HEROINE

AMY STOKES

Using technology to facilitate communication, this mom is giving South African orphans the gift of a worldwide family.

ALTHOUGH AMY STOKES, 44, didn't grow up using a computer or cellphone, it's the technologies from both these devices that form the cornerstones of her current venture, Infinite Family, an NGO. The organisation links up South African teens affected by HIV and Aids and poverty with adult mentors from 10 countries around the globe, via video chats online. Amy's hope with this programme is that children will "step out of the world they currently know into one that has boundless possibility."

AMY STOKES ON...

➜ Choosing to adopt: "My siblings were adopted, so I grew up knowing that one day I, too, would make that choice. When my husband and I were ready to start a family, we asked, Where are there the most children needing families? The answer was South Africa."

➜ Spotting a need: "When we came to SA [from America] to fetch our son Calder Qhawe, the orphan crisis shocked me. I realised many children didn't have an adult who cared for them. That's how the idea to start video-mentoring began – to give them one person who could invest in them."

➜ The lesson in recognition: "My take on being named a CNN Hero 2011 is that it wasn't me, but the concept that the judges loved. The prize validates what we do for children, and will help us expand our work."

➜ A new definition of family: "I feel we've created a fresh way for people to care deeply for each other."

➜ Respecting heritage: "Calder Qhawe takes African drumming lessons and we cook African meals. It's important that we don't erase our son's background and history."

–As told to Norma Young

To get involved, visit infinitefamily.org

Ayanda Buthelezi, 23

Online mentors made a telling difference to this young man's life.

BEFORE INFINITE FAMILY:
Orphaned seven years ago, Ayanda became his little brother's guardian. With no extended family to help them, they moved to an NGO home in Johannesburg.

AFTER INFINITE FAMILY:
While at the home, Ayanda was introduced to Infinite Family, and linked up with Betty and Dave Voigt from Pennsylvania, US. Within six months on the programme, he was at the top of his class. He is currently completing an IT learnership on the Gautrain project.

ODETTE VENEZIANO.