



Meet *The Watoto Children's choir*, orphans from Uganda who have been captivating audiences all over the world with their 'Concerts of Hope.'

A plane touches down at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago in 1994. On board are eighteen wide eyed African AIDS orphans, ranging in ages from seven to twelve years. Accompanying them are Canadian missionaries, Gary and Marilyn Skinner, Pastors of Kampala Pentecostal Church - one of Uganda's largest English speaking churches.

With nothing but \$3000 on a credit card, a few personal belongings and a word from God; the choir are about to embark on a journey that will change their lives forever. Their mission is this: to heighten the awareness of Africa's growing AIDS epidemic and raise funds for the newly established Watoto Child Care Ministries: a nonprofit organisation caring for orphaned children in Uganda.

"We arrived in Chicago with sleeping bags, tents and little else," recalls Marilyn. "One of the first things we did was to get hold of the yellow pages and start making phone calls." It was one of those phone calls that would secure them a place to sleep for the night, a week's transport and a much needed mobile phone—on loan from a local Pastor.

With their borrowed mobile phone and an unwavering determination, the Skinners called churches from Chicago to Alabama, booking concerts for their newly formed Watoto choir. "Gary would call Pastors asking them if they would like the choir to come and sing in their church," Marilyn explains. "They'd say, 'When?' and we'd say, 'How about tonight?' And then we'd go into MacDonald's and I'd say to the Manager: 'I have 18 AIDS orphans from Africa; if you give us free food, we'll give you a free concert.' Sure enough, they'd say 'Yes' and we'd get our drums out of the bus and start singing. Everyone had their hearts open to the children. Without fail a teacher would be at MacDonald's who would invite us to their school and then a Pastor's wife at the school, would invite us to their church.

#### God provides for the tour

"Our first tour was also a little overwhelming. To take eighteen children, who hadn't performed anywhere, had never been out of their country and had never seen an escalator or flushing toilet



This page, clockwise from top: a young girl sings in the choir; Rose and Mabel; Students at the school; Opposite page from top: The young choir performs; Men working on the Watoto building

seemed a bit crazy," Marilyn exclaims. "But it was a God idea. God clearly told Gary to put a choir together and take them around the world to speak on behalf of those who can't speak for themselves. I can remember saying, 'But Gary, it takes money to take a choir around the world and a lot of it.'

Un-phased, he simply said, 'God will provide.'"

Despite the enormity of the challenge, God did provide. Their first offering brought in \$30,000. Money raised from an amateur choir recording before leaving Uganda enabled them to purchase an old school bus, providing transport to schools, churches and campgrounds from Florida to Georgia.

"Overall the tour raised enough money for us to build six Watoto homes," says Marilyn. "We knew we had his divine favour for these kids – God opened many doors for us."



## HIV infected orphans

# SING FOR THEIR LIVES



### Impacting the world

Today the doors are still opening, with more than three to six choirs performing at any one time in the USA, Canada, Europe, Asia and Australia. Incredibly, doors have also opened at the White House, the Scottish Parliament, the House of Lords and here in Australia, at our own Parliament House. The choir has also appeared on the Oprah Winfrey Show and has personally met Angelina Jolie. And while the costumes, the choreography and the music have noticeably improved according to Marilyn, the mission remains the same: to be ambassadors for the 15 million children who have been orphaned due to AIDS, a pandemic that's been described as one of the biggest threats to the planet.

In Uganda alone, more than 880 million children have lost one or both parents due to AIDS. "I believe that the cry of these children greatly offends God," declares Marilyn. "God lovingly impels us to pick these children up from the dirt and take them from a kingdom of desperation to a kingdom of purpose."

So it was with purpose and conviction the Skinners founded Watoto Child Care ministries in 1992. "I was visiting a hospital with Marilyn Hickey when I came across a little boy, Frank, who was wasting away from the AIDS virus," says Marilyn. "He

### MEET JULIET

Juliet has a dazzling smile, as warm as the African sun. But like many of the Watoto children, behind the smile lies a past fraught with tragedy and rejection. When Juliet was a baby, she was abandoned by her birth mother. Her father soon remarried, but already saddled with children of her own, her new stepmother had no interest in Juliet. She was another mouth to feed, creating a burden on the already-stretched family finances. Juliet found herself beaten and unloved.

She was passed over to a grandmother, but age and finances meant she was unable to properly care for Juliet.

Feeling unwanted by her real family, Juliet found a home at Watoto. She now has a new mum with enough room in her heart to love Juliet and three new sisters and four brothers.

Juliet has renewed hope for her future as she enjoys going to school. Here, she is learning to pray and participates regularly in sport, excelling at volleyball and running. She wants to be a lawyer when she grows up and looks forward to showing everyone how her life has changed because of Watoto.



