofit Umthombo Street Child Action organization and the Children Rise foundation to help homeless children escape street life.

Raftery also has been directing "Children Rise," a documentary film about the issue that was previewed in New York City last week and is slated for completion later this year.

Page 2 caught up with Raftery to discuss the project:

You're the son of a famous college basketball analyst. How did you end up making this film?

I was studying film, visual arts [at Columbia University]. Wanted to get into it. I had been around cameras with my dad a lot. Always fascinated me. By chance, one of my best friends from high school was living in South Africa. I went there my senior year Christmas break to surf and party. I was blown away by the evolution of the country, a baby democracy, about six years after apartheid. Everyone trying to figure out where they fit. I stayed in a beautiful beach town, Camps Bay. It was like Hollywood meets Africa, very ritzy. But outside you see all these shantytowns. My friend would say, don't go in there, you'll get raped, stabbed, everything that white South Africans feared. So I wanted to go, like, the next day. We did, and it was the warmest, friendliest place I had ever been. I called my father and said, 'Dad, I'm moving here right after college.' He was excited for my passion.

When it comes to homeless children in South Africa, what's the nature and extent of the problem?

It goes back to the early 1990s, evolving out of the breakdown of the family that the end of apartheid brought on. Kids started popping up on the streets. Poverty is the



No. 1 problem. Then come the abuses: alcohol abuse, physical abuse. There's also a specific cultural issue of "regret" -- when people are married, have kids, break up and then enter new relationships where one partner resents the previous children and becomes abusive. That's a huge issue. What compounds everything is the AIDS/HIV crisis.

How old are these children?

It's a whole mix. My first time in South Africa was 2002. The youngest kids were 11 or 12. I was blown away. We finished filming this year, and today, it's not uncommon to see kids as young as 5 or 6 on the streets.

What is street life like for them?

It's quite an array of abuses. Everything you could think of. They have to beg constantly to get food for themselves. There's child prostitution, physical abuse, a lot of rape. There are two main gangs on the street, the "26s" and the "28s." The 26s are mostly thieves and drug dealers. I've seen kids put a knife against a tourist totally against their will, just because a gangster demands it. The 28s are more into prostitution, the sex trade and child sex slavery. They're also the sodomizers. They have sex with younger boys. It's an animalistic, street power thing. Street kids have to align themselves with one of the gangs for safety. Most go with the 26s.

Anything else?

We try to intercept these kids before they get into this lifestyle. Once they hit the streets it becomes a mathematical certainty that they'll contract HIV and then spread it. Girls will have to prostitute themselves just to win bread for the crew.

How else does this tie into the HIV/AIDS epidemic?

That is part and parcel of what we're dealing with -- a number of these kids are running away from a home where the parents aren't there because they died of AIDS. And the nature of the streets leads to HIV transmission. There's really no statistics on this when it comes to street children. My guess is 75-80 percent of them are infected.

What is local government doing to help?

It's unbelievable. Over here, we count our homeless kids in shelters. Kids there don't even have that option. They'll actually be rounded up by the police and put out of town if there's something international going on. We caught that on film. The cops will put them in a temporary shelter, or just drive them a couple hundred miles



away and have them walk back -- by the time they return, the event is over and the visitors are gone. They sweep the problem under the rug.

Did government preparations for the World Cup have any impact on the story told in the film?

To a point, yes. We filmed the bulk of it before 2007. We went back in 2008 and 2009, and that July was when I saw the most direct correlation. They were doing practice roundups with new trainee cops. Every day I was there, we were chasing police to get that footage. What they were trying to do was have the trainees learn how to round up street children for when the World Cup was in town. To make it easier and get a taste for it, they targeted the kids who were a little small or crippled, literally the ones sitting on the sidewalk and not in their wheelchairs. It was pathetic.

What does your organization, Children Rise, do to help these children?

The first thing is try to build trust with these kids. Show them any bit of care and compassion and they reciprocate it a thousandfold. Our group is led by former street children. The way they approach it is to develop relationships with children, find out the root of the problem at home. What forced them to the streets and what happened once they're on the streets. We're averaging about 500 kids a year off the streets. We've been able to get the children family, to extended family without abusers, or get help from the community.

Is it working?

The one hopeful thing is because of what we're doing, Durban has an all-time low in number of children on the street. In the film, we track two children from age 12 to 19. They finally made it. One's back home and working. The other is with his father.

Is there a sports component to the program?

We have a lot of sports stuff. We have an unbelievable surf program -- our kids are winning all these contests, even though surfing is a very white sport in South Africa. They've taken over New Pier, which is a predominantly white surf spot. Now you go out there and there's like 40 little black kids just ripping it. All of the surf companies there have helped out a lot. At some point my editor and I want to go down and establish a little video film school for the kids. They all want to make rap videos.

What do you hope to accomplish with your film?



We want to destigmatize this population. Put a face to them. Humanize them. The priority is to raise global consciousness about this issue. Hopefully get it into schools, so kids around the country can get excited about helping our surf program, our soccer program. I was apprehensive to put myself in the film, but I want it to connect with U.S. viewers. I'm hoping that what can come from a two-week surf trip in college and not knowing what you want to do with your life can inspire others. You don't have to go to Peace Corps to do something good.

What can someone reading this do to help?

Obviously, what they can do is help our work on the ground with donations. We also have programs where people come over and visit and help out with the kids. You can go to our website to find out more information. Be motivated and encouraged about what's going on with these kids. See that there is room for hope and growth. I didn't know this would take seven years to get this thing done. And I didn't know that these little street kids would end up being my bosses!