

BATTLING AIDS

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A Man on a Mission:

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By Louis Freedberg

Physician Robert Scott is split between a busy practice in Oakland and another treating AIDS patients in Zimbabwe.

When Dr. **Robert Scott** first traveled to Zimbabwe seven years ago, he wasn't thinking about AIDS. Perhaps it was because he needed to escape the grimness of his work treating AIDS patients in Oakland. Or maybe he was too focused on exploring his interest in the aesthetics of Shona stone sculptures.

"I had a grand time meeting with artists," said the lanky, bespectacled **Scott** of that first trip. "AIDS was never on my mind."

That changed quickly when he returned a year later and some of the people he had met earlier -- including the artists -- had disappeared. He asked what had happened to them. "Oh, they died," came the typically vague reply.

It was then that **Scott** started becoming aware of the devastation caused by AIDS in Zimbabwe and the silence that cloaks the disease. He discovered that doctors in Zimbabwe resist listing AIDS as the cause of death on death certificates out of respect for the families of victims and that the stigma around AIDS there echoed the stigma faced by his patients in Oakland. Since then, **Scott** has immersed himself in trying to combat the spread of the disease in Zimbabwe, even as he continues to do the same in Oakland, where he's watched the HIV infection rate nearly double among African American men in the past two decades.

His work there gradually became a focus of his life. Despite maintaining a busy medical practice, **Scott**, now 62, was drawn to Zimbabwe. He considers himself a world traveler, but his other journeys were just vacations. "When I go to Japan, I don't feel Japanese," he said. "I like Thailand, but that's not it either. But when I went to Africa, especially the English-speaking parts, I felt very much at home."

And when he returned to the Bay Area, he couldn't stop thinking about Zimbabwe. Or talking about it. His obsession prompted the Allen Temple Baptist Church in East Oakland to get involved in the fight against AIDS in Africa. The church where he has worshiped for 30 years had been a key player in the anti-apartheid movement in the United States. But with the end of apartheid, the involvement of many Bay Area activists in Southern Africa also ended. What has engaged some of them now is a more deadly enemy than South Africa's white minority regime. Between one in four or five adults in Zimbabwe is infected with the HIV virus. According to the World Health Organization, average life expectancy in Zimbabwe is shorter than anywhere else in the world -- a shockingly low 33 years for women and 37 years for men.

The Bay Area link to Zimbabwe has grown now to involve nearly a dozen churches, a foundation in Orinda, several local government agencies, as well as hundreds of individuals who have been drawn to the anti-AIDS cause. At the heart of the Zimbabwe-Oakland connection is the Mother of Peace orphanage deep in the African countryside in Mutoko, two hours northeast of the capital Harare. Built near a leper colony, it was the first orphanage set up specifically to house some of the 1 million AIDS orphans in Zimbabwe. It's run by 73-year-old Zimbabwean Jean Corneck, whom everyone calls Mama Jean. She remembers clearly the day in 2000 when **Scott** arrived at the orphanage, along with other members of Allen Temple Church's AIDS ministry. At the time, it was serving only a handful of children, and the orphanage was little more than a hospice providing comfort to dying children. "He was so tall, not like a Zimbabwean," she recalled. "I wondered, 'Who are these people?'" It was the start of a remarkable relationship.

Scott also remembers his first visit to the orphanage, which he had seen featured on CNN in his Harare hotel room. The orphanage had a new clinic -- built by Dutch donors -- but no doctor to staff it, and no AIDS medication. "No one knew I was a doctor, yet I have never felt more welcomed," **Scott** recalled. "There was something about the people, and especially this orphanage, that made me feel I needed to come back."

When Mama Jean learned he was a doctor, she asked him to see 27-year-old Charity Makarange, who was helping out in the nursery, and two children from the orphanage. He immediately recognized that they had AIDS. Makarange, whose husband had died of AIDS, weighed 80 pounds and was hallucinating. "I am sick, but when I die, will you please take my children and raise them?" she pleaded. **Scott** was unable to treat her because he had no AIDS medication with him.

