

CHILDREN RISE



Story and Photo by Carl Lindstrom

Billy Raftery describing how 'a kid from New Jersey', got introduced to the location for his new documentary film *Children Rise*:

"I was born in Montclair, New Jersey," said Billy. "But I went to South Africa to visit some of my friends. When I got to Durban, I saw a sea of shanty's to the Horizon." He recalls. "I told my friend, who lived in Durban at the time, we gotta go in there!, my friend said, 'No way! You go in there, you're gonna get stabbed and raped!'"

Billy wouldn't settle for that, and the very next day entered into 'KwaZulu Natal,' (name of the shanty town) only to be taken aback by the friendliness and hospitality of all the people he met.

"These people live in complete poverty and desolation, but they are so welcoming and full of life. It's amazing." Then in a slightly more serious tone, "But most alarming, was the street kids."

After changing his life's course, Billy graduated from Columbia University and moved straight to Durban. Once there, Billy immediately started working with the street kids around his house. He would play basketball with them and buy them food. He'd even go surfing with them, anything to get the kids active. Soon 4 kids turned into 8, then 12, soon he was helping out over 20 street kids.

So Billy decided to use his skill of filmmaking to get the word out, and hopefully, get these kids off the streets. He started the Children Rise Foundation and raised fifteen thousand dollars to get the film started. (Since then, Billy has raised over 500K for the film and for grassroots programs in South Africa.) Billy also connected with Tom Hewitt, chairperson of the Untumbo Charity that helps street kids in Durban, who was a huge help with the film.

Children Rise follows a few street children through their daily lives sporadically throughout the last 6 years. With former street kids behind the camera, this film gives the viewer the raw truth about this critical situation. "They call it Thobela." Billy referring to Peripheral Neuropathy, which is associated with the heavy usage of glue. Glue 'huffing' being the drug of choice among street kids in Durban. "It destroys the connection that the brain has with the nervous system. Ultimately, the children's muscles go into atrophy, from lack of usage, and the body breaks down. It also can cause permanent brain damage." Other side effects are appetite suppression, it keeps them warm, it keeps them awake through the night, and it lets them escape from the unconscionable existence. Billy went on to inform us that the effects can be reversed if the children stop using glue.

"Another problem is the AIDS epidemic." He explains. The Aids Orphan Crisis has now become the prominent producer of street kids in Durban. When the parents die from the disease, they leave behind children as young as 5 years old, to fend for themselves. "One of the goals of Children Rise and the Umthombo Partnership, is to get these kids before they get hooked on street life. Besides the safe haven we have in the Durban city center, we have satellite offices in heavily stricken HIV/AIDS areas where we keep track of the children whose parents have the disease, so when that day comes, we can help them before they ever step foot on the streets."

Billy sounded hopeful when he told us that the number of street kids has declined recently. But the situation is still very fragile, and could get worse with the arrival of the FIFA World Cup in 2010. "We must bring awareness to this problem. We must put it on the forefront." He exclaimed. The government has said that it would sign a contract where it would be illegal for the authorities to round up the street children and dump them outside the city, which is usual protocol. It is a slow process but Billy is hoping that his documentary, and the FIFA World Cup will bring the right kind of attention to these children, and hopefully give them a better chance at life. Children Rise was shown 'out of competition' at the Durban International Film Festival in July of this year. The audience was made up of the street kids themselves. That event also served as the final chapter of the documentary, bringing a little closure after following these kids for 6 years. The world premiere will be happening early-mid in 2010, and Revamp will keep you updated on when and where. If you are interested in helping and even donating to the Children Rise Foundation, please email: info@childrenrise.org

www.ChildrenRise.org.

Watch in HQ (High Quality) to see subtitles

Children Rise Trailer



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