

## Worlds away -- but as close as family

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Outside corrugated tin homes in South Africa that have no running water or electricity, orphaned and vulnerable children wash their clothes in a tub and dry them in the wind. Then, in what seems to be an anachronistically warped vignette, they come inside, put on headphones, sit in front of a computer and, through a high-speed Internet connection, wait to teleconference with an American "family" member.

Gail Harper takes her place at the computer in her Forest Hills home and gets ready to make a difference in the life of Mpho (pronounced Em-po) Boleke, a young girl she's never met but knows well. The two are linked through Infinite Family, a nonprofit organization that builds Net families around African children in need.

Amy Stokes of New York and Dana Gold of Munhall, both of whom adopted children from South Africa, started Infinite Family three years ago after Stokes realized that videoconferencing technology could be used to build relationships between American adults and orphaned children in southern Africa. "Pittsburgh has the largest group of volunteers," says Gold, noting there about 25 "Net buddies" here. "We try to match them based on interests, personality and preferences."

The match has worked well for "Auntie Gail" Harper and Mpho, 14, who lives in a shelter in Refilwe, north of Johannesburg, South Africa. "Hello there, sweet Mpho," Harper types in the instant message box to start the conversation. Although they sometimes use the headset that enables them to speak to one another, generally, Harper and Mpho communicate using instant messaging, in which their typed responses appear more quickly as they watch each other through the magic of videoconferencing.

The two talk about everything from school work to their shared love of music -- Harper's daughter, Abbie, is a musical theater professional in New York City, and Mpho loves to sing. When the conversation turns to the American rap music Mpho listens to, Harper -- after checking lyrics online -- isn't afraid to be a "mom" and tell the teen when the content is inappropriate.

Mpho likes Harper's kindness and that she keeps secrets. Mpho's perspective and positive attitude keep Harper's life in perspective. "My expectation was that I'd be talking to this sad child, and I would do my best to make her happy," Harper says. "Instead, I got a happy child who makes me happy."

Mpho is not an orphan, but she, her mother and sister were displaced because of family circumstances and rescued by a social worker. The teen hopes one day to work with children in need. At Refilwe, Mpho's mother is housemother at one of the five cottages that house six to eight of the 28 children ages 7 to 15 at the shelter. Instead of being upset by her circumstances, Mpho is grateful for an education and that she has more "brothers and sisters," according to Harper.

Street children in South Africa are not like America's runaways, who often are high school dropouts and substance abusers. "The thought of kids having an opportunity and not taking it is incredulous to Mpho,"

Harper says. Because they mostly are children whose parents have died from AIDS, Gold says they are viewed by society as "dead men walking." In reality, infants of AIDS-infected mothers sometimes shed the virus as their own immune systems develop, she says. "We're giving them tools for the future, even if their schools are substandard and their world is full of struggle," Gold says.

By providing children with virtual parents, Infinite family helps them improve the English they are learning in school and hone the computer skills that are vital to future employability, Harper says. "School is very important," Mpho says as she talks to Harper. "We learn things that we don't know and to have a bright future and to learn how to respect." Education and training are changing the status of the orphaned children in their communities.

Infinite Family has partnered with Bombardier, which has locations in West Mifflin and South Africa. Employees at the Johannesburg site mentor the Infinite Family children through job shadowing, career exploration and career testing, Gold says. "They're taking these kids from being part of the dregs of society to being accepted and looked at in a positive way," Harper says.

The number of orphans is growing. By 2010, almost one-fifth of South African children, about 50 million, will be orphaned in a country that also faces an unemployment rate of 23 percent. "We have communities here that, if they are not helped, can affect these countries and their long-term stability," Stokes says. Not only is AIDS rampant, but AIDS education has been poor, with misinformation from even government sources adding to the problem -- such as that males can cure AIDS by having sex with a female virgin. "There are people in very high places who are not enlightened," Harper says.

For Harper, a longtime church and school volunteer, having a chance to help someone without leaving home was a nice change of pace. She also supports other efforts to help impoverished children around the world but likes Infinite Family because she can see the end result of her financial contribution. Before talking to Mpho, Harper checks Infinite Family's Web site to see news from South Africa, such as the problem with anti-immigrant gangs.

"South Africa's been having a lot of violence," Harper says. She mentions it to Mpho, adding, "It must be scary but I understand you're safe." Mpho provides her perspective and explains that South Africans went to Zimbabwe during Apartheid, so now they should be tolerant of the Zimbabwean immigrants.

"I'm thinking you should be the next president of South Africa," says Harper, amazed by the teenager's perspective.

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