A few months later he was able to send anti-retroviral medicines to the Mother of Peace orphanage. He and the other volunteers from the Allen Temple AIDS ministry also persuaded their church to "adopt" the orphanage and raise funds to keep it open. "We were really aware that we were not going to be able to tackle the entire forest, so we just took on one tree," said Gloria Cox-Crowell, the longtime co-chair of Allen Temple's AIDS ministry who was with **Scott** at his first meeting with Mama Jean.

Scott now returns to Zimbabwe every three months, carrying medicines and other supplies, often accompanied by volunteers from the Bay Area. Each time, more patients show up to see him. Some are carried on a relative's back, others are pushed in a wheelbarrow or hauled in an ox cart. **Scott's** caseload in Zimbabwe has grown to 425 patients -- almost exactly the same number of HIV patients he sees in his Oakland practice. Constraining the number of patients he can see is the severe shortage of AIDS medicine, some of which he buys from manufacturers in India and Brazil.

"The last thing I want to do every three months is get on a plane for 23 hours," said **Scott**. "But I must do it because these people are worthy of this kind of treatment and this kind of attention." He is still only one of fewer than a dozen physicians specializing in AIDS in the entire country. "Just as Jews can't ignore Israel, African Americans can't ignore Africa," he offers by way of explanation.

Scott has avoided being dragged into Zimbabwe's political wars by refusing to even comment on the disastrous rule of President **Robert** Mugabe. When he came to power in 1980, Mugabe was greeted with some of the same adulation Nelson Mandela later received in South Africa. Today, democracy has morphed into autocracy. The economy, including its once-flourishing agricultural sector, is in ruins. Hunger is widespread.

The motivation

Scott's African odyssey has taken him far from the streets of Chicago where he grew up. His father, who never graduated from high school, worked as a brake repairman for the Pennsylvania Railroad before starting his own businesses, which included cocktail lounges, taxicabs and apartment buildings. "He was the most astute businessmen I ever met," said **Scott**. His father wanted him to become a doctor, but **Scott** at first resisted. Instead, he received a bachelor's degree in biology from Parsons College, a Presbyterian college in Iowa, and a master's from the University of Illinois. That landed him a job teaching biology at Laney College in 1969, where one of his students, Arnold Perkins, remembers him as an extraordinarily gifted teacher. (Perkins is now the director of public health in Alameda County and has traveled with **Scott** to Zimbabwe.) But eventually **Scott** gravitated toward medicine. After receiving his medical degree from UCSF, he opened his practice in Oakland in 1977, several years before HIV/AIDS hit.

The cemetery at the Mother of Peace orphanage, with its rows of 70 white crosses, took him back to the early, hopeless days of the epidemic. "Having lived through the AIDS epidemic from the beginning, and having seen many people living in the United States die, there was no reason for all these folks to be dying," he said.

His work is backed by energetic volunteers in the Bay Area. Some ferret out donations of unused anti-retroviral medication. Others seek donations of books, school supplies, clothes and other needed material. Many have also pledged \$30 each month to "adopt" a child at the Mother of Peace orphanage, an amount that covers all the costs of AIDS medication, clothes, food and school fees. So far Bay Area volunteers have "adopted" 160 of the 175 children cared for by the orphanage.

A group effort

Each year Mama Jean comes to the Bay Area for visits of up to a month to energize volunteers and boost fundraising efforts. Mama Jean and Doc Bob, as he is sometimes called, have complementary styles. She is short, soft-spoken and exudes warmth and sincerity. The 6-foot-6 **Scott** has a no-nonsense manner. He has little trouble asking people to take on tasks, without being overbearing. He also seems able to juggle myriad details without burning out -- a trait that invariably helped him when he adopted and raised his own son, now 34.

In December, Mama Jean appeared alongside **Scott** at a packed Sunday service at the Allen Temple Church that coincided with World AIDS Day. "Let us give more, let us do more, let us pray more, for this outreach ministry of Christ's love," declared Pastor J. Alfred Smith Sr. from the same pulpit where Archbishop Desmond Tutu once preached. "Let us make Mama Jean happy as we provide money and resources and support for her ministry." **Scott**, who is a deacon in the church, was elated as contributions totaling \$34,000 poured in. Later, in his private suite, Smith and other congregants huddled in a prayer for **Scott**, who was due to leave the next day with Mama Jean.