**“Our first tour was also a little overwhelming. To take eighteen children, who hadn't performed anywhere, had never been out their country and had never seen an escalator or flushing toilet seemed a bit crazy...”**

couldn't have been more than eight years old and he was lying in a bed with no-one visiting him - unwanted, uncared for and unloved. It was in that moment, I knew that God had moved in my heart. So we began rescuing children and building Watoto Villages.”

### **A safe haven for children**

Now a haven of peace, security and support for little boys like Frank, Watoto villages place parentless children in homes with families. Each home accommodates eight orphans and one house mother. In addition each village, divided into small clusters of homes, has a school, medical clinic, church building/community centre, electricity and running water.

Currently more than 1500 children and widows all live in these self contained villages. Says Marilyn, “It's more than just institutionalised care; it's holistic. We are catering for the needs of the children spiritually, physically, academically and socially. Our goal is to train and equip these precious children with the essential moral values and life skills that will enable them to make a significant and lasting impact on the future of their country. We are training the future leaders of Uganda.”

The whole choir experience, according to the Skinners, is an important part of this training and leadership development. “Every child at Watoto has an opportunity to go on tour once,” maintains Marilyn. “It's while they're on tour the children gain confidence, new skills and come back excelling in every area.” Fred, now 21, who travelled with the first choir, attributes his ambitions to be a lawyer and advocate for the poor to his life in Watoto and the experiences he gained whilst in the choir.

“We train the choir for five months before the tour,” Marilyn explains. “They learn how to sing and dance and how to be Ambassadors and leaders. It's as much about developing leadership as it is about performing.”

### **The choir tours Australia**

It's a Saturday night in September at one of those 'gala balls,' just one of around eight hundred fundraising events this year, inspired by Hillsong's 'Colour Sisterhood' program – a partnership that began with a miraculous meeting between the Skinners and the Houstons back in 2004. More than 350 people, most un-churched, have gathered together to raise funds to build two homes.

Outside the ballroom a table displays Watoto merchandise. CD's, books, DVD's and jewellery – all proceeds from the sale of this merchandise covering costs for this Australian tour, leaving the \$2 million raised over the six month tour to be sent directly to the Villages.

Mid way through the night, the lights go down, the African drums start beating and one by one the children, wearing brilliant colourful tunics and dresses, bound through the crowd and onto the stage. They dance, they bounce, they wave and they sing with all their hearts: traditional African music, blended with contemporary gospel music. And there's no mistaking the message, 'Jesus, ever shining' they sing in unison. No-one in the room flinches. They are mesmerised by their energy, enthusiasm and wide smiles. The choir finishes, takes a bow, and dances

out of the room. And the audience, who are visibly moved, clap and cheer.

In 2001, the Watoto choir toured Australia for the first time, a move inspired by a 'God' connection formed between the now Australian Managing Director, Mark Bradshaw and Gary Skinner. The Watoto children have been performing in Australia ever since. The current Australian tour, which began on May 14 and ends on November 14 in Brisbane, will see the choir perform at more than 250 churches, schools, concerts, events and Gala balls.

“Many who are moved by seeing the choir at one of these events, whether it is at their church, school, a conference or a Gala ball, often take their commitment to the next level,” says Mark Bradshaw. This year, more than 70 teams, 40 from Australia alone, will travel to help build the homes they have funded. For a cost of \$38,000 a home can be built that will accommodate eight orphans and a widow.

“It truly is global partnership,” says Marilyn. “Many friends from around the world have helped build over 200 schools and clinics and established 'the Bulrushes', a facility for orphaned babies.” What began 14 years ago with a word from God, the yellow pages and a bus, has turned into something bigger than Gary or Marilyn could ever have imagined.

“Every day, Gary and I shake our heads at the doors that have been opened for us. We just have to say, 'Thank you Lord,’” Marilyn says, in all sincerity.

“Moving forward, we want to continue to saturate the planet with the Love of Jesus, build awareness of the incredible problems that Africa faces and finally show people, through these little Watoto children, that there is hope.” **A**

**Nicole Partridge**  
*Freelance writer*



If you are interested in finding out more information on the sponsoring a child, a mother or teacher, hosting a 'concert of Hope', or fundraising to build a home, classroom or clinic, email: [Australia@watoto.com](mailto:Australia@watoto.com) or check out their website at: [www.watoto.com](http://www.watoto.com)

On the 5th of August, 2007, KPC Uganda launched KPC Gulu, in response to the issue of Child Soldiers in Northern Uganda. For 20 years, this area has been under rebel oppression of the LRA (Lord's Resistance Army). Child soldiers have been abducted and turned into weapons of terror against their own families and communities. In recent times, peace talks have been underway, but many of these children are left with nowhere to turn. In the months to come, KPC will begin the work of rehabilitating these child soldiers through Watoto's holistic child care program. Beyond the brutal past, there is a future of hope.

*\*source: Watoto.*