Before she left, Mama Jean accepted a check of \$10,000 from fundraising efforts spearheaded by Bishop Yvette Flunder at a celebration at San Francisco's City of Refuge Church. Contributions like these have helped keep fundraising on track despite unexpected obstacles. First, the December 2004 tsunami sucked up donations that might have gone to the orphanage. Then Hurricane Katrina had the same effect. Once again, the City of Refuge's Flunder came to the rescue, organizing a three-hour "gala gospel concert" at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts.

Flunder, a third generation Bay Area pastor, has traveled to Zimbabwe four times. In February, she led another delegation to meet **Scott** at the orphanage. This time, the group consisted of 21 United Church of Christ members -- nine from the Bay Area and others from Los Angeles, Long Beach, Portland and elsewhere. The night the group arrived, they were introduced to Anthony, a 1-year-old with AIDS who was being kept alive with a feeding tube. The visitors were wakened

the next morning to be told that Anthony had died -- the first baby to have died at the orphanage in more than a year. Flunder helped officiate at a song-filled African funeral. **Scott**, who carried the tiny coffin, helped bury him.

But instead of demoralizing the visitors, said Flunder, Anthony's death inspired them. "It felt like Anthony had waited to die until we got there," Flunder said. "In some ways, Anthony's life and purpose was to affect all these people, who have now gone back around the world to tell his story. He did more in one day than some people do in a lifetime."

After burying Anthony, Flunder and others in the group worked with **Scott** in the orphanage clinic. Some of the HIV-positive visitors shared their stories of having lived for 10 to 15 years with the disease, giving hope to Zimbabweans. Others helped in the bakery, worked in the vegetable garden or milked cows.

Flunder came back determined to raise more money to help complete the orphanage's "skills center" in an abandoned thatched-roofed structure, as well as build a long sought-after addition to the clinic. "Whenever we go there, we find there is some great need," she said. "When we come back home, we raise the money and we meet the need," she said.

For those who can't go to Zimbabwe, there are multiple ways to participate close to home. On a recent Saturday, some two dozen volunteers worked in the donated space of a vacant county building in downtown Oakland, packing boxes and supplies destined for shipment to Zimbabwe.

Among the volunteers were a dozen alumnae of Delta Sigma Theta, an African American sorority. Dolores Snell, 72, whose son died of AIDS when he was 29, had contacted clothing outlets for donations of clothes with minor defects -- that could then be repaired with donated sewing machines at the orphanage.

The J.F. Kapnek Trust, another Bay Area organization working in Zimbabwe, also contributed to the day's effort. Run by Dr. Dan Robbins, a pediatrician in Orinda, the group arranged the donation of a container, and the shipping company agreed to pay shipping costs. The trust helped fill the container with school and other supplies for a network of preschools it is building in Zimbabwe.

The payout

Mama Jean said all these efforts are making a difference. She points out that Anthony was the first child to die at the orphanage in more than a year. She believes the stigma of AIDS has diminished significantly in the rural areas around the orphanage, in part because of the success **Scott** and other volunteers have had persuading people with symptoms of HIV/AIDS to get tested. As for **Scott** -- recently named a "public health hero" by the UC Berkeley School of Public Health -- he measures the success of the project in terms of lives saved. "If it wasn't for our intervention, most of the patients we have taken care of would be dead by now," he said.

Charity Makarange, one of the first patients introduced to him by Mama Jean, is a case in point. Like many of the others treated by **Scott**, she is flourishing. Now the medical assistant in the orphanage clinic, she is also working to get her nursing degree, has organized a support group for HIV-positive women and has persuaded hundreds of people to get tested, said **Scott**. The orphanage, instead of being a hospice for dying children, is a thriving community where "they are planning a future for these children."

What **Scott** has not been able to do is find people to take over his AIDS practice, either in Oakland or in Zimbabwe. He said he has unsuccessfully mined medical schools from UCLA to Stanford looking for someone to succeed him in Oakland. And in Zimbabwe the handful of

medical students he has trained to treat AIDS have taken overseas jobs after graduation. For now, he has no choice but to continue. "People depend on me," he said simply. "My profession says I must serve."